

SURVIVING A SPIRITUAL MISMATCH
Surviving Life's Challenges
Part 1 of 5
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You know the TV show *Survivor*? We're starting a new series called "Surviving Life's Challenges. Today we're starting it by talking about a challenge that many people face and that is surviving what's called a spiritual mismatch. What do you do if you're a Christian but you're married to someone who isn't?

If you've been following the news you know the stresses that can enter into a spiritually mismatched marriage were highlighted recently by the breakup of the marriage of Jane Fonda and Ted Turner. They talked about the turbulence created by her conversion to Christianity caused stresses in their relationship. Ted Turner is very adamantly opposed to Christianity. Maybe you've read about that and it's brought to the forefront some of the kind of tensions that can happen in marriages that are made up of two people one of whom is a Christian and one of whom isn't.

It's an important topic for a lot of folks. Some of you find yourself in that very situation. You're a follower of Christ. Your spouse is disinterested in spiritual matters or hostile toward spiritual matters or lagging quite a bit behind you in terms of spirituality. Or it may be you're single and you're a Christian and you're wondering is it ok to date people who aren't Christians. Or maybe you have friends or family members who are Christians but are married to someone who isn't a follower of Christ. There might be some ideas from this sermon today that might be helpful in passing along to them. Or it could be you have some children. You're kids are of dating age or someday they will be of dating age and you need to give some guidance along the lines of what the Bible teaches in this area. So we're going to help you do that.

The Bible's very clear, by the way, about what the teaching is in this regard. 2 Corinthians 6:14 "*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.*" Crystal clear. The yoking idea refers to something in the ancient world where they would take a wooded frame – a yoke – and it had two metal loops on it and this would be put over the necks of two animals who would be, for instance, pulling a plow. If the animals were of the same species, most of them oxen, moving ahead at about the same pace, the same direction, then this yoke would allow them to be efficient in pulling the plow.

But, if the animals were of two different species, like one was a donkey and one was a horse or one was an ox and one was a donkey, or if they were pulling at a different rate or going a different direction then this yoke would pinch one of the animals and would choke the other.

So what the Bible is saying is a warning. It's telling Christians that if you're married to a non-Christian your spiritual life is going to be pinched. It's going to be choked. There's going to be tensions and turbulence and problems and stresses that could arise in your relationship.

God doesn't give this command to spoil anyone's fun. He doesn't give this command to artificially and unnecessarily limit the dating field. He doesn't give this command because He doesn't love people who aren't followers of Christ. Jesus died for everybody. This is the suggestion that Christians are great and everybody else is bad so therefore you ought to stay

away from them. No, it's just saying in a marriage kind of relationship for the sake of both parties – the Christian and the one who isn't a Christian – for everybody's sake, God is saying that you need to be aware of a spiritually mismatched situation can spell trouble. I think by the end of this message you're going to understand the reasons behind the command that God has given – the reasons Leslie and I found out the hard way.

Leslie and I have known each other 35 years. We've been married 29 years next month. During our marriage we've gone through three distinct eras. The first which last seven years was when neither of us were Christians. So we know what it's like to be in a relationship without the guidance of Christ. Then Leslie became a Christian and I was still an atheist. So for two years we lived in a spiritually mismatched situation. We understand the turmoil and the stresses that creates. Then for almost the last 20 years we've both been followers of Christ so now we have an understanding of the differences between a Christian relationship and one that isn't.

So what I'm going to do today is walk you through those three eras of our life in the hopes that some of what we experienced, some of the mistakes we made, some of the lessons we learned might be helpful for you in your own situation.

This first spiritual era began on August 12, 1972, which was when Leslie and I got married. I can sum up the role that God played in our early marriage very simply by saying He just was not on our agenda. We had our own agenda. We were very busy finishing school, going to law school, buying a house, and getting our careers launched. We were very busy people and frankly, there was no room for God even if He did exist and I was an atheist and didn't believe He did. But He just was not on our agenda.

Despite that we had a happy marriage. We really did. I sort of picture our marriage as driving down the highway in a convertible sports car with the top down. Just going down the highway of life. I've got one arm around Leslie and waving to everybody as we're driving along and people are saying, "There go the Strobels! Don't they look happy? Everything's going great." I didn't even have to have my hand on the steering wheel because the momentum of our love just kept us going straight down the highway.

But what we didn't know was that there were curves up ahead in the road. What we didn't know was that we would face a hairpin kind of a curve when our first child would almost die at birth. And we'd face a rough road up ahead when we lost a third child to a miscarriage. And we didn't see the curve up ahead from the financial difficulties that would rock our marriage. And we didn't see the potholes that were coming when we tried to figure out how do we raise our children with values and morals when we didn't know what our values and morals were anyway in an increasingly dangerous world. And finally we didn't see the inevitable fork at the end of the road when one of us would die and the other would be left to cope with the biggest loss of their life. Where would we get the strength and the courage to muscle that car through the curves? Who is going to guide us around the potholes? Who's going to get us back on track after we slide onto the shoulder? We were oblivious to the deeper issues of life. But were we happy? Yes. In a superficial way we were very happy.

At least until 1979. That's when Leslie came to me with the news that she had become a follower of Jesus Christ. And the second era of our marriage began. I remember her telling me that she had become a Christian and thinking, "This is the worst possible thing that could happen to our marriage." One of the first thoughts that came into my mind was, "That's it! We're going to get divorced. Our marriage is not going to survive this kind of a change." While Leslie was

going through a very exciting era of her life – these experiences, these discoveries about God and who He is and relating to Jesus Christ in a personal way, this richness, this excitement, this adventure that she was experiencing as a Christian – while she was going through that I was digging in my heels harder and deeper spiritually speaking. And as a result of this mismatch we began to be buffeted by turbulence and emotions in our life. I want to describe some of these emotions to you because I think this is part of the reason why God has given us this command not to become unequally yoked.

The emotions that I felt first of all, I really felt hurt. I felt hurt because all of a sudden I felt like in Leslie's eyes I was less. Like I'd lost some of her respect. Because all of a sudden as a Christian the people she's admiring, the people she's respecting and looking up to are Christians who have a deep and a vibrant and authentic faith. So she's admiring these people. What does that say about me? If that's what she's looking at to admire in folks, I'm an atheist. I don't have that. And I felt like I was losing her like she was being sucked into this Christian subculture. I felt like she was getting away from me.

I remember one Sunday morning. I was in bed, sleeping off a hangover and Leslie's getting up to go to church. She's getting ready and she notices I have one eye open seeing what's going on. So in a very sweet way she comes over and says, "Would you like to go to church with me today?" That's the last thing I wanted – to go to church. First of all I'm an atheist – *hello!* I don't want to go to church. Secondly, I've got this hangover. I've got elephants dancing on my head. I don't want to get out of bed and go to church.

But I said, "Yes, I'll go!" You know why I said I'd go? Because I felt like I was losing her! I felt like she was being pulled toward this other group of people who I didn't know who were very different from me, into this alien Christian subculture. I wanted to hang on to her. And I thought just to hang on to her I'm going to go with her. Of course, I didn't want to go. I was feeling sorry for myself and angry. So I'm stomping around the house. She says, "Can I get you some breakfast?" *I don't want any stupid breakfast!* I'm really being a pain. So we walked out and it's raining out. And we got wet on the way to the car and that really made me mad. We're going down the highway. I'm driving like a maniac down the road. We're hitting puddles with the car, the car's hydroplaning and I'm swearing and just really ugly.

Then Leslie started to cry. She said, "I didn't twist your arm. I'm not forcing you to go to church with me. If you don't want to go to church, *don't go to church!* But don't ruin it for me." I thought, here I was. I'm trying to hang on to her. I'm trying to prevent losing her to this other world that she was being pulled into and yet because of the inept way I was doing it I was pushing her further away.

Then I was worried, I was feeling the emotion of worry because I thought what if she starts raising our children as Christians? That would be the worst! If our kids are Christians how are they going to look at their dad, the atheist? They're not going to be respectful of me. All I could picture was Leslie and the kids heading out to church and there I am in my bathrobe, sucking on a beer, reading the Sunday paper and my kids looking and saying, "Poor old dad. He's just a pagan on the road to hell. Satan's got him in his grip. We're praying for you, dad!" I wanted my kids' respect no body wants to be pitied by their kids. And the kids feel sorry for you. So I worried about that.

Then I felt frustrated. Because all of a sudden we were on a different page in terms of how we wanted to live life. For instance, in the area of our finances. I never saw a dollar I didn't

want to spend. So we were living way outside of our means at the time. When Leslie became a Christian she realized that was going to head for trouble, that's going to create problems. So she wanted to have a budget. I thought that was bad enough but she said, "I want to give some money to the church. I said, "You've got to be out of your mind! Don't you know that these are con men out for your money? You're going to find out sooner or later and you're going to get burned."

She said that's really no true. And she felt so deeply about wanting to help this church reach more people and change more lives she actually went out and got a part time job so she could give her own money to the church. Nobody asked her to do that. She just wanted to do that. I thought she might as well crumple up the money and throw it away, throw it down the toilet! I couldn't understand this. So all of a sudden we're on different pages of our finances and in other areas of our lives.

Then I felt afraid. I felt afraid that Leslie was going to turn into some wild-eyed religious fanatic, some sexually repressed prude that was going to ruin all of our fun. Was she going to embarrass me in front of my friends? Was she going to get haughty on me and shame me every time I got drunk? Was she going to get caught up in a cult that was going to try to control her mind and her life? Was she going to get into one of these prayer groups and start sharing very personal information about me and our lives? I had this nightmare that Leslie was going to be in this prayer group with our neighbors saying, "Please pray for Lee. He's spiritually lost. He stubbornly refuses to open his eyes to the truth. He arrogantly refuses to admit he is a sinner. And behind this phony facade of success he's immature, immoral, stressed out and bitter. And you know how I love him so would you pray for Lee?" And I've got this facade thing going pretty good! I don't need anybody spilling the beans about what's really going on to our neighbors. I didn't want that so I worried that something like that was going to happen.

To me this was a classic case of bait and switch. I married one Leslie and now she was becoming something different. I didn't sign up to spend my life with this other Leslie. I signed up for the fun loving, the wild Leslie. I didn't sign up for this. I wanted the old Leslie back.

Then I felt anger. I really felt a lot of anger and rage inside of me. Once Leslie and I got into an argument about church and I kicked a whole in our living room wall. Just out of rage. And if you asked me back then, "Why are you so mad? Let her go to church if she wants. Why are you so angry over it?" If you'd asked me that, I wouldn't know. But now looking back I know why I was so angry. The more that Leslie became a follower of Christ, the more that she applied biblical teachings to her personal life, the more she grew in integrity and honesty and kindness and self sacrifice and goodness, the more God was changing her life for the good the more obvious it became the difference between her life and my life. The contrast of her living an increasingly godly life was like holding up a mirror to me. She didn't do it on purpose but it was like her godly life holding up a mirror saying, Look at the difference between your life and her life. It accentuated the immorality and the ugliness and the self-centeredness and the bitterness in my own existence and I didn't want to face it.

The Bible calls it being convicted of sin. And it hurts. And it made me mad because I wanted to pretend I was just a great guy. I wanted to keep the facade up. But looking at the contrast of her life I couldn't help but notice the truth about my life. And it made me mad. I didn't want to face it. But I had no choice because I'm living in the same house.

You can see how these emotions were sort of like a cauldron bubbling inside of me.

And while this is going on inside of me, Leslie is facing all kinds of emotions too.

First of all she's feeling hurt and she's feeling angry by the way I would belittle her faith and how I'd walk around with this self righteous demeanor and say, "Why do you have to believe in that junk? Why can't you stand on your own feet and face life without putting your belief in a book of fairy tells and legend and make believe and bad history? Why do you need this crutch of Christianity for? Why do you have to believe in some phony God? Can't you face life on your own? What's wrong with you that you can't stand up and look life in the face?" I would belittle her faith. And it made her angry that I was so open minded about so many things but when it came to Christianity my mind shut and I said, "Don't confuse me with the facts!"

Then Leslie felt frustrated because for the first time in our whole lives there were some things that she couldn't share with me. Here she was growing in her relationship with God, she was learning all these incredible things about God and His promises to her and she's experiencing this relationship with Him and she couldn't share it with me because she knew, (a) I wasn't interested or (b) I'd get mad if she tried to do it or (c) I wouldn't have understood anyway.

One day because our finances were a mess at the time Leslie was feeling a lot of anxiety and a lot of fear over that and I was at work and she was home alone that day. She took the Bible and went into the bedroom by herself. She laid down on the bed and she opened the Bible just looking for some wisdom about what do we do about our financial situation. There's a lot in the Bible that talks about that but those weren't the verses she found that day. The verses she kept stumbling upon were the verses about how much God loves her and how much God cares for her and how much God wants to ease her anxiety and release her from this fear that had gripped her. As she really caught a fresh glimpse of God as a loving Father who treasured her as a child she began to weep. She began to weep out of joy and wonder about how much the God of the universe loves her. It was a very tender moment. Then she hears the front door opening up and she knew I was coming home. And she knew if I saw that Bible I would pick a fight over it. So she closed the Bible and stuffed it under the bed to hide it. She knew she couldn't share with me what had just happened because I wouldn't understand and I wouldn't care. So she wiped away the tears got herself composed and came out of the bedroom "Hi! Glad you're home. What do you want to do for dinner?" She'd just had this moving experience with God that had filled her heart so much it overflowed and made her weep with joy and she had to stuff it and pretend it never happened and dry the tears. She couldn't share it with the man she loved the most. That was so frustrating to her. And it happened more and more and more. The more she built her relationship with God, the deeper her faith went, the more distant became the gulf between me and her. We'd always shared stuff together. Now this most important part of who she is had to go unexpressed to me.

And she felt fear as well. Leslie felt fear because as she looked down the road of our marriage all the way to the horizon she saw conflict. She saw problems. All the way down to the horizon. Disagreements. How are we going to raise our kids? Is it going to be Dr. Spock or Dr. Dobson? We've got to decide who's it going to be. How are we going to handle our finances? All these relational issues. Conflict resolution issues, all the way down to the end she sees it's going to be a constant source of disagreement. Then she saw to the end of the road. She saw the day was going to come when I was going to die and I was going to stand before a holy God who was going to look at me and say, "Lee, your whole life you didn't care to be in relationship with Me. You rejected all of My overtures to you. You wanted to live separately

from Me all your life and I allowed you to do that because that was your choice. And now I'm sealing that choice and for the rest of eternity you're going to live apart from any influence of Me." And Leslie knew what that meant. There is no way the human mind can never begin to understand the horror of being separated totally from any influence of God for eternity. That's what hell is. She knew that someday on that day of reckoning was going to be judged by God. She loved me and she didn't want that for me. So she feared for the future.

Can you see how this spark of a spiritual mismatch can just ignite a powderkeg of emotion inside of each person? Can you begin to understand why God has said, I want to protect you from this – both parties – from the frustration and the anger and the pain and the heartbreak that an unequally yoked situation can create.

So if you're single today, God is saying to you, I love you so much that I want to protect you from that kind of pain and heartbreak and turbulence and stress in your relationships. So I want you to understand: a spiritual mismatch is trouble. It will stifle your spiritual growth. It will choke out your relationship with God. It will create frustration for you and for your spouse so for both of your sake He would say do not date anyone who is not a follower of Jesus Christ. If you're a Christian man or woman the Bible would be clear. That's the counsel I give to any single Christian. Do not date anyone who is not a follower of God. Friends? Absolutely. Hang out together in a group? Absolutely. Be colleagues at work? Absolutely. But don't start dating. Because that can take you down a path to a deeper and deeper relationship and possibly to marriage. Even casual dating can be a problem. Some people think, "It's just a casual date. It's just fun dating. Why is that a problem?" It's a problem because what is casual dating to one party might be something entirely different to the other person when at the back of their mind they're thinking; I hope this relationship goes further. And the relationship even though it's casual dating becomes an incubator for feelings to develop and situations change. You may find yourself on the road to a deepening and deepening relationship and on the road to marriage that you never intended when you first began this casual dating. Then you're faced with a choice between your faith or your feelings for this other person. That is the place where heartbreak happens and where faith is compromised.

I remember doing a message on this topic a few years ago. Afterwards a young Christian woman came up to me and said, "I'm dating a man and he's so close to becoming a Christian. He's checking things out and he's really close. Don't you think it'd be ok if we got married? He's so close and I know it's going to happen sooner or later." I said, "Did you not listen to the message? Read my lips: do not become unequally yoked. For your sake, for his sake heed the word of God. Father knows best!"

If you're a Christian and you're single today I would encourage you to make July 1, 2001 the day that you draw a line and the day that you say, "From today forward regardless of what my past has been like from this day forward I'm only going to date those people who are followers of Jesus Christ. For everybody's sake and because God told me that that's what I need to do." Put the date in the front cover of your Bible. Write it down. July 1, 2001. Circle the verse in 2 Corinthians that talks about the unequally yoked situation.

Last night after the services I went home and I already had email from people who said, I wish I'd heard that message twelve years ago. People who said, I'm drawing the line now. I've made the mistake in the past. I've suffered the consequences and I'm drawing the line today. God wants to protect you. Cooperate with Him.

But if you're already in an unequally yoked situation. You're already spiritually mismatched God doesn't abandon you. He doesn't want you to throw in the towel on your relationship, on your marriage. He offers wisdom on how it is you can survive. What Leslie did was she followed four bits of biblical counsel and it saved our marriage. It literally saved our marriage. The way I remember these is by the word HELP because that's the word Leslie said most during that year "HELP!" So HELP will remind you of these four bits of biblical counsel.

H – Harness the support of others.

Harness the support of other Christians. Ecclesiastes 4: 9-10 says, *"Two are better than one because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down his friend can help him up. But pity the person who falls and has no one to help him up."* Leslie realized, "I can't go through this relationship by myself. I need a mature Christian woman by my side to help me get through this era." So she built a relationship with a woman named Linda who was a mature Christian. And Linda did primarily two things for Leslie.

The first thing Linda did was she helped Leslie grow in her faith. I wasn't encouraging her. I was discouraging her. She didn't have anybody in her life who was feeding the flames of her newfound faith in Christ. So Linda would hold Bible studies. Just her and Leslie. She mentored her spiritually. They'd pray together. She would answer her questions. It was like a mentoring kind of relationship spiritually speaking. That was very important.

The second thing Linda did is she offered godly advice and consistent prayers and a shoulder to cry on when the relationship got particularly hard. But in doing that it's very important that Linda did not allow Leslie to get mired in self-pity. She didn't allow Leslie to fall into the trap of being judgmental toward me, her husband. It would have been very easy in these get togethers for them to get into sort of a bitter complaint session about me. And pretty soon it's God and Leslie and Linda versus Lee. Us versus him. I'm her husband! I'm not the enemy. So Linda helped her to keep focused on that. Don't get mired in self-pity. Don't get bitter and start making it an Us versus Them proposition. And Linda made sure that Leslie didn't start blaming every little shortcoming in our relationship on the fact that I wasn't a Christian. Leslie had this idealized idea of what life would be like if Lee would just become a Christian. "If Lee would just become a Christian, he'd diaper the kids without complaining, he'd take the trash out without complaining, he'd take me out to romantic dinners – if he'd just become a Christian everything would be great!" And Linda would say, "I don't think so! Not all that Lee does that annoys you he does because he's not a Christian. Some of it he does because he's just a jerk. That's just who he is." But she said, "Don't idealize Christian marriages. They have flaws. They have challenges. They have turbulence and difficulties too." So she helped her maintain that perspective which was important.

What Linda did was she helped Leslie stay focused on God and not obsessing about her situation. She encouraged Leslie to keep building on the commonality that Leslie and I had. In other words, we got married for a reason. We loved each other. We enjoyed doing things together. So what you can still in good conscious do now as a Christian together with your husband keep doing. You build on that commonality so you don't begin to drift apart.

So if you're looking for a confidant like Linda, if you're in a spiritually mismatched situation saying, I need someone who can provide that kind of anchor in these turbulent waters that I'm facing we can help you with that. On the card in the tray in front of you, mark "I'm interested in a small group." We'll help you find a small group where there will be wise Christians who will

get alongside of you and encourage you and pray for you and who will give you godly wisdom and will help you process what you're going through and carry you through this difficult era of your life. We can serve you in that way.

E stands for Exercise restraint.

This is a huge reason why our relationship didn't blow apart. Leslie, even though she didn't water down who she was as a Christian, she was very much sensitive that religion caused conflict in our relationship. So she respected me enough to give me space. She respected me enough to exercise restraint. In other words there were a lot of times she wanted to take a Bible and slap me up the side of the head with it. She wanted to grab me by the hair and drag me to church. That is what she wanted to do. But she realized she had to exercise restraint.

Sometimes she kind of violated that rule. Sometimes she'd be reading a Christian book and she'd find a paragraph and think, "If Lee would just read that one paragraph it would change everything!" So she'd highlight it and underline it and then she'd casually leave the book open on the coffee table. It was fine with me. I'd close it and that was it! But if she had persisted in that kind of stuff, if she had put Bible verses on post it notes on my mirror or put tracks in my socks or keep changing the presets on my car radio to Christian stations or put crosses all around the house or stuff like that it would have been a problem. But she exercised restraint.

One of the things she restrained herself from was involvement in church. She loved the church she was part of. There were so many things she wanted to go to and attend and participate in and contribute to and be a part of. But she realized – we'd reached an accommodation where I didn't mind her going to church on Sunday's with Linda. That was fine with me. But if she was suddenly gone two or three nights a week it would have been a real problem in our relationship. It would have fueled the tensions and the stresses in our relationship. So even though she wanted to get more deeply involved she exercised restraint. And that was where Linda came in, to be that spiritual mentor, to do Bible studies with her, to help her, to pray with her, to help her through this particular era.

One of the things that Leslie did was, instead of opening the Bible and praying when I was around, she would get up before I would every morning and go into the kitchen by herself and set at the kitchen table and open the Bible and she would read the Bible and pray every morning. Then I would get up. And the first thing I would see every morning I'd look in the kitchen and the first thing I would see would be Leslie closing the Bible. And she would get up and say, "Hey! Good morning! How ya' doing?" Almost as if to say, "I've already had my spiritual nourishment today so now let's not let religion get between us today." So she exercised restraint in that way as well.

But the most important way that she exercised restraint was she didn't nit pick everything that I did. In other words, she didn't shame me every time I had a few drinks or let loose with some bad language. She didn't refuse to go to parties at my friends' houses anymore or go to movies where the language might be just a little rough. She didn't elevate everything to a spiritual battle. There were some issues where she drew the line and said, I can no longer do that, participate in that as a Christian. She would draw the line where appropriate but she didn't elevate everything into a battle. She didn't make every little problem into a spiritual confrontation with me. If she had our marriage would have just degenerated. Proverbs 25:24 *"Better to live alone in a tumble down shack than to share a mansion with a nagging spouse."*

And that's true. But she didn't nag me. She loved me. She gave me space. She exercised restraint.

L – Live your faith, don't just talk it.

In other words the integrity of your everyday life as a Christian will speak more powerfully to your spouse than any sermon you could ever preach. Look what the Bible says to Christians in 1 Peter 3 *“If your spouses refuse to listen when you talk to them about the Lord they will be won by your respectful pure behavior. Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words.”* Leslie was a new Christian. I was a hostile atheist. She was prepared to deal with the challenges and issues and questions that I wanted to throw at her. It would have ended in a debate, degenerated into an argument. So she did something better. She allowed God through His Holy Spirit to begin to change her from the inside out. To change her values and her character and her priorities and her desires and her relationships. Her outlook began to change from the inside out. As I watched Leslie become a woman of humility and of self-sacrifice and of love and of patience and of kindness and of goodness and of self-control that was the main reason I was willing to take Christianity more seriously. Because I couldn't explain otherwise what was going on inside of her.

Not only that but Leslie's behavior began to change the whole temperature of our marriage. Jo Berry wrote in her book Beloved Unbeliever “Rather than just wishing things were different, all of us have to admit that for the most part our marriages will only be as good or as bad as we make them. Any unequally yoked wife can have a Christian marriage to the extent that she is willing to implement God's standards into her performance and into the relationship itself. And the same is true of any man who is unequally yoked.” In other words what she's saying you can have a “Christian marriage” to the extent that you personally are willing to implement God's principles and God's values into the marriage relationship. You won't be able to do it fully because your spouse is not on the same page with you spiritually. But the degree that you can unilaterally you can live out your faith and what it means to be a follower of Christ and biblical principles for marriage, as best as you can live them out in your marriage it will raise the temperature of your marriage for the good. That's what we found in our life.

P stands for Pray, Pray, Pray.

James 5:26 *“The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with.”* You pray because it's powerful and you pray because where else are you going to go when you are feeling these emotions, this fear, this anxiety, this frustration, this anger. Where else are you going to go but to God?

Right after Leslie became a Christian she met some women at the church she was going to and she said, “I'm so grateful for what God is doing and has done in my life but I don't have any hope for my husband. He is a hardheaded, hardhearted legal editor of the *Tribune*. This guy's heart is like granite. I can't crack it open. I don't know what to do.” One of those women gently opened up the Bible to the Old Testament to Ezekiel 36:26 and she said, “Leslie, you pray this verse every day for your husband *‘Moreover I will give you a new heart and I will put a new Spirit within you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh.’*”

So Leslie began praying saying, “God, I can’t crack open Lee’s heart. It’s like granite. But God, You can do a heart transplant. I know that You can give him a new heart. You can put a new spirit with in him. Open his eyes to his need for a savior. Open his eyes to the truth of Scripture. Open his eyes to his need for You.” She began praying that for me and an extraordinary thing happened. This difficult time of trials and tribulation and frustration and anger and all these emotions, God used this difficult time to mold Leslie into something she never would have become if she had not gone through that turbulent year of our marriage.

In other words it was because of the stress and the turmoil of our marriage that Leslie learned how to pour herself out authentically to God. Because of the stress and the difficulties of our marriage Leslie learned how to be 100% dependent on God. Not on her own ideas, her own agenda, her own timing. But to depend 100% on God. It was through these difficult times she learned lessons of patience and forgiveness and love and kindness and self-sacrifice. And what God did through this was He molded her character in such a way so that today she is a person who has such a deep and vibrant and abiding faith. And she has such steadfast courage spiritually speaking. And she is so dependent on God. I don’t think she would be that today if God had not used the difficulty of our spiritually mismatched marriage to mold her into who she is now.

And what I want to say to you is if you find yourself today in a spiritually mismatched marriage, this is not a wasted time in your life. God is going to work through the stresses and through the difficulties if you call out to Him, if you reach out to Him, if you’re dependent on Him, He is going to change your character in such a way that you will emerge from it a person who will be changed forever. He will draw good out of what you see now as a troublesome time in your life.

The Apostle Paul was very acquainted with suffering. He wrote in Romans 5, *“We rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance. And perseverance character and character hope and hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out His love into our hearts by His Holy Spirit whom He has given us.”*

There is hope. There is hope if you’re in a spiritual mismatch God has not abandoned you. He will use this experience to deepen and strengthen you faith, to mold your character and He’s given you biblical principles for how to live, to harness the support of others, to exercise restraint, to live your faith and not just talk about it and to pray. And by that prayer to build your relationship deeper and stronger with God. Let Him use that prayer experience to sow comfort into your life when you’re feeling uncertain, to ease your anxieties, to give you courage and to give you peace and to give you wisdom for how to proceed.

So those are the four things that Leslie did right, the HELP she did that right. And during that two years of our marriage I think I did one thing right, I said one right word – “Maybe”. I said the word “maybe”. In light of what was changing in my wife, even though it made me mad because it accentuated my sin, I could not deny this was good. This was good. She was becoming a better person. She was becoming a more loving a caring individual. And because of the changes that she said God was causing in her heart and soul I began to say, “Well maybe this isn’t the result of positive mental attitude. Maybe there is something to this. Maybe God is real. Maybe He does change human beings.” And because I was willing to crack my heart open just enough to be willing to say maybe God began to take me on a journey of discovery and I spent two years of my life using my legal training and journalism training to begin to explore the maybes about God until I emerged on November the 8, 1981 absolutely convinced by the historical evidence that Jesus did rise from the dead that He is therefore the Son of God, that

therefore the Bible is the word of God, that I can trust it, that I can trust for my eternity in Christ. And on November 8, 1981 I received Christ as my forgiver and my leader and my friend and the third era of our marriage began.

Remember how I said how in this first era when neither of us were followers of Christ and we were kind of going down the road in that sports car with no hands on the wheel, now that we're in spiritual synch we still don't have our hands on the steering wheel because God's got His hands on the steering wheel. We've found that is the best way to live. Because we just hang on. We say, "God You know. We trust You. You love us and You're going to take us to the best possible place for us to go. So You take the steering wheel. We're going to sit here and we're going to have the time of our lives." And God has shown us the difference between living without God or living with one of us who has God to what it is like to living in a marriage situation where both of us know Jesus Christ.

I'll mention two ways that it's changed our live.

First, God has given us wisdom that works. Christianity is not just an abstract philosophy but the Bible offers a practical roadmap for navigating the day to day problems we're going to have in our lives, in our marriage, in our relationships, in our child rearing, in our finances, in our conflict resolution, in our friendships. And it has worked. We have found as we applied it it's worked. And God has given us a moral compass now so we're not making up the morality as we go based on what feels good. And then suffering the bad consequences of situational ethics. God's given us a compass that points to true north.

The other thing that God has done is He has given us intimacy that is unequalled. When I think back on those days before I picture us skating, superficially over life. It's as if God says to us now, "You and Leslie before you knew Me you used to relate to each other on a physical level, on an intellectual level, on an emotional level. That's all fine. That's part of what it means to be married. That's good but that's not all there is. There is something deeper, there is something better. There is a spiritual level on which you can relate to each other and you can relate to Me." And there is no intimacy that is more daring there is no intimacy that is more fulfilling and more satisfying than sharing your souls with your spouse and then sharing your soul with God. He has given us intimacy that is unequalled.

And when I look back and think we almost missed it, to think we were going to be satisfied living the superficial life and to miss this kind of intimacy.

So God has given us a happy ending. We're grateful for that but I want to be quick to say you may not have one. You may be married to someone who is not a Christian and they're going to their grave rejecting the overtures of love and forgiveness and grace and compassion and eternal life that Jesus has been reaching out. And their whole life they're going to say, "No, No, No." And there's nothing you can do about that. You're not responsible for the spiritual decision that your spouse makes. Don't put that burden on yourself. Don't think, "If I were just a better Christian then for sure he'd see God in me and he'd bend his knee to Christ." This is not your responsibility. We're not going to stand before Jesus Christ someday as married couples. We're going to stand individually before God and He is going to judge each one of us individually and He's going to say, "Are you going to pay for the sins and wrongdoing you did in your lifetime. Are you going to pay yourself for that through eternity? Or did you receive forgiveness and grace through Christ, His full payment for your wrongdoing? Are you going to spend eternity with God in heaven?" That's going to be an individual question. You cannot make the decision

for your spouse. I know you want to but you can't. And if you put that burden on yourself that you're responsible for his or her eternal destiny then you will inevitably push too hard and you'll probably alienate him even further.

You know what your responsibility is? Your responsibility is to follow Jesus Christ. Your responsibility is to live a life that honors God. Because the truth of the matter is if you honor God in your everyday life then He is going to honor you for a lifetime even in the midst of a spiritual mismatch.

Prayer:

Father, I pray first for those who find themselves in a mismatched situation. And I know from talking to people last night and this morning, this dredges up all kinds of emotions for them. I pray by Your Holy Spirit that You would encourage them, that You would give them peace, that You would give them wisdom and comfort, that You would help them apply these biblical principles in their marriage that You would remove from them any undue burden that they've been feeling, responsibility for someone else's eternal decisions and help them just be an authentic follower of Yours. Father, I pray for those in a mismatched situation who are the ones who aren't followers of Yours. Father, I pray that they might crack open their hearts enough to say, "Maybe, Maybe it's true." Because if they just begin to seek, we know, Father, that they will find You. And then we pray for the courage for them to act upon what they find, to ultimately say the word, "Yes" to You and to Your free gift of eternal life. Father, we pray for those who are dating. Help them to draw that line to do what's right. Encourage them, I pray. Help them to remain steadfast in their commitment to You.

And Father, we're coming up to a big week here in our country with Independence Day coming up in just a few days. We want to pause and once again thank You that we can gather on a Sunday morning in this place and talk about spiritual matters. We know there are places in the world where people are beaten and imprisoned and tortured and even put to death for doing the exact thing that we're doing now, gathering on a Sunday to worship and to honor You. So we don't take for granted the lives of the men and women who've died through history, whose blood has purchased the freedom that we have here in this country to be able to live freely. So we thank You for that. We thank You for this land that we're in. We thank You for the opportunities You've given us as Christians to vote and to lobby and to participate in our government and to express our faith through the ballot box. And we pray for future generations that they might reap the benefit of us having stood firmly and strongly for our faith in this land. In Jesus' name. Amen.