

# Marital Conflict Theres A Blessing in the Storm

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Observing the unfolding of events around the EU Referendum and its aftermath, I noticed how easily my mind views the world from relational perspectives and applications. If the UK Government follows through with the mandate to leave the European Union by triggering article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, Britain will embark on a two-year divorce process from the EU. While biblical prophecy ensures us that the unstable marriage of European states is one that will not hold together (Daniel 2:43), God made it clear that marriage, according to His purpose, is designed to bind couple's together in spite of challenges internal and external.

Genesis 2:24 states, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." However, marriage is a primary battleground on which the Great Controversy is fought. We are informed that, "It is Satan's studied effort to pervert the marriage institution, to weaken its obligations and lessen its sacredness; for in no surer way could he deface the image of God in man and open the door to misery and vice" (Patriarchs and Prophets, 338).

The fact that marriage is a spiritual endeavour, guarantees that it will be a major target for the Enemy. In his book, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, J I Packer makes the point that the real theme of Ephesians, chapters 4-6, is spiritual warfare. He observes that it is no accident that Ephesians 6 which talks about spiritual warfare follows Ephesians 5 which talks about the importance of family relationships.

The arguments, insults, recriminations, blame-laying, jockeying for position, which are taking place in both the Conservative and the Labour Party, are all illustrative of the conflicts that ensue when marriages hit crisis and begin to fall apart. However, in a marital context, the fact that couples go through times of turbulence is not an issue in and of itself. Often, it is the fallacy that they shouldn't have these conflicts, which causes most difficulties.

Couples often hold the mistaken belief that if they love each other, they shouldn't be having problems in their relationship. However, the reality is that problems are an inevitability. I recently listened to a talk delivered by best-selling novelist Anne Lamont about successful writing. She made an observation that struck me as being pertinent to the role conflict plays in successful marriages. She said, "If nothing bad happens, there is no story". The richness of our marital story is often forged on the anvil of affliction and in the crucible of self-examination (see 2 Corinthians 13:5).

The truth of the matter is that the lack of 'problems' does not necessarily indicate a healthy marriage. It may actually indicate that there is nothing significant going on between spouses. The experience and display of strong emotions often arise out of the fact that we care for our relationship. The existence of problems is normal, but the false expectation that healthy marriages should exist in the rarefied air of heavenly bliss, along with the unhealthy ways couples try to solve their problems, are the real problems. Paradoxically, the conflicts that couples

have may hold the key to deeper intimacy if they are used creatively. Conflicts are revealers!

How we choose to respond to our spouse in a crisis says more about us than it does about them. We are then faced with the choice of whether to take the high road of sensitive responsiveness, trust and emotional availability, or the low road of emotional reactivity. Spouses cannot experience deep levels of intimacy unless they are willing to tolerate the emotional discomfort inherent in the journey toward self-awareness and mutual understanding. Successful marriages are those in which couples are able to achieve the balance between the ability to stand on their own two feet emotionally and the willingness to allow themselves to be fully known by their spouse. The goal is neither independence or dependence, but interdependence.

Conflicts in marriage can be like the rigorous processing of raw elements out of which precious gems are produced. In 1909 David Lloyd George, former Prime Minister of Great Britain, gave a speech about the hardships the nation would face as they fought the evils of injustice and oppression. He warned the people that before things got better, they were going to be, “in for rough weather.” To encourage the masses, he drew on a childhood experience of collecting firewood. He said, “I learnt as a child that it was little use going into the woods after a period of fine weather, for I generally returned empty-handed; but after a great storm. I always came back with an armful.”

The harsh reality is that all marriages, even those sanctified by God, “are in for rough weather”. In his day, Paul gave sobering council to those considering marriage. He said, “But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this” (1 Corinthians 7:28). Our marriages are under constant assault from internal pressures and external forces. However, these very challenges are the tools God uses to strengthen our union and prepare us for His kingdom. Though we live in uncertain times, we serve a certain God - a God who can bring good out of every bad situation. He knows what He has in store for us.

Obviously, God desires the happiness of His children, but His primary purpose is not to make us happy, but to prepare our characters for eternity in His presence. Happiness is a by-product of living according to His purpose. He knows that the only way our characters can develop is through the test of trial. However, He weighs our trials being fully aware that too many will crush us, and too few will not allow us the opportunity to learn dependence upon Him. Consequently, the only problems that God allows into our lives are those He knows we can handle through His strength.

Spouses are counselled, “Make Christ first and last and best in everything. Constantly behold Him and your love for Him will daily become deeper and stronger as it is submitted to the test of trial. And as your love for Him increases, your love for each other will grow deeper and stronger” (The Adventist Home, 105-106).

Spouses need to appreciate that their husband or wife is not the enemy, but there is an Enemy abroad against who they need to unite in order to fight - to fight for,

rather than against each other. God not only declares to us that our future is secure in Him, but He also assures us of His presence in our present. The Psalmist assures us that “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). If we seek Him, not haphazardly, but with all our hearts, then we will find in Him a shelter in our time of storm.