

Closing The Chasm

Do you ever feel like you and your spouse are treading opposite brinks of a deep chasm, going the same direction, but only connecting occasionally when it narrows enough for a fallen log to make a not-to-precarious bridge? Then something happens to the log, but you do not end up on the same side of the chasm. Would you like that chasm to be narrow enough to step across at will, or disappear altogether?

Reading some of the posts on Blazing Grace has been like reading a page out of the history of our marriage. I hope that sharing some of the lessons I have learned over many years, and with much struggle, may help you to find a shortcut to the truth that obedience to Scripture brings joy. That truth has filled our chasm.

Beware that I will be making some generalizations that, of course, will not apply to every situation. Furthermore, if both spouses are not committed to the principles of biblical marriage as expressed in Eph. 5, 1 Cor. 13 and 7, (notice that I put the love chapter before the sex chapter,) this may prove of very little help. Also, there are probably many books out there that address the matter more thoroughly than I am here, as well as more expertly and based on research.

First, let me make two things abundantly clear:

1. Addicts: DO NOT EVER USE WHAT I AM ABOUT TO SAY AS AMMUNITION AGAINST YOUR SPOUSE. Even if this fits your spouse to a tee, your struggle as an addict is separate, and you must own it and deal with it, whether or not your spouse changes. Yes, you can share it with your spouse, but unless the Holy Spirit is at work in her/his heart, don't expect it to make a difference, especially considering that it is, after all, just one woman's experiences and understandings.
2. Spouses: DO NOT EVER ACCEPT BLAME FOR YOUR SPOUSE'S ADDICTION. Even if you struggle with responsiveness, that does not give a spouse license to be emotionally or physically unfaithful.

When I was fifteen, my parents, (unbelievers,) separated. As is not uncommon in such situations, my mom shared with me, the youngest and only girl at home, more than she probably should have. My father had pornographic books and magazines which, if I understand correctly, he did not even hide from her. She shared how she felt compared to those images, and how he expected her to wear lingerie as they did. Being a starry-eyed teenager, I had no idea how deeply that perception had affected me until I got married.

My husband's family, (somewhat church-going, though questionable as to belief,) had had a very liberal/casual attitude about porn/sex, and had gotten my husband his own subscription to Playboy at twelve or thirteen. My husband having come to know the lord while we were dating, we disposed of the collection and figured that was the end of it, not realizing how our pasts would haunt our future.

Our first Valentine's Day, living with his parents at the time, he and his mom presented their gifts together, one or both, I don't remember which now, being lingerie. I flushed in embarrassed mortification, and burst in to hurt and angry tears, aghast that they thought me to be "that type of girl." It was probably the first time that the possibility crossed my mind that my husband was "just like every other man." Couples who are struggling with intimacy issues need to consider what preconceptions each has brought to the bedroom, and be careful to exclude other's negative influences.

A couple of years down the road, my husband ended up in a job for about 7 months that

involved very long hours and a lengthy commute. Yes, he was tired, but never TOO tired... It took me a while, and many painful arguments, to realize that he was no more interested than he ever had been, but that, due to having less time together, sex had suddenly begun to claim a much higher percentage of the time we did have, making it seem like he was wanting more. Combine that with the diminished time we had for my female communication and cuddling needs... So couples need to be aware of time, which can be very difficult to control, and try to make sure there is enough time for both your needs.

My next lesson came after adding a couple of children, and moving a couple of hours away from family. He was working nights. I would awaken him in time to tell the kids goodnight, he would get ready for work, and would not return until the young children were already awake. Obvious problem, especially on a budget. Hire sitters and go out/away. Trade off kids with another couple. Find substitute extended family at church. Do whatever it takes to have enough time for both of your needs. (Hum, did I say that before?) :-)

Even with these realizations under our belts, we continued to struggle. I see many advantages to men and women being different, but sometimes I think God may have overdone it, or, more likely, the fall warped those differences in to potential for conflict. Why do the drives differ? Why does stress tend to increase men's needs, but decrease women's needs?

Between the emotional and physical drain of young children, and ongoing time pressures, we got in to a vicious cycle of my disinterest and his frustration. My mind-set was that faking was lying, and I would never lie to him. Yes, there were a couple of times that I acquiesced, but was completely non-participatory, which needless to say, was worse than saying no. I felt like a cornered animal. His turning away from me when I declined reinforced my perception that that was all he wanted with me. Most affection seemed suspect as an attempt at seduction. I would rather have fallen asleep over a book on the couch than face the ever-impending question "maybe tonight?" Ironically, when every circumstance was just so, I would enjoy our time and think, "perhaps I should do this more often."

Unfortunately it took the porn discovery to break this cycle.

I have to say that God's timing was amazing, as usual. I found it the day before leaving to visit family for two weeks. His denial was extremely short-lived, and, amazingly, he never tried to blame me. My anguish broke his heart. Getting on that plane the next day was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but perfect for God's working. It completely removed all pressure of "maybe tonight?" It gave us each time apart to pray and think, and time to talk by phone to begin to explore how we had gotten to that point.

My most fervent prayer was not for my H to be free from porn, but that I would have a renewed physical desire for him. Praise God, that answer was a resounding "yes!" By the time I returned, I had no reservations about being intimate.

Once home, I began to research and reflect even more. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate the article again, but it was addressing the genders' differing perceptions of, and needs for sex. I quote as best as I recall: "When she says "I don't want sex", she means "I don't want sex". When she says "I don't want sex", he hears "I don't want you". The tears began to flow. It was my turn to be broken-hearted at the pain I had caused my beloved. Never in a million years would I have said that, or thought it, yet my rejection of him physically had proclaimed it hundreds of times!

The article also pointed out that while a woman's body cycles through ovulation and menstruation without regard to sexual activity, semen is in constant production and is only cycled by ejaculation, consciously or through nocturnal emissions. Though these are very basic biological facts, I finally grasped that men's need is legitimately physical, not just brought on by a "one track mind." Yes, unfortunately, it is possible for a wife who dearly loves her husband, and feels loved by him, to be completely oblivious to the physical and psychological role that love-making plays for him. While there can be physical factors that can inhibit a woman's interest/satisfaction, (and don't forget all those external life and time pressures,) it may be as likely that a change in heart and spirit is necessary. Prayer is definitely recommended!

"Fixing" the sex/intimacy gap, providing that there are no prior issues/trauma with which to deal, requires both husband and wife to be completely yielded to God's Word. It is my experience that obedience to His Word brings incredible joy, not drudgery and misery. It starts in Genesis 2:24 when God established that "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (NIV) This is reiterated by Jesus in Matt. 19 and Mark 10, and by Paul in 1 Cor. 6 and Eph. 5. It does not simply say that they will become one household, or be joined in order to be fruitful and multiply. It does not say to be one flesh only during a honeymoon period, until the newness wears off and life pressures push it to the back burner. 1 Cor. 7:5 does not say "Do not deprive each other except by not being awake in the same bed at the same time." For years I kidded myself that I was not depriving my husband because when I chose not to avoid him, I didn't say no.

In Eph. 5, Paul puts in to words, as best he can, the mystery of the parallel between human marriage and our union with Christ. When husbands love their wives as Christ loves the church, with 1 Cor. 13:4-7 love, and wives return the respect due such selfless love, 1 Cor. 7:3-5 is a natural outcome. Most often it seems to be the wife depriving/defrauding (pick your version) the husband, but I have known cases that went the other way. While it is only the believer that can withdraw from union with God, through sin and/or lack of meaningful communication, either or both spouses can disrupt marital union in the same way. Note that the list associated with love in 1 Cor. 13 says absolutely nothing about warm fuzzy feelings, but rather speaks of choices in behavior. Likewise, being, or not being one flesh is also a choice. Sure, there is a physical process that involves certain necessary physical responses, but I have learned that I do not have to feel passionate in order to behave genuinely lovingly. Do I feel sexual at all times? No. Do I love my husband at all times? Absolutely! If I "just want to be held," does it really matter so much if there is one additional point of contact in the embrace? No. It did take some time and reinforcement of my genuine joy and emotional satisfaction for my husband to accept that physical fulfillment was not always required for my emotional fulfillment, and not feel like he was repeating the physically and emotionally absent experience. Yes, there are times when the husband suppressing his desire is the most loving option, but it is probably just as often when the most loving thing for the wife to do is respond to his desire, perhaps not passionately, but with joy. Is excessive demand (and don't ask me to define that) really any more selfish than ongoing deprivation? I see them, now, after years of an unnecessary tug-of-war, as being equally selfish. How often do our husbands do something that they know will put a smile on our face, for no other reason than the pure joy of having made us happy? Can we not, then, make love, or be made love to, as a joyful gift of happiness to our husband? At risk of repeating myself, this perfect world scenario is only possible if the marriage is otherwise well tended. When I have chosen to respond to my husband's desire with love, albeit not passion, I have felt beautiful and cherished, never objectified.

We have found that the self-discipline of adhering to a mutual and not too late bedtime has helped immensely. Not only does it keep my husband from feeling (or being) avoided, but I think just knowing that anything is possible, barring one or both of us being exhausted, makes us both feel more content and secure in our love. We have also found, in addition to making sure we take time to go out, that making time to do something at home that is completely unrelated to the operation of the household, such as reading, playing games, or enjoying a movie together, reinforces common, non-sexual interests.

I wish that I could spare you your struggles through SA and intimacy issues, but the Holy Spirit is your best hope for you both not to miss years of joy as my husband and I did. May the joy of being fully surrendered to God's Word close your chasm!