

Sermon—March 22-23, 1997
Rich Nathan
Loving Your Spouse for a Life-Time
John 11

Before You Give Up: Hope For Troubled Marriages

I want to start this morning with a true story. This is a true story. It is the story of Nathan Roth, who made a lot of money in stocks and securities while being married and having four children in New York City. Nathan had a plan for his life. He would work real hard, manage his money and investments wisely, and then he would move to Hawaii where he could live in paradise into his old age. His wife, Harriet, was a lot more practical and level headed than Nathan. She knew it was incredibly unlikely that two Brooklyn-born Jews whose family were tightly enmeshed in New York City, who had hardly ever ventured farther than Florida, could leave the big city and spend all day lying in the sun. All of their extended family lived around them. All of their friends lived in New York.

Harriet worked hard along side her husband Nathan. She used to find real estate to invest in. She managed all of their payments. They were a partnership.

But continually on and off, at least when the oldest was in High School, Nathan kept talking about Hawaii. He became obsessed with it. He kept telling Harriet that this was his dream. One day Nathan came back home after an appointment with his accountant and he announced that the family was going to move to Oahu. The money would be there. He figured it out.

Harriet went crazy. She had just finished decorating their enormous apartment. She had beautiful furniture. She had a collection of exotic paperweights. She had her family and friends. Harriet said, “No! I am not moving.”

But Nathan kept pushing and pushing. Finally Harriet cried when the movers took her things away. Most of it she had to sell at Nathan's insistence. We don't need this heavy furniture in paradise. We will get new furniture. I will buy you more paperweights than you will know what to do with in Hawaii.

Eventually, they settled into a waterfront home on the western side of Hawaii away from Honolulu. Harriet, of course, missed her family. She missed her friends. But the kids adjusted. Things became stable and comfortable. They made new friends. Nathan got involved in charity working with kids from troubled backgrounds. The kids in the program looked up to him. The family looked up to him. Harriet looked up to him, right up until the day that Nathan disappeared.

He simply vanished. Without a note, without a trace, Nathan was gone. Harriet became frantic. She called the police and the hospitals, everyone they knew, all their friends, his co-workers at the drug rehab clinic where Nathan volunteered – everyone they knew. The kids searched for their dad. He simply did not come home.

About a month later, Harriet got a call from an attorney saying that he was representing Nathan. Nathan wanted a divorce. He had had it with his responsibilities. He wanted to enjoy life. After all, he was 45 years old and it was time for him to start enjoying women again and have some fun. Here he was in paradise. He had gotten into the same old grind, getting up in the morning and going to work. He needed to get out. He didn't love Harriet anymore. He wanted a change and that was the way it was going to be.

He didn't offer a phone number or an address. One time he called the house to talk with one of his daughters. Harriet grabbed the phone and tearfully asked, "Why are you doing this? Why did you leave?"

Nathan said, “Well, I want to find myself. I want to explore my sexuality.” Very emotionlessly, very coldly he said, “I want my youth back. You cheated me out of my youth and now I am finding it again.”

This story ends in tragedy. Nathan drained the family checking account. He only talks to one of his daughters on the condition that she not ever challenge him about his decision and not interfere with his life. His three sons were absolutely devastated by Nathan’s abandonment of his family. One of his sons started doing drugs. The other dropped out of graduate school. The third walked away from a strong religious faith and a promising career. Harriet, according to this little article, is trying to rebuild a small business in Hawaii.

Five lives were destroyed by Nathan’s decision to cut and run from his marriage. And each year in the United States millions of lives are destroyed by millions of couples who simply give up. They throw in the towel and give up hope of reviving their marriages.

Hope is key. Every marriage is built in hope. People marry because they hope that life together will be more satisfying, more fulfilling, more wonderful than life alone. People marry expecting that their marriage is going to be successful. No one marries saying, “I know this is going to fail and I know that I am going to destroy some lives. But, hey, I am not doing anything on Saturday and the church is free.” Marriages are born in hope.

But somewhere along the way nearly every marriage goes through a period of disillusionment. Life is not working out the way we dreamed it might. Some counselors call it “the fall.” What people hope would happen is not happening. Their relationship is not what they want. Anger and sadness replace hope. Innocence is gone.

One woman wrote this. I am going to read her letter.

“I thought when I got married I had entered into a joint contract, that I would have a companion, a life-long friend, someone who was interested in the same things that I am

interested in, someone who wanted to share the burdens of life's day-to-day chores as well as the fun times. Instead, I married a little boy, someone whose mother had taken care of him all of his life and expected me to do the same. He has no interest in being my friend. And he has no capacity to be my companion. To make things absolutely unbearable, he expects me to be grateful for taking care of him."

When we hear stories like the story of Nathan Roth or the like the letter I just read, we can begin to sink under the weight of hopelessness. Pastors and marriage counselors hear story after story about troubled marriages and destroyed dreams. We are tempted to join in the chorus of those saying that the pressure on marriages these days is so great that basically people are faced with a choice of grimly enduring a marriage or giving up entirely.

Well, I want to be a source of hope today and share with you the hopeful facts that I have discovered over years of watching hundreds of couples. The facts are people can change. Whatever you think about your mate, they can change. Whatever you think of your marriage it can improve. With God's help miracles can occur. Attitudes and perceptions can be altered.

And rather than enduring a life-long prison sentence, people can have vastly improved relationships. Relationships that they never imagined could exist with this other person.

A number of years ago I met with a man whose wife had abandoned him. [The have since moved out-of-state.] She simply packed up her stuff and moved out. There was a note left on the table explaining to him that she wanted a divorce. It was the third time she had done something like this. He called me up in crisis. We got together and talked. He was sick of putting up with her nonsense. He said that this was it. He was going to beat her to the attorney's office. To make a long story short, I persuaded him to hold up on filing. By an act of sheer grace, I was able to sit down with the wife and uncover some of the roots

of her bitterness and anger. This couple decided to go an excellent marriage counselor before they completely dissolved their relationship because they were committed Christians.

I got a letter from them not too long ago. They said that their relationship is now better than they ever hoped it could be. God worked a miracle in their marriage.

I have been doing a series on marriage for the last few weeks. I know that in a congregation this size there are dozens, perhaps even hundreds of marriages that are in trouble. This is true with many of you despite the fact that you and your mate are committed Christians. I know that some of you are committed to endure no matter what. There are others of you that are already toying with the idea of separation or, perhaps, giving up all together and seeking a disillusion or a divorce.

I want to talk to you, any of you who find yourselves in a troubled marriage today. To tell you that before you give up, it is possible for you – even you and your mate – to recover hope for your relationship. No matter what has happened. No matter how much water has gone under the bridge. Marriages in trouble do not have to break up. It is possible to rebuild your marriage and to even have God's blessing on it.

I have called today's talk, "Before You Give Up: Hope For Troubled Marriages." Let's pray.

In talking about recovering hope, believing that God can work a miracle, I would like to go to one of the great miracle passages in the Bible found in John 11. If you have a Bible, I would like you to open up to John 11. John 11 is story of Jesus raising up his friend Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was a dear friend of Jesus. He died and had been dead for four days when Jesus raised him from the dead.

What I am going to do today is apply a few of the lessons from this miracle to the raising up of a sick or dead marriage. We read in John 11:

“Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha.”

Bethany was a very small village a few miles away from Jerusalem. It appears to me at least, that this first verse may contain a hint of the dating of the gospel of John because John without any kind of introduction says that Lazarus was from Bethany the village of Mary and her sister, Martha. He doesn't tell us who Mary and Martha are; he assumes that the reader will know who they are. There is no little tag after the statement, “the village of Mary and her sister, Martha,” friends of Jesus or followers of Jesus. The kind of tag that John often gives to people who would be unknown to the reader like Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

The point is that either by the writing of the gospel of John, these two women had become well known in the church community and needed no introduction or the readers would have been familiar with another story of Mary and Martha from the gospel of Luke. It is a hint that John was written after the gospel of Luke.

And this may be further bolstered by verse 2 that says, “This Mary whose brother Lazarus now laid sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.” Since John doesn't even talk about that event until chapter 12, he appears to assume that his readers know about the anointing by Mary of Bethany. How would they know it? Perhaps they already had a copy of one of the gospels in front of them, maybe the gospel of Luke.

In any case, we read that Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus in v. 3 that Lazarus, their brother, was sick. “So the sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is sick.’” Now, Mary and Martha did something that is a model for us regarding what we ought to do when we are in sick or when, to apply it to today's lesson, when our marriages are sick. They

called out to the Lord. They turned to Christ knowing that Christ could revive and work a miracle in their brother's life.

It is at this point that I think many people simply make an enormous error. Instead of crying out to Christ to restore their marriages, they become embittered, frustrated and eventually hopeless. Like Lazarus, many marriages get sick – even the marriages of those in relationship with Jesus and whom Jesus loves and who love Jesus.

Why do marriages get sick? Well, there are lots of reasons, but on your outline I have listed the three biggest reasons for marriages becoming sick. One of them is what I talked about last week, unresolved anger. For those of you who were here, you will recall that I used an illustration of a husband who tried to act in a loving way toward his wife. He complimented her three times a day for seven days. He wrote it all down in a journal. When the wife was asked at counseling whether he ever said anything nice, she said no. Because of unresolved anger, she was simply unable to hear his compliments or to receive the change that had happened in her husband.

The illustration that I used, borrowing from Gary Smalley's very good book called *Making Love Last Forever* was the illustration of a bank being closed for deposits. It doesn't matter how much money you have in your hand. If the bank is closed you can't deposit the money. And our mates' hearts may be closed to us because of unresolved anger. There are no deposits able to be made.

Again, occasionally we may find that our hurt is so great, or our skills are so lacking in controlling our anger that we need some outside help. In your bulletins, we have an insert regarding some resources that we are making available to you through this church. We don't want to simply do a number of nice talks about marriage. If you need help, we are offering you help through the church. All you simply need to do is take out that sheet in the bulletin.

You can fill it out now or send it in. Check off what you would be interested in. We are starting some marriage improvement groups. We are doing some counseling. We have professional counselors available. One of our staff counselors will be out in the lobby after the service answering questions.

Sometimes marriages get sick because of unlearned skills. It is not a will issue. Sometimes it is a skill issue. We simply have not learned some of the essential skills for having a good marriage. For example, one of the essential skills for having a healthy marriage is learning good communication skills. Most of us are not good communicators. We haven't learned how to listen well, to listen empathetically. We haven't learned how to speak clearly and to express our needs in a fashion that doesn't sound attacking or accusatory.

One of the simplest communications skills that bogs many marriages down is what Gary Smalley calls "drive-thru" communication. In his experience he says that if people would simply learn the skill of drive-thru communication, many marriages would instantly turn around.

What is drive-thru communication? Imagine that you go to a McDonald's drive-thru and you are in the car with your mate and maybe your three kids. You hear the little voice through the box, "Welcome to McDonald's. May I take your order?"

You say, "Yes. Give me a cheeseburger, 3 quarter pounders, with 4 fries, and 4 diet cokes."

The little voice comes back and says, "OK. I have that, 2 cheeseburgers, 2 quarter pounders, 3 fries, 2 diet cokes."

You say, "No. It is a cheeseburger, 3 quarter pounders, 4 fries, 4 diet cokes."

"Ok. I got that. Cheeseburger, 2 quarter pounders, 4 fries, and 4 cokes."

By this time you are ready to break the little box that the woman is talking through. Then reach inside and grab the woman and strangle her.

So much marital communication is just like that frustrating experience with the McDonald's. People need to learn how to simply repeat back what they heard rather than react to what they think they heard.

A guy comes home from work thinking that he would like to go out with his wife that night for dinner and he says, "What should we do for dinner tonight?"

What she hears is, "When will dinner be ready?" And so she answers, "What shall we do for dinner tonight" with "Why is it always my job to make dinner?"

He hears an attack and feels like his wife is always so negative and says, "It is not always your job to make dinner. I made dinner once last week."

She responds and says, "Bringing home hamburgers and fries is not making dinner."

He says, "Well, just forget it. I don't want to go out to dinner with you anyway."

She gets confused. She didn't hear him say anything about going out. She says, "You never said anything about going out tonight."

He gets really defensive and says, "Yes, I did. I asked you if you wanted to go out and you immediately got nasty."

"I got nasty? You never said anything about going out."

"Did to."

"You are never wrong are you? You can never be wrong."

Sound familiar? So many marriages could be improved by couples simply learning skills like how to communicate in a non-frustrating way; learning how to resolve problems without them escalating; learning how to listen. I will tell you that I have met more couples that the

issues weren't ones of will, but of skill. We want to help you through this church to give you the skills necessary to improve your relationships.

Sometimes marriages get sick because one or both of the parties has completely unattainable ideals. We should never fight. My husband should be able to read my mind and know what's wrong without me having to say anything. My wife should look exactly the same as when we got married even though she has had 3 kids and it is 25 years later. Or that we should be as passionate as we were on our honeymoon and that passion should never have its ups and downs. Or my husband ought to make as much money as my successful lawyer father made. And I ought to be provided for in the same way that I was provided for growing up, even though my husband is a schoolteacher.

One of the issues of recovering hope for a troubled marriage often is the willingness to lay down unattainable dreams. It is not unattainable to believe that you can have really successful communication. It is not unattainable to believe that even your partner can change and learn to not be so angry or so negative. It is not unattainable to believe that you could be happy even if your ideals are never met, that you could learn to love your wife even if she has put on 20 pounds or more, or love your husband even if he has gotten bald and is not very exciting and doesn't make that much money.

The tragedy is that sick marriages often die. In the case of poor Lazarus, we read this:

“When he heard this, Jesus said, ‘This sickness will end in death. [He means ultimately in death, although there is going to be a death.] No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.’”

What an important verse for couples or anyone who is struggling with why is God allowing this to happen in my life? You might want to underline v. 4. God might be

glorified through it. The reconciliation of a broken marriage is one of the great manifestations of the power of God.

I spoke earlier about a couple in which the wife had moved out on several occasions. They believed that the marriage was irrevocably broken, no hope for restoration. But by employing a trained sensitive counselor, by being willing to work, by making small changes, their marriage was saved. They wrote to me in their letter that people around them have had the opportunity to get a clear testimony regarding what Christ can do. You have the opportunity to magnify God by allowing your troubled marriage to be healed.

Lazarus died. By the time Jesus got to Lazarus, Lazarus was dead.

Sick marriages like Lazarus sometimes take a turn for the worse and before there is a rescue the marriage can die. One or the other party can contact an attorney or stubbornly refuse to move back in with their mate. Refuse to even engage in reconciliation talks.

How do sick marriages die? Sometimes marriages die as a result of unhelpful supporters. What you see in this story and what we haven't the time today to read through the entire chapter – but what you see is a bunch of people around Lazarus, his friends, relatives, who really got in the way of Jesus being able to easily work a miracle. Jesus' disciples got in the way. Mary and Martha, to some degree, got in the way. Certainly those mourners who were around the tomb got in the way.

But I believe that sick marriages can be made worse and sometimes even die at the result of those who are around the marriage that I am calling unhelpful supporters. Sometimes those unhelpful supporters are extending positive support for one of the individuals. Positive supporters may approach the wife or the husband because of long-term friendship and they say essentially, “We will listen to you. We will pray with you. We will support you. We will care for you no matter what. Can we do anything for you now? You can come and

cry on my shoulder. With no judgment, with no confrontation, with no correction, we are here.”

We live in an age, friends, in which one of our highest values is non-judgmental supportiveness. There are a number of us who simply open up our arms to the hurting and we say, “Here we are.” No judgments. No confrontations. And you know that kind of non-judgmental positive support by friends, by a couple, by a group, by a counselor, by parents, can be the most corrosive thing that can happen to a couple’s marital bond.

Listen to me. Mercy-extenders, listen to me. Walking away from your marriage vows, turning your back on everything you said you stood for, shredding your witness in the community, the church, quitting, throwing in the towel, running away ought to hurt our self-esteem. We ought to have extreme feelings of guilt that lead to serious depression. We ought to feel great shame and find it really hard to have people contact us. Guilt and shame and embarrassment and depression and humiliation and low self-esteem are the natural consequences of doing something that God hates.

The Bible over and over teaches that sin yields incredibly unpleasant consequences. Romans 8:13 says, “For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die.” You will lose your peace when you sin. You will destroy your joy. You will shred your self-esteem. That is part of the reason why God in His love warns us so strongly against sinning and against throwing in the towel and against breaking our vows and promises. Because He knows that sin, like sulfuric acid, kills us, corrodes us.

So, what do these non-judgmental supporters do to someone who is saying no to God? You know what we do? We come along and we get in God’s way by anesthetizing and dulling someone else’s pain. We say, “Here, let me lower that pain. I can’t stand seeing you in pain.” This is the real struggle of the mercy-extender. They can’t stand someone else’s

pain. Maybe it reminds them too much of their own pain, I don't know. But we must lower the pain.

Here is a little support. Here is a little comfort.

I am not saying that there is no room for friendship when someone has sinned. And I am not saying that every single contact and that every single sentence you have with a person who is walking from their marriage vows ought to be confrontation and challenge. But I am calling for integrity in your relationship with someone who is walking away or throwing in the towel. Where time after time you are going to that person and saying, "Listen, I love you. But what you are doing is wrong. You are hurting yourself and you are hurting God by doing what God hates. And you are hurting your mate."

Friends, is it not the case that it is the pain of sin, the pain of shredded self-esteem, the pain of depression, the pain of guilt that often drives us back to God? The fact is a lot of us are so willful that we won't turn back to God unless we hurt a lot. God uses the painful consequences of sin to draw us back to himself. The lost son was saved as a result of finding himself in a pigpen. Isn't that the case in your life, mercy-extender, that there have been times that the only reason you came back to God was because you were in so much pain? That you had nowhere else to turn for love? Don't be the non-judgmental supporter that gets in the way of God.

Then, lest I be misunderstood, I am not telling you to be a condemer or a finger-pointer. I am telling you to build your relationship based on truth and to stop being afraid of pain, to stop getting in the way of God's appointed means of drawing people back to Him. That is what positive community can do. When there is not a clear confrontation of breaking vows, challenging people who walk away regularly, continually.

On the other hand, negative community can be even worse. Sometimes this can in the form of friends who are bitter about their own marriages. Or who, themselves, have divorced or separated. Your divorce, your separation can validate their choice. Well, hey, if more people make the same choice that I made that I am not so proud of, and then I guess I must not have been so bad. Everyone is doing it. Fifty million Americans can't all be wrong.

Sometimes the negative community can come from family who were always opposed to the marriage to begin with. This is their opportunity now. Mom who just ran the wife or husband down can really inflict some blows there or siblings can. Certainly the divorce industry weighs in. There is an industry that is supported by unhappy marriages. Marital counselors, attorneys—some of these people, some of the worst, will basically do everything in their power to drive you toward a disillusion or a divorce.

Friends, I went to law school and I can tell you that attorneys do not get any training in marital therapy; that many, many attorneys who practice what is known in the industry as family law, divorce lawyers, many attorneys have very limited interest in trying to see couples get reconciled. Pick up the phone and call a lawyer and you may be on the fast track, the downhill ski slope toward getting a divorce. That is just the reality.

And so this negative swirl begins to form around the person having trouble in their marriage. This negative community – friends, parents will circle around them like vultures. And sometimes they will magnify the supposed flaws of your mate and remind you of all of their sins and all the stupid things they have done and all the mistakes. They may even call them names that you, in a million years, wouldn't have called them. Oh boy, I have watched it. I have watched parents bring up things and friends emphasize that the mates themselves didn't emphasize. Negativity in the environment gets so strong that a person begins to get

the message real clearly: You would have to be the biggest fool to return to your spouse. My goodness, just to save face, I have to go through with this divorce. Everyone tells me that he or she was a heel, a cad, that we never should have gotten married to begin with.

Sometimes people opt out of community.

They may be in a church like this where people may insist on truth telling in relationships. We are very real with each other. We have lots of problems here, but we really make it our aim to tell the truth. Some people opt out of that. They don't want to be told the truth.

Has it ever struck you as being amazingly contradictory but when we begin our marriages we throw a big wedding? We open up our new marriage to the whole world. Aunts we haven't seen for 20 years are invited. Cousins from other states come, co-workers we don't really like, and fellow students and friends of our parents that we don't even know. We ask for the church's involvement. We want a church pastor to bless us and pray for us and counsel us. We make our wedding day, our entrance into marriage, a very public affair. Our picture is in the newspaper. There are announcements sent out to the press. We accept gifts from everyone who will send them to us.

But when it comes to leaving our marriage, suddenly our marriage is a very private affair. We say, "How dare you remind me of my wedding vows." Who are you; church, to stick your nose into my business? This is no one else's business. What I do with my marriage is a private matter.

Can someone help me here? Do the rest of you see the incredible hypocrisy and contradiction? Church, friends, family, get involved big time at the beginning. But don't hold me to my very public vows. And even though I said to them in front of God and these

many witnesses, I will pretend that they were said in a corner in a cave. When we want blessing we invite the world, but when we want to sin we say leave me alone.

Well, certainly unchecked selfishness is a second reason why marriages move from sickness to death. I need not spend much time on selfishness. We are all intimately acquainted with it. But you have heard the old lines, “I need my...” and you can fill in the blank. I need my independence. I need my freedom. I need to pursue my career. I need to pursue this one opportunity I have in life for love. I need to recapture my youth. I need to get my head together. I need to find myself.

We have so many covers for what, at bottom, is just selfishness, pure and simple. The unwillingness to stop asserting that our way and our view point is the only one. In the 90’s of course, we have the unraveling of standards. Marriage for almost 20 centuries in the church was considered to be forever. There was a rock solid commitment to stay in this, to persevere, to endure no matter what. People made their vows for better or worse until death. Now, we make our vows until we grow apart, until we no longer communicate, until we find something better, until the passion fades. We have lost the ability to say, “forever.”

The most corrosive thing that can happen in a marriage is having that out, leaving the door open. Refusing to settle in your heart that this is forever no matter what. I have watched it over and over again. A couple goes into marriage and, in the back of their mind, not in the front – no one goes in wanting to divorce – but in the back of their minds they say, “If it doesn’t work out, I can leave.” If the door is open, if you allow it to remain open, human nature being what it is, we will go through that door. We will escape when it just gets so hard that we can hardly stand it. When the pain gets too great, we will run.

The only way to make a marriage last for a lifetime is to lock that door, to throw away the key, to put a cement wall in front of any exit. We are going to have to work this out,

darling, because neither of us is escaping whatever the pressure and however hot it gets. Standards are unraveling and that is unraveling the foundation for marriage.

Certainly one of the things that people have lost the capacity to do in the 90's is to think clearly about right and wrong. We are such a feeling based culture. We make decisions based entirely on our present feelings. But don't you get it? I feel pain. I feel unhappy. I feel hopeless. I feel passion for someone else. How can you challenge me to stay when I feel so depressed?

In the old days, when people's lives were based on what the Bible taught, folks had the capacity to not put their feelings in the driver's seat and instead to make life decisions based on right and wrong. Based on what God said. I feel passion for this other person, but it would be wrong of me to pursue a relationship with them because I am married. And so being an honorable person, I will do what is right.

I feel like the fires in my own marriage have died, but being an honorable person, I am going to keep my marriage vows while I try to rekindle the fire.

I feel very disappointed with our financial situation and I did not sign up for this, but I made a vow. It would be wrong of me to hurt my children and shuttle them between me and their father just because I am unhappy.

How rare is the person who will in this culture not be controlled by their feelings and simply choose to do what is right? I want to tell you that if you choose to do what is right, God does not plan for you to live in a prison with the jail door slammed. God wants to move you from death in your marriage to faith in His miracle working power. That with God nothing is impossible, including a revitalized marriage, a change in your own heart, and a change in your mate's behavior.

This story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead was also a story of raising faith from the dead. Remember I said at the beginning that the reason people throw in the towel is because they lose their faith. They stop believing in change. They become hopeless. Marriages are born in hope but somewhere along the line we lose our hope. And this wonderful story in John 11 is a story really about the recovery of hope.

Look with me at v. 23. Jesus said to Martha, “‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ she said. ‘I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world.’”

Look down to v. 38. “Jesus once more was deeply moved and came to the tomb. It was a cave where a stone was laid across the entrance. ‘Take away the stone,’ he said. ‘But Lord,’ said Martha the sister of the dead man, ‘by this time there is a bad odor for he has been there four days.’ Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe you would see the glory of God?’”

Do you understand how far along the faith scale you can go without believing in God’s capacity to do a miracle, to raise the dead now. Martha here believes for the future. V. 24, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” You can’t be a Christian without believing for the future. That in the future based on your trust in Christ today, you will hear God grant a “not guilty” verdict over your life. You can’t be a Christian unless you believe for the future. Martha not only believes for the future, but she believes what all orthodox Christians are called to believe. V. 27, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who has come into the world.” She has future faith. She has an orthodox faith.

But when it comes to the ability to believe God for a miracle in this present crisis, Martha is like a lot of us. Her faith doesn't stretch that far. When Jesus said, "OK, now roll the stone away," she said, "Lord, he has been dead four days." Four days.

You know, the Jews in Martha's day believed that the soul departed from the body after the body was dead three days. The soul returned to heaven on the fourth day. What Martha was asked to believe was not just in an incredible healing, nor simply in the raising of the dead, if that could be simple, but in an incredible miracle of the rejoining of a soul that had gone to heaven with the body that was still here on earth.

I am not saying the soul leaves after three days. I believe it leaves instantly according to the scriptures. But the Jews believe that. And so Martha was asked to embrace what in her mind was an astounding miracle.

Friends, those of you who are in troubled marriages are precisely called to believe like Martha, in God's capacity to work an astounding miracle. You may say, "It is too far gone" like Martha. It has been dead four days or four years. The soul of this marriage has departed. We tried before and we can't change. I can't love this man. I can't forgive this woman. You are called to exercise faith now in Christ's miracle working power.

You know that couple that I spoke about at the beginning of the talk. You know what I talked with them about? I talked with them at the beginning not about their marriage. I talked about faith. I said, "How do you know if your faith is a genuine faith?" Of course, they responded with the response that Martha gave to Jesus, "Well, I have this orthodox faith and believe for the future."

I said, "Well, in the Bible faith is never proven genuine unless it can deal with a present crisis. It is in the squeeze of life, where the rubber meets the road, for real genuine faith in how we handle present crisis. We are out of work. Do we trust God to provide or do we lie

our way into a job by padding our resume. We need money. Do we lie on our income taxes or do we believe that God will somehow provide for us another way? We feel this sexual urge. Do we indulge it or do we believe that God will provide for our needs if we obey him and wait on him.

If you don't handle this present crisis in faith, what inclines you to believe that when the next crisis comes along, and another crisis will come – we live in a fallen world, the next crisis could involve one of your kids, the next crisis could be your health, the death of your parents, a vocational problem – what makes you believe you will have what it takes to sustain that crisis?

How do I get that kind of faith, Rich, that can weather the storm in marriage?

I always think it is a good idea when sitting on the knife's edge of obedience or disobedience to simply count up the costs of disobeying. There is an entire literature out on surviving divorce. You go to any bookstore and look in their counseling section, the self-help section, their family section and you will see shelf after shelf of counselors suggesting ways for you to survive your divorce. There is a reason why there are so many books out like that, because divorce invariably creates incredible pain. It is humiliating. It is contradictory for a Christian who promised to love and to cherish until death us do part. It calls into question the genuineness of our profession. Divorce involves guilt. Divorce will cost you an arm and a leg. It generally doesn't improve anyone's economic situation. Contrary to popular belief, both men and women's economic situations decreases when you factor in all the costs.

If you have children, as a general rule, divorce creates long term hurt for your kids. They have done extensive studies of adult children of divorce and the studies indicate that marital

break-up is the next most stressful thing for a child next to the death of their parents. Divorce exacts an incredible toll in which there are no winners.

Psychologists sometimes use a social readjustment scale, which lists life's events most shattering to a person's equilibrium. On the social readjustment scale, marital separation and divorce are the second and third most stressful things that anyone could experience after the death of one's spouse. Find it hard to believe? Consider the costs of not believing and not following.

I think the first step toward regaining faith is sometimes a step of sheer unadorned obedience – a willed choice to do what God says you should do before you see anything at all. Before you see anything in your mate, in yourself, anything in the counselor, anything that you can concretely pin your hope on. The first step of faith is a sheer unadorned naked choice to do what God tells you to do in His word.

Here in John 11:39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone."

Why? Because he wants the people to obey him before they see something. Martha raises the objection finally. Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" And they took away the stone.

Naked obedience. It is not hard to figure out what God's will is for your marriage. It is not as if what the Bible teaches about divorce is so complicated. Oh, Christians can sometimes make it complicated. But reading verses like "God hates divorce" Malachi 2:14 or "What God had joined together, let no man separate." Or the fact that marriage is meant to be a permanent institution, short of a few very sharply drawn exceptions -- flagrant sexual immorality, abandonment and, perhaps, if we stretch serious danger to a spouse or to the children. But apart from a few sharply drawn exceptions in which God permits divorce, but

certainly doesn't require it, it is not hard to discover God's will for your marriage. It is for you to stay, to not throw in the towel, to not give in, to not give up.

Sometimes the step of faith to believe for your marriage begins with just obedience. Nothing else. But then that obedience can be stimulated into a renewed hope that you are not confined or consigned to a prison sentence. You say, "How can that little spark blaze in to fresh hope?"

Let me finish with a few simple thoughts. Sometimes couples need a trained sensitive counselor who will stand for the marriage and speak the truth to both the husband and the wife. But stand for the marriage. Not just be a supporter for one of the people to have them cry on their shoulders and dull the pain of separation. Sometimes a trained sensitive counselor can be an incredible boost and an incredible help. That is why we have it on your sheets one of the things to check off is "marital counseling" for your marriage that is sick, is dying or is dead and will end in divorce.

Sometimes hearing the stories of other couples who were in your situation and who have received help from God can restore a marriage. We have people in this church that will talk to you. Sprinkled in this congregations are dozens of stories of God's rescue and miracle working power. Couples that were in situations as bad as yours, perhaps worse, situations involving long-term affairs, situations involving substance abuse, financial ruin, constant fighting, conflicting differences. Sometimes hearing other people's stories can be a great encouragement to us.

One of the greatest encouragements to faith is recognizing that you can change and actually change the atmosphere of your marriage whether your mate chooses to join you at the beginning or not. See, you can't control what your mate does, but you can before God choose to become a different person, to respond differently to hostility, to take responsibility

for your own attitudes, to unpack your own bags, to alter your own contribution to the overall crisis. You know what is a faith builder? Seeing yourself change.

But the biggest faith builder in the midst of a sick or dying marriage is recovering a clear view of Jesus Christ again. Throughout this chapter, Jesus calls Martha to take her eyes off herself, her eyes off the crisis, to fix them firmly on him. V. 25, “Martha, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”

V. 40, ““Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”

Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here that they may believe that you sent me.” And when he said this, Jesus called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” And the dead man came out.

The strongest stimulation for faith is for you to get your eyes on Christ again. The one who calls Lazarus from the grave and the one who could speak a word to your marriage and call it from the grave. To hear His words shatter your hopelessness as He says to some of your marriages, “Arise. Arise.”

Please stand.