

2 Difficult Marriage and Divorce

Joy Davidman

Joy Davidman is best known as the wife of C.S. Lewis – but her story started very differently. She was born in 1915, into a prosperous New York City and a family of atheist Jews. Conditioned to earn her difficult father's love as best she could, the precocious Joy declared her own atheism before she reached her teens. She kept her love for science fiction and fantasy literature secret, knowing deep down that it demonstrated a yearning for wider spiritual experiences and answers. When she was fourteen, America entered the Great Depression. Without any faith to answer her questions about poverty, injustice and suffering, Joy looked elsewhere for an ideology that made sense and offered a way to make a difference. As a young woman – now a writer – she turned to the Communist Party in America. She became the editor and famously scathing critic for their magazine, and through the Party she met fellow novelist William (Bill) Gresham. Bill proved to be an alcoholic, abusive and chronically unfaithful.

The couple had two sons in short order, but in 1946 their marriage reached a crisis point.

In Her Own Words

My husband had been overworking. One day he telephoned me from his New York office – I was at home in Westchester with the children – to tell me that he was having a nervous breakdown. He felt his mind going; he couldn't stay where he was and he couldn't bring himself to come home....Then he rang off.

There followed a day of frantic and vain telephoning. By nightfall there was nothing left to do but wait and see if he turned up, alive or dead. I put the babies to sleep and waited. For the first time in my life I felt helpless; for the first time my pride was forced to admit that I was not, after all, 'the master of my fate' and 'the captain of my soul'. All my defences – the walls of arrogance and coxsureness and self-love behind which I had hid from God – went down momentarily. And God came in.

How can one describe the direct perception of God? It is infinite, unique; there are no words, there are no comparisons. Can one scoop up the sea in a teacup? Those who have known God will understand me; the others, I find, can neither listen nor understand.

There was a Person with me in the room, directly present to my consciousness – a Person so real that all my previous life was by comparison mere shadow play. And I myself was more alive than I had ever been; it was like waking from sleep. So intense a life cannot be endured for long by flesh and blood; we must ordinarily take our life watered down, diluted as it

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were, by time and space and matter. My perception of God lasted perhaps half a minute.

In that time, however, many things happened. I forgave some of my enemies. I understood that God had always been there, and that, since childhood, I had devoted half my energies into the task of keeping him out. I saw myself as I really was, with dismay and repentance; and, seeing, I changed. I have been turning into a different person since that half minute, everyone tells me.

When it was over I found myself on my knees, praying. I think I must have been the world's most astonished atheist....

When my husband came home, he accepted my experience without question; he was himself on the way to something of the kind. Together, in spite of illness and anxiety, we set about remaking our minds. For obviously they needed it. If my knowledge of God was true, the thinking of my whole life had been false.¹

Joy explored different religions, searching for the source of her experience with the divine.

...only one of them had complete understanding of the grace and repentance and charity that had come to me from God. And the Redeemer that had made himself known, whose personality I would have recognized among ten thousand – well, when I read the New Testament, I recognized him. It was Jesus.

...My present hope is twofold. I want to go deeper into the mystical knowledge of God, and I want that knowledge

1 All quotes in this section are from Don W. King, (Ed.) *Out of My Bone: The Letters of Joy Davidman* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

to govern my daily life. I had a good deal of pride and anger to overcome, and at times my progress is heartbreakingly slow – yet I think that I am going somewhere, by God's grace, according to plan. My present tasks are to look after my children and my husband and my garden and my house – and, perhaps, to serve God in books and letters as best I can. And my reward is a happiness such as I never dreamed possible. 'In His will is our peace.'

In time Bill and Joy both professed faith and held offices (elder and deaconess) in their local Presbyterian church. While Joy's spiritual life deepened and grew – through both the Bible and the works of C.S. Lewis, who became her pen-pal – Bill's did not. His interest in biblical Christianity waned in favour of Scientology's Dianetics as well as other spiritualist fads. After ten years of marriage, Joy left her two sons with Bill, with her cousin Renée and her two children looking after them, and spent several months in England, where she met Lewis. While she was away, Bill wrote her a long, callous, self-centred letter asking for a divorce in order to marry Renée. He offered Dianetics as the best way for the three of them to unload their negative feelings and live near each other to raise the children. While Joy was initially shocked by Bill's request for a divorce, she found that the total breakdown of the marriage gave her the freedom to both see and call out Bill for the kind of husband he had been, and when he tried to bully and threaten her into taking him back, she could not bear the thought of it.

[To Chad Walsh, a Christian friend and writer] I don't know how you feel about divorce. I always took it that divorce was only the last possible resort, and felt I ought to put up with

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anything I could bear for the children's sake. And I hoped that Bill's adulteries, irresponsibilities, etc. would end if he ever recovered from his various neuroses; also that his becoming a Christian would make a difference. Unfortunately I've been disappointed on both counts. Bill gave up being a Christian as soon as he found out it meant living by a moral code and admitting and repenting one's sins.

...I never felt I could talk to anybody about my married life, in the past. But when this new situation developed I asked Lewis for advice and told him a good deal of the story – an expurgated version, at that. Some of it I simply can't put into words. Anyhow Lewis strongly advised me to divorce Bill; and has repeated it even more strongly since I've been home – Bill greeted me by knocking me about a bit, and I wrote Lewis about that. So now I'm rid of the feeling that it's my duty to go on!

She even shared her experiences with her husband's mistress when she had herself been let down by Bill.

[To Renée] One of the things about being the victim of such a man is the self-contempt it brings – the woman despises herself for being a fool and a sucker....I am a fairly bright girl, and yet I was so much under Bill's influence that I had to run away from him physically and consult one of the clearest thinkers of our time for help, before I could see clearly what he was!...[Bill] went on to say that a neurotic's promises oughtn't to be considered binding and that a 'rapidly changing personality' like his couldn't be held to any promise. In short, he's entitled to be fickle because he's fickle.

Joy also took her children's relationship with their father into account when thinking about the family's future.

[to Chad Walsh]...All the same, I've been thinking and praying hard since I saw you, trying to be sure that I am doing the right thing. Jack [Lewis] wrote me a few days ago, saying what I thought myself; that I must disregard my own feelings and base my decision on what is best for the boys. The boys, Davy particularly, beg me not to take Bill back – they say he makes them nervous and jumpy, and Lord knows I've seen it happen! Worse yet, I think, is what they learn from him – I've known both of them to try tantrums just like his on me.

Bill and Joy divorced in 1952 and Joy took the boys to live in England. Bill paid a fraction of the child support ordered by the court, and Joy tried to sell what writing she could, including a study of the Ten Commandments, *Smoke on the Mountain*. Joy and Lewis' relationship deepened, and they married civilly in 1956 to solve a visa problem. A year later, with Joy suffering from cancer, they had a bedside wedding performed by an Anglican priest. Her prognosis was deeply uncertain.

[to Chad Walsh]...the physical agony was combined with a strange spiritual ecstasy; I think I know now how martyrs felt. All this has strengthened my faith and brought me very close to God – as if at last I knew all the answers.

Joy entered a stunning remission that gave her three happy years, in which she and Jack travelled together, and she helped him with some of his best-known works. Deeply in love, Jack was Joy's mainstay in painful periods of bad health and further cancer scares. When Joy finally died of her illness in 1960, Lewis wrote *A Grief Observed* in her memory.

Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. (Ps. 62:8)



Can you overcome?

Some of you reading this chapter know all too well the agony of emotional and physical abuse, addiction or unfaithfulness in your marriage. You're wondering how you'll survive, or how you'll ever feel yourself again. You're wondering how God could let you get into this terrible place. But you can't blame God completely, because you also blame yourself. You question your choices and reactions and even your standing before God. Even if you have never been married, perhaps you know the sensation of your life going a way you never pictured it – never wanted it to. You may have relationships with friends, colleagues or family members that feel toxic or even abusive.

Others of you have had a marriage fail long ago, perhaps even before your conversion, and feel uneasy about the decisions you made. There are regrets and consequences for your choices, and the past seems to follow you. Do you really have a place among the 'good' people at church?

Some of you have gone through a bad patch in your marriage which has shaken your view of your spouse and your faith too. Perhaps you are there now: you knew all marriages had rough spots, but you're certain it isn't meant to be this hard. You're wondering if there's a way for your marriage to

experience joy again, or perhaps longing for a way out but unsure of the biblical mandate to leave.

Or you may be one of the many Christian couples that has a loving, faithful, supportive marriage, but you are aware of the cracks that show up in any union between two sinners. Irritations surface; resentments over housework and money simmer; two sex drives move at different speeds; one spouse tends to compromise more on big decisions. You know those are normal issues, but it's hard to remember sometimes that you're on the same team.

There are a number of different points of view on the biblical doctrine of divorce, though perhaps the more controversial subject is remarriage. It's not the purpose of this book to explore these issues, and I'd encourage you to do some research and speak to your minister or elder if you need biblical counsel on these topics. Our question is simply: can you still be fruitful in your Christian life? Can you overcome?

For struggling wives

Let's look first at what *overcoming* looks like in a difficult marriage, whether it's an abusive situation or simply a loveless or tense relationship.

First, where there is physical danger, any church should advise the woman to at least separate from her husband. A situation with physical violence is bad for the wife, bad for the children, and even bad for the husband: by beating or molesting his wife he is committing criminal acts which are hardening his heart, and it is better for him to be denied that opportunity. Guilt should not keep a woman captive in