

GOD  
UNDERSTANDS  
DIVORCE

*a biblical message of grace*

Barry D. Ham, Ph.D.

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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to four groups of people

First, to my two sons Jeremy and Jason who have lived so much of this journey.

Second, to my clients; those couples who have sat in my office, hurting, telling their stories, and doing the hard work to make sense of it all, hoping to make it better

Third, to the students in my Marriage and Family classes, who have generously shared their lives, and have endeavored to apply this material and grow in their own relationships

Fourth, to all of those individuals who have struggled in challenging marriages, who have been faced with the threats or devastation of divorce, and yet who strive to honor God above all else in their difficult decisions.

This book is for you!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A project like this never happens in isolation, and it is imperative that I acknowledge the contribution of at least a few significant individuals, even though there have been many.

Walking through those dark, lonely, and uncertain times following a divorce is awful at best, but is made much more travelable when God provides you with key friends, confidants, and accountability partners. And God was gracious enough to give me many supportive friends, but three were specifically priceless. Mark Berrier, who has been like a brother to me for the past 40 years, has never wavered in his support, his willingness to speak the truth, and his faithfulness, even when I was seemingly out to lunch. Thank you. It was actually out of our discussions that this book began to germinate. I am grateful to Al De la Roche who was always available and never hesitated to ask the tough questions over a #3 combo at Carl's Jr. The trilogy wouldn't be complete without an individual who was willing to endure daily phone calls when I was clinging to an emotional rollercoaster. I am indebted to Bryan Bytwerk, who was that essential person.

One particular couple that was willing to get in the trenches with me and just love on me was Ralph and Kathy Crume. Thank you for adopting me into those Sunday evening dinners and allowing me to process.

Once the writing was complete, then the real work of getting this project published began, and I want to thank my friend and author Paul Batura for his invaluable advice and support along the way. Several individuals reviewed the manuscript for me, but I particularly appreciate the thoughtful suggestions of Georgia Clifton and Al De la Roche. You have both been friends through the storm and therefore knew my heart, understood my words, and knew how to speak into this project.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my website producers, marketing idea gurus, and dear personal friends Steve and Shawna Bryant for all of their contributions both personally and professionally.

Thank you all!

## ENDORSEMENTS

As Christian couples experience divorce at an alarming rate, individuals cry out, wondering if there are any real answers or solutions. Does anybody really care? In these pages, Barry reveals that God has been where you are, He knows your pain, He desires wholeness for you, and He offers clear guidance to enable you to get there. He really cares!

GARY CHAPMAN, PH.D.

Author of *The Five Love Languages*

Dr. Barry Ham writes with a marvelous mixture of compassion and conviction. His life's calling is to help others not just find answers to challenges, but to also discover the root cause of their problems.

PAUL BATURA

Author of *Good Day! The Paul Harvey Story*

This book demonstrates that God truly understands divorce—our pain and brokenness, our challenges and struggles, and the oftentimes resulting carnage. As Barry points out, it is because God really “gets it” that He gives us clear insight and direction to help us avoid the “train wrecks” and actually restore marriages that, at first glance, appear to be dead. For those walking this dark and lonely

journey, Barry offers, in these pages, real, practical solutions and a genuine hope.

BILL BUTTERWORTH

Author of *The Promise of the Second Wind*

In a world where divorce has become the new “normal,” Barry shares strong insight on the balance of Old Testament and New Testament teaching on divorce. And his thoughts on how churches should serve the divorced, and those who are contemplating divorce, are worthy of consideration by churches of all sizes around the country. Implementing his ideas in your community will result in stronger marriages and healthier people who have struggled through this great loss in life.

DUSTY RUBECK

President, Dallas Christian College

It’s undeniable: divorce is accelerating in our culture and many people are grasping for hope and perspective. However, in the midst of this disturbing whitewater trend, too many are reaching for rescue shortcuts that, instead of healing, cause further pain and damage. With compassion and understanding, Dr. Barry Ham challenges that tendency by offering a lifeline of both grace and truth. He ignores neither the heartbreaking realities surrounding the issue nor the gracious truth of God’s Word. Aiming to help those who are struggling in their marriages, as well as others who are seeking to walk alongside them, he delves below the surface and invites people into a journey of healing as well as rescue.

MATT HEARD

Senior Pastor, Woodmen Valley Chapel  
Colorado Springs

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# INTRODUCTION

My spouse doesn't love me anymore—what should I do? This marriage is not at all what I thought I was signing up for—how do I get out? I messed up my marriage big time—how do I fix it? How can God even begin to understand my pain? How can He understand divorce? What kind of a dumb title is that anyway? I am divorced—now what? Am I able to remarry? My family members—son/daughter, brother/sister, or parents are going through a divorce—how should I respond? How can I help them? I am watching my best friend's marriage come unraveled—how do I intervene—or should I even try? Husbands and wives are going their separate ways in our church on a daily basis—what can I do? Do we support? Do we confront? Do we counsel? Do we stay out of the way and say nothing?

Questions, questions, questions! These, and dozens more questions around the subjects of marriage and divorce, seem to come at us relentlessly. I know. I have faced them all, as a husband, father, professor, and therapist, which is my reason and my passion for writing this book. It can be an excruciating journey, and I invite you to travel with me down a path that I believe will help provide some support, encouragement, reassurances, and solid biblical answers for the questions and situations you face. And most importantly, I hope you will discover that God does truly understand and He cares.

SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION

## CHAPTER ONE

### JEREMIAH 3

*“Commitment is what transforms a promise into reality. It is the words that speak boldly of your intentions. And the actions which speak louder than the words. It is making the time when there is none. Coming through time after time after time, year after year after year. Commitment is the stuff character is made of; the power to change the face of things. It is the daily triumph of integrity over skepticism.”*

—ANONYMOUS<sup>1</sup>

Jimmy and Ellen<sup>2</sup> met in high school. They were in the same grade and began dating their junior year. It was young love, and with it came all of the intensity and proclamations of “foreverness” that this typically brings. Everyone knew that they were a couple and respected their boundaries. During their senior year, Jimmy decided to join the Navy immediately after high school. This increased the intensity and the pressure of their relationship. If he joined the Navy, he would begin his basic training during the summer following graduation. Ellen would be left at home in California, while Jimmy would be on the other side of the United

States—and potentially out of the country. The thought of separation caused an increased level of anxiousness for both of them. So, acknowledging the many challenges that would lay ahead, they decided to get married before Jimmy began basic training.

Friends and family strongly cautioned them about the challenges of marrying so young. This only increased their determination to take all of the right steps to make certain that their marriage survived. They began to see a premarital counselor in the springtime. It seemed to them that focusing on typical problem areas that couples face would be a protective guarantee for success. Discussions about everything from finances to in-laws were on the table. When the topic of children came up, they spoke with certainty about the fact that they were going to wait a few years so they would have important bonding time together. Counseling seemed to go well as they expressed lifetime loyalty and commitment to one another. In June, just a few weeks after graduation, they were married in a beautiful outdoor wedding with family, friends, and all of the typical adornments—flowers, music, and an elegant reception. With a beginning like this, surely happiness and bliss were on the horizon.

Shortly after the wedding, Jimmy left for boot camp and Ellen remained at home with her parents. While the separation was difficult for these newlyweds, Ellen knew that as soon as her husband received his first assignment, they would be together to begin their lifelong partnership. She was lonely, but it would only be for a short time—then her “real life” would begin. Jimmy was busy with all of the demands of a new recruit. He missed his wife, but he was working hard to keep up physically with his peers and to deal with the flood of emotions that he was feeling. He just wanted this time to pass quickly.

Finally, after the longest eight weeks of their young lives, Ellen traveled to the Chicago area to watch Jimmy graduate. She went along with his parents for a long weekend. Waiting in the

hall where the graduation ceremony was to take place seemed to drag on forever. At last, the graduates began their march into the drill hall. She knew that he was in division #133 and she watched intently for his arrival. Finally—there he was. He looked so sharp in his uniform, and she was about to explode with pride. It was all she could do to keep from bursting from the stands and running to hug him. But, she sat patiently—full of excitement—waiting for the ceremony to be over. At last, the “Liberty call, liberty call,” order was given, and the graduates were released to be with their families. She ran to her husband, kissing and embracing him, wanting to never let go. He had equally longed to see her and had begun to think that this moment would never come. But, here they were—together—finally. By the end of the weekend, Jimmy had received his orders, and he and Ellen began to make plans for her move to their next assignment.

While they had grown up in far northern California, their new home was San Diego. This was quite different from Redding, but at least it was back in California, and finally in a place they could call their own. Here they were—married and together. Life would be great now!

During the day, Jimmy would be off at work while Ellen remained at home. This seemed terrific at first, but after a couple of weeks, boredom began to set in for her. Ellen wanted to begin taking classes at the local community college, but needed to wait because Jimmy might be transferred again before the end of the semester. She tried to occupy herself during the day, but much of her time was spent just waiting for Jimmy to arrive home. Ellen worked to have a great meal ready for her husband and even tried to make sure that she looked especially nice for him. However, more often than not, Jimmy would arrive home exhausted, barely able to enjoy the dinner and hardly aware of much else. Ellen tried to be understanding, but as the routine became more common day after day, she found herself getting angry. She was homesick;

she had no friends in San Diego, and she was feeling more alone as each week passed.

Weekends were a little better, because Jimmy was home. But rather than making good use of this time, they usually spent it arguing about the rest of the week. It was not a safe or pleasant place for either one of them. They began to question how they had gotten themselves into this situation and secretly began to wonder how they could get out of it. Just when it seemed that things could not be any more complicated, Ellen discovered that she was pregnant. How could this be? They weren't going to get pregnant for several years. They weren't ready for this—not even remotely ready! Yet, here they were. They had to make this work.

Pregnancy was not the glowing joyful time that friends had predicted. Ellen was sick much of the time, and Jimmy was not physically or emotionally available for her. They continued to drift further and further apart. The initial excitement at the birth of their son, Todd, provided a brief respite from the troubles in their relationship. However, within a few weeks they were back into their dysfunctional patterns. Only now, the sleep deprivation and dirty diapers served to amplify problems that already existed.

During this time, one of the young men from the apartment complex began to befriend Ellen while Jimmy was at work. At first, it seemed innocent enough. Eric would just stop by to say “hi.” Before long, Ellen would find things that she needed a “man’s help” with and call Eric during the day for assistance. Ellen was moved by Eric’s willingness and his availability. He never seemed too tired to give her his attention, and he appeared to genuinely listen to Ellen and her concerns. As her feelings began to develop and increase for Eric, she rationalized that she had tried to make things work with Jimmy, but that he just didn’t seem to really want her. Now here was someone who did. As might be expected, Ellen and Eric became involved sexually, and soon the affair was in full swing.

At this point, the story becomes a common one—the pattern is repeated daily in this country. Jimmy discovered Ellen’s secret. They fight, spewing venom as they each blame the other for the demise of their marriage. The resulting divorce brought with it all of the property and custody issues that are a part of this typical scenario. The impact was like that of a rock thrown into a pond. The ripple didn’t stop with just Jimmy and Ellen. It played, and will continue to play, havoc in the life of Todd, Jimmy’s parents and family, Ellen’s parents and family, and all of their many friends and acquaintances. The effects will continue to be felt in their lives, and in the lives of others with whom they come into contact, for years to come. Lives were changed forever.

Friends and family attempted to intervene with both Jimmy and Ellen, but to no avail. The decision was made. People offered thoughts and opinions, some in support of their decisions and others condemning their choices. Of course, those in disagreement with them simply “didn’t understand” what they had gone through. No one really understands the hurt, pain, betrayal, and heartache. Friends from church attempted to get them to examine God’s thoughts and desires about all of this, but this too fell on deaf ears. “After all,” the couple said, “God may not like divorce, but He doesn’t understand what I have been, and am going, through. He is God. He doesn’t have any worries, and He certainly doesn’t have to live with my spouse. He just orders people not to get divorced. That is easy to do because He has never experienced what I have. He doesn’t know how difficult and hurtful this is. He doesn’t understand.” Therefore, Jimmy and Ellen didn’t go to Him for answers. Instead, they went to friends who have perhaps experienced the same hurt and pain that they have. Their friends didn’t have any more answers than they did, but they could understand and relate—unlike God.

Well-meaning individuals might conclude that there is merit in this thinking. I mean, after all, what can a holy and sinless God



know about a marriage that has gone sour? How can the creator of the universe even begin to understand my feelings when it comes to divorce? The answer is actually quite easy. God understands divorce far better than most may think because God has been divorced.

*What? That is impossible. God can't be divorced. He is God. What are you talking about?*

God has been divorced!

*What is this, some kind of whacked cultic belief in a god who has lots of wives? Is this some kind of Greek mythology stuff?*

Not at all. God clearly has been divorced. Let's take a look at the ongoing difficulties that He has had with His bride and the resulting divorce.

Jeremiah 3 presents a clear picture. But before we look at that, let's see what troubles existed leading up to God's divorce.

## GOD SELECTS A BRIDE

From the very beginning, God designed people for intimacy with Himself. Adam walked through The Garden in the cool of the evening with God. What an image—the created walks and talks with the Creator. It would be wonderful to have even been just an ear in those conversations—what did they talk about? Were they discussing plans for the future of the world? What kinds of questions did Adam have for God? What an opportunity to be with the Creator! You most likely know what happened in The Garden and the resulting breach in the relationship. This placed humanity in a broken and distant position with God. Yet, God had certainly not given up on people; He had a plan. We see in Scripture the manner in which God's plan unfolded as He chose His bride—by selecting an individual, Abraham, who would become a people—a nation.

God made covenants with humanity—an agreement, a contract. One of those early agreements was made with Noah. The

earth had become a very godless and corrupt place. It didn't seem that there was much worth salvaging. Yet, God found one righteous man and gave him very clear instructions concerning what he needed to do to survive the coming catastrophe. Following the flood, God made a covenant with Noah regarding this issue of flooding—He would never again destroy the entire world with a flood.

In Genesis 12, we see God called Abraham. God could have selected anybody that He wanted. He may have even looked around a little to see who would be the best individual for the call. By Genesis 15, God made a covenant with Abraham—a part of which includes this statement: “*Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them....So shall your offspring be*” (Gen. 15:5). God selected an individual who would become a nation who would become God's bride. This covenant was confirmed again in Genesis 17. The covenant was carried on with Jacob, who literally became Israel, and Israel became the bride of God. Wow! What an awesome privilege and opportunity, to be selected as the favored people of the Creator. Any nation would covet this position, but only Israel was selected. God made His agreement, His covenant, with Israel. In her youth, Israel was devoted to God. She watched God perform miracle after miracle as He loved and protected her. She knew that she had a good deal.

However, it wasn't long before Israel became complacent and self-centered and took the Creator of the Universe for granted. God used Moses to lead the Israelites out of their captivity. Yet, by the time they got to the Red Sea, they were already complaining. In Exodus 15, they grumbled about food; in the next chapter, water; and by Chapter 32, they were ready to forsake God for another. “*Who?*” you ask. *Who could possibly match the kind of Protector and Provider God is?*

A human-made golden calf.<sup>1</sup>

*Huh?*

I know it seems unbelievable, but that is exactly what they did. Of course there were consequences—many people became sick and died. Israel had been unfaithful to her husband. Yet, even after severe consequences—when you think that she would have seen the error of her ways, when you think she would have learned her lesson—this was only the beginning of her problems.

God loved Israel as His wife. Even when she sinned, if she repented and returned, God took her back time and time again. Yet she never seemed to quite grasp the concept of faithfulness and trust in her Husband. Here are a few examples:

- Numbers 11—the people complained against God.
- Numbers 13 and 14—they didn't trust God and instead feared the Canaanites.
- Numbers 20—they complained about water (they have been here before).
- Numbers 25—Israel was seduced by the Moabites and worshiped human-made idols.

By Deuteronomy 28 and 29, in an event similar to the renewing of wedding vows, God described the blessings and curses in their marriage agreement and renewed the covenant. Joshua renewed the covenant in Deuteronomy 8. However, by the Book of Judges, we see that the pattern of unfaithfulness was running rampant.

- Judges 2—Israel was serving Baal. The covenant was violated and God responded.
- Judges 3, 6, 10, 13—Israel continued to violate her covenant with God.
- 2 Kings 17—Israel was exiled because of her sin.

- 2 Chronicles 36—God sent messengers to Israel to plead for her return, but she mocked the messengers.
- Isaiah 1—we see that Israel became a rebellious and sinful nation.
- Ezekiel 11—God passed judgment on Israel’s leaders for disobedience.
- Hosea—the entire book deals in some form or fashion with Israel’s repeated unfaithfulness and God’s persistent and unwavering love.
- Amos 3—God listed witnesses and evidence of Israel’s unfaithfulness.
- Micah 6—the Lord presented His case against Israel.
- Malachi 2—Following the split of Israel and Judah into two nations, Judah was also unfaithful.

What an amazing pattern—Israel continued to sin against and stray from her husband; God punished and yet pleaded for the nation to return; Israel repented and returned; God blessed Israel; and then they walked away again, thus repeating the pattern. It made no sense. They found no fault in God, but they forsook Him. Jeremiah probably presented the case most clearly.

Jeremiah received the word of the Lord and recorded it during the beginning of the reign of King Josiah. He continued until the people of Jerusalem went into exile. As you read Jeremiah’s writings Chapter 2, you almost get a feeling that he is baffled, that in his mind, this surely can’t be happening. In the Book of Jeremiah, you see the development of Israel as she loved the Lord, but then changed gods. She was likened to a prostitute, to a donkey in

heat (see Jer. 2:24). Yet, even after God punished her, no change occurred. Unbelievable! Israel was even so bold, after all of this, to make the statement, “*I am innocent; He is not angry with me, I have not sinned*” (Jer. 2:35). Hello? What planet is she from? How could she have possibly asked this question with a straight face? Yet, she did. Finally, in Jeremiah 3, God lowered the boom.

It is important to understand God’s pattern of love for His bride. Notice that He didn’t give up on her the first time she was unfaithful—or the second, or the third, and so on. God continued to forgive and take her back. He is a God of reconciliation. This pattern has implications for our own marriages and will be addressed later in the book. But for right now, it is important to see that after a continued unrepentant lifestyle of unfaithfulness, *God gave Israel her certificate of divorce*. This was no arbitrary “in the heat of the moment” impulse. God had dealt with Israel’s pattern of unfaithfulness for years and years. He realized that she was not going to change.

So, He filed for divorce. Yet, even in the midst of this, He continued to plead and offer restoration.

*“Return, faithless Israel,” declares the Lord, “I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,” declares the Lord, “I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt—you have rebelled against the Lord your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me” declares the Lord. “Return, faithless people,” declares the Lord, “for I am your husband” (Jeremiah 3:11-14a).*

Many people have experienced the pain of an unfaithful spouse. Yet, I wonder how many have experienced repeated unfaithfulness over the span of many years as God did. Some, I am certain, but not most. My point here is that as you read Jeremiah Chapter 3, it becomes quite clear that God was grieved at the

loss of His beloved. Not only does He understand divorce, but He also understands all of the accompanying pain. He understands the complications, the anger, the logistical issues, the embarrassment, the betrayal and rejection, the longings, and all of the other associated hurts. He understands it, because He has experienced it. God knows the impact that divorce has on people because it has impacted Him. God even knows what it is like, and how difficult it is to initiate divorce, because He had to initiate it. God understands divorce.

I know—this may be a difficult concept to get your head around. We usually don't think of God having to deal with this kind of an issue. We think that He is busy keeping the stars in place and making sure the earth tilts the right direction. But feeling hurt and pain, understanding where I live day in and day out—we tend to think that God is out of touch with these kinds of issues. Know that He is not.

So, what is your situation? Has your spouse been unfaithful? God knows that pain better than anyone. Has your spouse said one thing and done another? Israel fits there. Have you pleaded and tried everything that you know how to do in order to save your marriage? So did God. Were you the one who had to begin the divorce proceedings because you had run out of options? God knows how difficult that is. Or perhaps your spouse has decided to leave the marriage for no apparent reason. You have been a faithful husband or wife. You have done your best to meet your spouse's needs, offering love and kindness at each turn. Your spouse truly has nothing against you. As a matter of fact, your spouse has had to work to manufacture some twisted justification for these actions. How awful is that? God has been in the same place.

But wait a minute—what about property issues? God never had to deal with dividing who gets what and the unfairness that can accompany this. C. White, author of *Marriage, Divorce, and Reconciliation*, states “Jerusalem is the wedding band of God

and Israel. Jerusalem is a representation of the covenant and when God divorced and put away Israel, then Jerusalem is totally destroyed.”<sup>3</sup> The very city that God gave to Israel with instructions for His temple, He had to watch be destroyed. This was significant. And what about child custody? *He didn't have to sit with a court mediator and hear His spouse tell lies in an effort to win the kids. He didn't have to see His children upset and torn from the home and people that they loved.* But didn't He? The prophets, God's messengers, went to Israel pleading God's case. These sinful, guilty people lied to the prophets, as we saw in Jeremiah, claiming that they had done nothing wrong. As Jerusalem was destroyed, as the people lived in exile, as segments of the population were taken into captivity, as all of this happened—God had to watch. Israel took her unfaithfulness to a new level, and therefore could no longer be married to God.

Yet in this process, God watched innocent children live in brokenness, pain, hunger, and misery, while they were homeless and lost. This grieved God's heart. This was not what He wanted. These were not the plans that He had for His bride. He had told Israel repeatedly the limitless blessings that He would bestow upon her if she simply remained faithful. He desired to be a loving husband to her. All she had to do was let Him. But regardless of the breadth and depth of His love, she still chose a different course. It made absolutely no sense. Logical or not, it was still the choice that she made. You may have thought up to now that no one understands you, that no one gets what you have gone or are going through. Believe me—God gets it. He understands all of your pain in your situation. He understands what divorce does to people—and more specifically, He understands what it has done to you.

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE ANATOMY OF A DIVORCE

*“We must all suffer from one of two pains: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret. The difference is discipline weighs ounces while regret weighs tons.”*

—JAMES ROHN<sup>1</sup>

Nearly 90 percent of children lived their first 18 years in homes with two biological, married parents during the early 1960s. During the past 40 years, that percentage has diminished at an alarming rate.<sup>2</sup> It has been reported that by 2001, 18.5 million children under the age of 18 lived with one parent.<sup>3</sup> This is a reflection of the reality that 50 percent of all first marriages in the United States result in divorce<sup>4</sup>, with the average length of marriage being just under 8 years.<sup>5</sup>

This current state of divorce is a relatively new one. Until recent years, divorce was considered to be rare and unacceptable in society. Approximately 100 women per thousand married each year in the 1920s. During this time, the divorce rate was about 10 per thousand. However, over the next 70 years, the picture dramatically changed. By 1990, the first-marriage rate of women had dropped to about 80 per thousand each year, yet the divorce



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