

THE
JOURNEYS
TRILOGY

DAVID W.F. WONG

GRACEWORKS

THE JOURNEYS TRILOGY

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PREFACE

C.S. Lewis offers an intriguing insight into our meeting with people:

When you and I met, the meeting was over very shortly. It was nothing. Now it is growing something as we remember it. But still we know very little about it. What it will be when I remember it as I lie down to die; what it makes in me all my days, that is the real meeting. The other is only the beginning of it.¹

How true that our first encounter, quickly over, falls like a seed into the fertile soil of memory. And there it lies. Over time, it grows with a life of its own into nostalgia and longing. We look back and remember the once small seed; now a full-grown tree. We rest under its shade and reminisce, and remember more than what happened. We cherish what it meant, the beauty of friendship, the lesson of pain, the durability of love, and most of all, the blessedness of life.

Some thirty years have passed since I wrote the first of this Trilogy. I had then stepped down from almost twenty years of pastoral ministry in the church where my wife and I grew up. We were mere teenagers when we met, and the people there had become inextricable threads in the tapestry of our lives. I looked back and explored the theme of naïveté versus cynicism in *Journey Mercies*. We were naïve when we started, but as we grow towards maturity, must we exchange naïveté for cynicism?

Nothing could fast-forward us from being naive (believing everything) to being cynical (believing nothing) faster than love. Yes, love — that mighty, majestic, and mysterious force, by which we soar to the heavens or plunge to the abyss. That was the theme for the second book of the Trilogy, aptly

portraying love as a rough journey. Falling in love is a long way down; how can we ensure an upswing towards our dreams?

When I wrote *Journey Mercies*, little did I know that its first two chapters would anticipate two sequels, one on love and another on pain. Both involve change, for better or for worse. Leaving the church of our youth as well as the country of our birth thrust us out of our comfort zone. We packed our home in a twenty-foot container, sent it ahead, and flew thousands of miles to an island in the Pacific Ocean. That became the theme of the third book in the Trilogy: What happens when we leave the familiar and the routine?

Time has not obscured the questions asked or the lessons learned. As we re-issue these three books as a trilogy, my prayer is that readers will share in our journeys and re-live with us our stories. Perhaps once again seeds will fall on fertile ground and trees will grow, under which we will one day recount how we have journeyed and grown.

My wife Jenny and I wish to dedicate *The Journeys Trilogy* to our friends in Singapore as well as friends we have met from more than a hundred nations around the world. Thank you for journeying with us.

**JOURNEY
MERCIES**

INTRODUCTION

“Tell us about your pilgrimage,” urged a younger colleague as a few of us sat down together for lunch. “It will take a book,” I replied jokingly. When I stepped down as senior pastor of the church I had served for some twenty years, I remembered that conversation. Perhaps the time had come.

We are stewards of all that God has given us. God’s gifts include our years of experience together with the insights we gain from it. My own spiritual journey has taught me much. I have had the privilege of being involved in the lives of many people — a young couple preparing for their marriage, a family who had lost a loved one, a person in mid-life wondering what to do with the rest of his life, a teenager asking questions about rock music. We meet at the crossroads where decisions are made and directions are clarified. Such intersections provide timely opportunities for reflection and learning, healing and growth. I have seen many people grow and I have grown with them.

In these chapters, I have woven my personal journey with the lessons learnt on the way. I have taken the liberty to relate real-life stories with pseudonyms. Truths come across best through real people and real events. To protect the identity of individuals, I have changed the details and, in some cases, blended several similar situations into one. To readers who see themselves in these examples, I thank you for what you have taught me.

I grew up in Mount Carmel Bible-Presbyterian Church, Singapore, from the age of sixteen. From the time I graduated from Bible College in 1973, till I left in 1994 in answer to a call to a wider ministry, I was privileged to shepherd God’s flock at the church. I also saw the birth of our daughter churches: Hebron, Hermon, and Horeb. To the people of these “mountain” churches, by whom my life has been so infinitely enriched, this book is lovingly and gratefully dedicated.

PROLOGUE

BETWEEN NAÏVETÉ AND
CYNICISM

“Let your eyes look straight ahead,
fix your gaze directly before you.
Make level paths for your feet
and take only ways that are firm.
Do not swerve to the right or the left;
keep your foot from evil.”

Proverbs 4.25–27

The simpleton believes everything. The sceptic believes nothing. One is naïve, the other cynical.

We start off simple. As children, we believe everything we are told. By youth or young adulthood, life becomes increasingly complex. Questions arise to which we have no easy answers. We become incredulous. As knowledge replaces ignorance, doubt encroaches on certainty. We are no longer sure. The child in us grows up. From believing everything, we begin doubting everything. Our journey has taken us from naïveté to cynicism.

We cannot afford to remain naïve. But must we become cynical? Can we grow out of naïveté without falling into cynicism? Must life make a cynic out of each of us?

Take Alex for example. He grew up believing the best about people and drawing the most out of life. To him, a half empty cup was half full. He never asked why things were so bad, always how they could be better. He would never post a sign that said “Do not smoke here”; his line would be “Thank you for not smoking here.”

That is, until he met Gail. Theirs was a love made in heaven and incarnated on earth. At least that was what he thought. He gave himself with ecstatic abandon to her. One day, when he returned from a long business trip, he was devastated by the news that she would like the relationship to be put on hold. He was too intense for her, she said; she needed time to think through things.

But Alex knew better. There was another guy, and Gail had fallen for him. Could the heart of someone change so fast? Could dreams burst into flames and fall to earth in ashes? Yes. When the finality of the break-up hit home, Alex became a different man. He carried a grief in his heart, and many unanswered questions in his mind. He could never be sure about anything again. He had become another casualty in the hazard of growing up.

Dora is another example. Her father’s favourite, she always had what she wanted. She cruised through life, doing well in school, getting along with friends, and embarking on a promising career in public relations. Her greatest moment in life came when she walked down the aisle in her father’s arms into the arms of the man she loved.

Dora constantly spoke of how blessed she was — a loving husband, a beautiful home, a challenging career, surrounded by friends, and undergirded

by a faith inherited from her parents. Then it happened. When it was time to start a family of her own, she found she could not conceive. The doctors did the tests, offered advice and encouragement but never promised anything.

Five years passed, and Dora came to the end of her hopes. Science had let her down. Her God had let her down. She had let everybody down. Could dreams soar so high only to fall back to earth? Could she be given so much only to be denied what she wanted most? Yes. If so, what is life but a dead end, a road that leads nowhere. Another cynic had emerged from the disappointments of life.

In C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, he had the senior demon, Screwtape, advise the junior demon, Wormwood, about mortal people:

You see, it is so hard for these creatures to persevere. The routine of adversity, the gradual decay of youthful loves and youthful hopes, the quiet despair (hardly felt as pain) of ever overcoming the chronic temptation with which we have again and again defeated them, the drabness which we create in their lives and the inarticulate resentment with which we teach them to respond to it — all this provides admirable opportunities of wearing out a soul by attrition.¹

To the enemy of the human soul, time is an asset, not a liability. The more time there is to work on the soul, the more opportunities there are to wear it out. Men and women can be persuaded to turn from simplicity to embrace complexity. They can be taught to give up naïveté and practise cynicism. Like Alex and Dora, they witnessed the breach of promises, the loss of dreams, and the incursion of disillusionment.

Those who believe in God are not spared. If anything, the devil works all the harder on them. We long for a simple faith. But is simplicity the same as naïveté? In the account of the healing of a boy with an evil spirit (Mark 9.14–29, KJV), the disciples of Jesus could not cast out the spirit. When Jesus came on the scene, the boy's father made a strange declaration of faith: "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief!"

Did he believe or did he not? Evidently, he did believe — but his belief was tainted by unbelief. And he knew it. His was not a naïve faith; neither was it

a cynical parody of faith. When Jesus had cast out the spirit, the disciples asked Him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” In contrast to the boy’s father, the disciples demonstrated an impotent naïveté. Theirs was a naïve faith which could not face up to the challenge of the situation.

We learn soon enough that naïveté does not take us very far. Neat assumptions about life will be tested and exploded. Romantic notions about love will be rudely dispelled. Our orderly world of precise formulas and equations will fall apart. Our faith has to be made of stronger stuff. It has to emerge from naïveté, but does it have to fall prey to cynicism? The boy’s father shows us the way: “Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief!” That is a far cry from the resigned lament of a cynic.

A girl I knew who attempted suicide several times scribbled a note that read: *Nothing matters anymore*. That is cynicism in its starkest form. If naïveté does not take us far, cynicism takes us nowhere. Everything that is beautiful about life is denied, everything noble is doubted, and everything worthwhile is rejected. Nothing can be believed, no one can be trusted. Is life so bleak? Surely not. Is life all rosy? Definitely not. When Joshua was about to embark on his journey of faith as the new leader of Israel, God said to him:

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. (Joshua 1.7)

With God, life is an adventure of faith. But we must tread carefully.

The journey we take leads us along paths winding between naïveté and cynicism. We need to navigate our course wisely so that we turn neither to the right nor to the left. Lest we fear, God promises to be with us. As we go, may God grant us journey mercies. We know we need it.

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE GARDEN
PATCH OF

LOVE

“Life has taught us that love does not consist
in gazing at each other but looking outward
together in the same direction.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

“Love needs marriage as much as
marriage needs love.”

Walter Trobisch

The bride arrived early that bright, sunny morning. We had half an hour before the wedding, and I offered her my office to catch her breath and hide from her excited friends. In her resplendent white gown, Josephine looked every inch a lady, unlike the shy schoolgirl I had met and baptised some years ago. “How do you feel with your wedding so close?” I asked. Her answer startled me. “I don’t know,” she started, then broke down in tears. “I don’t know if I’m ready,” she continued, crying, her drops of tears ruining her make-up.

In the whirlwind of romance, Josephine had opened her heart to Geoffrey, a young man whom she had known from childhood but whom she never considered anything more than a good friend. That is, not until he confessed his secret love for her, and she awoke to the overpowering emotions of desires whose time had come. I had enjoyed meeting with the two of them over the past six months, preparing them for their partnership in life. I thought she had come a long way, but there in my office that morning, I learnt that no one is ever completely ready for that irrevocable step in life called marriage.

When two persons cross that threshold, pledging themselves to love each other “for better or for worse” and “till death do us part”, they are taking a giant step. No one in his or her right mind would commit himself or herself to one person unconditionally and for life. It is putting all the eggs in one basket. It is leaping off a plane without a parachute. It is signing your life away without an escape clause. Who would do such a thing? Many would. God has put in the hearts of men and women something so powerful that it defies all common sense, overwhelms all rational arguments, abandons all reasonable precautions, and makes them say to each other, “I love you, now and forever.”

CAN LOVE SURVIVE MARRIAGE?

Love is that force that woos or drives us towards marriage. Love makes fools of the wise, and heroes of the ordinary. But can love survive marriage? It does not take long for two persons, when the music of the wedding processional has faded from their memory, to awaken to the demands of their commitment. Couples soon lose their romantic naïveté and come face to face with a love that is made of bills to pay, meals to cook, in-laws to please, houses to clean, habits to tolerate, and quarrels to resolve.

In the sixteen years following my ordination in 1977, I have counselled and married more than 200 couples. Each brought to my life a story of love and enriched my own marriage with the freshness of romance still a-blossoming. My years of working with these couples taught me a few things. Firstly, love is indeed blind. Love looks at life through a magnifying glass. What it focuses on is enlarged; what lies at the edges is blurred. People in love see life in its simplest configuration: If the two of us love each other, what is there to stop us from finding happiness together for the rest of our lives?

Bystanders and onlookers see it differently, of course. What is love? It is a feeling that is here today and gone tomorrow. Marriage is one of those mechanisms in life that can fast forward two starry-eyed romantics from a naïve mode to a cynical mode in a few months flat. Or earlier. A bride whose wedding I had solemnised the day before stood at our front door early the next morning, having had her first quarrel, her first fallout with her husband, and her first walkout of her matrimonial home, all in twenty-four hours! Fortunately, that was a rare exception.

A bad marriage can make a cynic out of any romantic. Yet cynics envy the romantics and say to them, “Enjoy it while you can.” And some of them enjoy it for a long time. That leads me to the second thing I learnt: “Keep your eyes wide open before marriage and half closed after.” Sound advice indeed. Part of what I do in the six months to a year before a couple marry is helping them open their eyes to the many-splendoured mystery that is marriage. I go through a workbook with them and we walk through a marriage together.

On a few occasions, I have told couples that I was not ready to solemnise their weddings because I did not think they were ready for marriage. Having seen the sorry state of marriages hurriedly and poorly put together, I was not about to condemn two lovely persons to a life sentence of misery. Not all couples welcomed the postponement of their plans but they always appreciated it from hindsight. A good thing is always worth waiting for.

Walking down the aisle with eyes open sets the couple in the right direction. The wedding is not the marriage. The wedding is an event that lasts a day; the marriage is a relationship that lasts for a lifetime. Working on the relationship takes time and patience. In fact, it takes more. Marriage is not man’s idea but God’s patent. He knows how we tick and how we click. He is after all our Creator, having programmed our genetic code, fashioned both

our left and right brains, and set up the chemistry of our inexplicable impulses. My own experience over the years has convinced me that the best blueprint for marriage is God's, and it is found in the Bible.

AN ARM OR A SACK OF RICE?

We need to *work hard* at our marriage. We need to *work smart* too, by reading God's instruction manual. The two key passages in the Bible on marriage attest to divine acquaintance with the subject. Genesis 2.24 prescribes:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The wife is not asked to leave her family. Why? Among the couples I have met, the woman seldom has a problem leaving her home. Once a woman has committed herself to a man, she shifts her emotional base from her parents to her husband without too much difficulty.

A man is different. In Asian cultures, like the Chinese and the Indian, the man marries his wife into his family inasmuch as she marries out of her family. The wife becomes part of her husband's family, and often that is where conflict starts.

Meilin is such an example. Barely a month into her marriage, she feels like a stranger in a foreign household. Since she and Zihan cannot yet afford an apartment of their own, they moved into his parents' house. They occupy one of the bedrooms, but share the rest of the house with his parents, two brothers, and a sister. One day, Zihan returns home from work and senses that something is amiss. Like a filial son, he speaks first with his mother, and then proceeds to chide his wife, "I told you not to upset my mother." Meilin breaks down in tears, feeling more alienated than ever, and seriously wonders if their marriage will work out.

The Hainanese, one of the Chinese dialect groups, have a saying, "The mother is like an arm; when it's amputated, it cannot be restored. The wife is like a sack of rice; when it's consumed, another can be bought." The mother, being only one and irreplaceable, is more important than the wife, who is replaceable. But the biblical blueprint teaches differently. In a marriage, the

man is instructed to leave his father and mother, and make his relationship with his wife the key human relationship. Unless the man understands this, and makes that emotional (not necessarily geographical) break with his parents, his relationship with his wife will lack the security needed for it to grow. If Zihan had read God's instruction manual, he would have gone to Meilin first, reassured her before talking with his mother. His marriage would then have rested on firmer ground.

The other passage in the Bible on God's blueprint for marriage commands:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.
(Ephesians 5.21–24)

The passage goes on,

Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her... In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. (Ephesians 5.25–28)

Finally, it sums up, "...each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband" (Ephesians 5.33). Three times the man is commanded to love his wife, but nowhere is she enjoined to love her husband. Again, God knows us well enough. The woman loves the man she marries; she does not have to be told. The man, on the other hand, forgets, and has to be reminded. Our church sends out wedding anniversary cards to members every year. Many husbands have thanked us for reminding them. Wives need no such prompting. They know when they got married without having to remove their wedding rings to look at the dates engraved.

Another reason why God tells the man to love his wife is this: The woman needs to be loved more than the man. At least she needs visible expressions of affection and consideration. A man gets along fine without it for days,

but for the woman, love demonstrated is staple food. In my counselling, I seldom hear husbands complain of neglect by their wives, but every other wife tells me that her husband does not talk with her enough or spend enough time with her. When God instructs husbands to love their wives, He knows what He is talking about. He knows what men need and what women need.

The same is true of what is required of the wives, namely, to submit to and respect their husbands. Of course, this runs counter to some cultures today. The Western democratic mind which has reinvented marriage as a fifty-fifty option finds the call to submission repulsive. But God knows better. A woman finds her place of true security in submission to the man she affirms and honours. Just as she needs love, he needs respect. A man therefore finds his place of true security in the affirmation of his wife. This is God's original model for marriage. Many marriages falter today because the husband has forgotten to love his wife sacrificially, or because the wife has failed to respect and affirm her husband wholeheartedly.

I remember helping a couple resolve a difference which grew and threatened their approaching wedding. In our sessions together, Eugene had talked frequently about leaving his job to start a company of his own. He had been extremely unhappy with his work, and a few friends had offered to back him on a bold venture. While that thrilled and challenged him, it sent shivers down May's spine. With the wedding so near, and their finances so stretched (for wedding expenses, their new house, and perhaps their first child within a year or two), the last thing she wanted was an unemployed husband with an empty bank account.

From our discussions, I identified two underlying issues. Firstly, there was May's lack of confidence in Eugene. She frankly did not think he could make it on his own, notwithstanding the help of his friends. Secondly, there was Eugene's disregard for May's fears. He thought her apprehensions were unfounded and unnecessary. Applying the principles we learnt from Ephesians 5.21–33, I proposed the following:

"May," I began, "What does the Bible say should be the attitude of the wife towards her husband?"

"To submit and to respect," she replied, reluctantly.

"Is there any exception to that command?" I asked.

“Yes, if what he does is clearly against the command of God,” she replied. She knew her Scriptures well, and was probably thinking of Acts 5.19: “We must obey God rather than men.”

“Do you think, in this case, you would disobey God if you go along with Eugene?”

“I do not know.” Her honesty was refreshing.

“Then are you prepared to follow God’s command in Ephesians 5 to submit, in good faith, to Eugene on this matter?”

She felt I had led her to a corner, and after a pause, quietly nodded. I saw from the corner of my eyes, the look of satisfaction on Eugene’s face. He broke into a triumphant smile.

“Eugene,” I said, turning to him, “Now that May has agreed to do her part in Ephesians 5 to submit to you, you must do yours.”

He creased his brow, and I continued, “What does the Bible say should be the attitude of the husband towards his wife?”

“To lead and to love,” he answered.

“For whose sake is his leadership and his love?” I asked, “His own or his wife’s?”

“His wife’s,” he said softly. He knew I had him in a corner too.

“Then, I believe our problem is resolved. May, you have said you will submit to Eugene. This means you will accept whatever decision he makes on this matter, respect him, and support him all the way.” She wanted to say something, but then held back. Perhaps she wanted to qualify her submission but decided against it. I waited, and she nodded.

“As for you, Eugene,” I continued, “The decision is now yours. But remember, you are to make it in the spirit of Christ who loved the church and gave His life for her. It must be a decision made, not for your sake but for May’s.”

It did not take him long to make that decision. The following Sunday in church, Eugene took me aside and told me, “I told May I will not be taking up the new venture. Perhaps in a year’s time, if my friends are still keen, I will think about it again. I guess I was pressing for it because I wanted to prove myself to her. I didn’t like the way she doubted my ability. But when she agreed to go along with me, I began thinking of her instead of myself.”

Though names and details have been changed, Eugene and May are real people I have met. They are among the many who have come to accept God’s

blueprint for marriage as the best, humbly seeking to live by the principles taught in the Bible. Without an authority on which both husband and wife are agreed, how can couples build their marriages on a strong foundation?

Once I spoke with a non-Christian lady whose husband had committed adultery. I asked, “Are you willing to forgive him?” Her answer was as defiant as it was frank, “Why should I?” We never got beyond that question, because I saw no common basis on which we could proceed further.

A BARE PATCH, SOME SEEDS, AND TOOLS

Having worked with many couples, both before and after their wedding, I am convinced that all marital problems, however difficult, can be resolved. But two conditions must be met. Firstly, the couple must value the relationship enough to want to work on it. They must be prepared to put in time, effort, and everything they have got to save what they believe is worth saving. Resolving conflict and building marriage is hard work. It takes months, even years, of patient effort by both parties.

Secondly, the couple must believe that God values their marriage. When they work on it, they do not do it alone. I have found prayer to be a crucial factor in marital counselling. Not that we do nothing else, but when initiatives are undergirded by prayer, breakthroughs thought impossible happen. God has as much a stake in our marriage as we do, since it was His idea in the first place. No one who sincerely looks to God for strength, wisdom, and grace is disappointed.

So we must work, and God also works. Like the man who builds his house on rock which stands in the time of storm, so we who hear and obey the words of our Lord should do likewise with our marriages (Luke 6.46–49). Otherwise our homes will be washed away in a world of rising divorces, broken families, and wrecked lives.

We cannot afford to be naïve about marriage. It is not simply falling in love, and everything else falling into place, effortlessly. No, it does not happen that way, except in fairy tales and paperback romances. Marriage is not a garden; it is a bare patch of earth you inherit on your wedding day together with seeds and tools. You and your partner work at it, and make it what you want it to be.

On the other hand, we need not become cynical about marriage. Having bad marriages around us does not mean marriage is bad. When God the divine matchmaker and wedding solemniser made man and woman, He “saw all that He had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1.31). A bad marriage can be made good, because God designed it to be good. When we work at marital problems, we have God on our side. He wants to see us succeed in what is, after all, His proposition. Navigating the path between naïveté and cynicism in marriage means growing out of our sentimentality but not slipping into scepticism. Nothing speeds up the maturing process like marriage. It exposes our immaturity, and it either takes us to maturity or confirms us in our immaturity.

One of the first things we learn about our immaturity is our self-centredness. A husband hangs the mirror in the house to his height, and his wife can barely see herself in it. A wife cooks all her favourite meals for her husband who is at a loss about how to tell her that they are her favourites not his. A husband plans his weekend and expects his wife to follow his schedule. A wife gets upset with her mother-in-law and expects her husband to feel the same. How we make ourselves the centre of the universe! When we read the Genesis account of “two becoming one” in marriage, we interpret it to mean our spouse becoming like us.

ONLY ONE IN THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD?

Popular notions about love, whether in pop music or pulp fiction, tell us to find the right partner for a happy marriage. Everything good said about someone we love is something to serve our own interests. If she is pretty, it is so that we may be pleased by her beauty. If he is understanding, it is so that we may be understood. If she is a good cook, it is so that we may enjoy the outcome of her culinary skills. If he is a financially stable person, it is so that we may find security. Not that any of these qualities is wrong. In fact, they are all important to a relationship.

But love is more than finding a right partner to satisfy all our needs. It is also being the right partner to meet the needs of the other person. If we become less preoccupied with marrying the right person and more concerned with being the right person, our marriage will experience a paradigm shift for

the better. For Christians, a deviant theology about finding God's will can undermine a faltering relationship. A man once told me, after he found that the girl he married three years ago was no longer what he thought her to be, "Maybe she was not God's will for me."

Such a thought does a number of things to a person. Firstly, it conveniently absolves him of any blame in the relationship. It is not his fault but his partner's. Secondly, it starts him thinking about whom he should have married. Perhaps someone else was God's will for him. Thirdly, as a consequence, it gives him no motivation to work on his marriage.

I personally do not subscribe to the belief that there is only one person in the whole wide world who is God's will for me, romantic though it may sound. I do not see this taught in the Bible; neither have I found it helpful in counselling. I believe that God leaves the choice of a life partner to us. The only condition He lays down is that we "must not be unequally yoked with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6.14). In other words, any person who is a believer is God's choice for you. Of course, you have your preferences: He or she must be compatible with you, fulfil certain minimum requirements, and so on. But that's your prerogative. God leaves it to you.

A lady who had been married for more than thirty years was asked how she kept her marriage intact. She replied with a twinkle in her eye, "I could not marry the person I loved so I love the person I married." She did not ask if her husband was God's will for her. The fact that she married him made him God's will for her, whether she liked it or not! I often feel compelled to make this clear to couples who believe their marriage will be great simply because they have found in each other the right person. For example, I would say to the man:

Whether or not she is the right person for you will be known some years down the road. We all change, and the person you marry now may not be the same person five years later. By then you may find each other a perfect fit. Or you may not. The important thing is not finding the right person as your wife, but becoming the right person yourself. Do not ask, Is she the right person for me? Instead, ask, Am I the right person for her? Also, never ask, Is she God's choice for me? When you both stand before God, and make your vows, taking each other as man

and wife, God seals her as His choice for you, and thereafter the question should never again arise.

The promise before God to love each other must be taken in all solemnity. Ben came to me feeling that the bottom had fallen out of his marriage. Four-and-a-half years into it, with two active kids and a tired wife, life had become a constant hassle. He enjoyed his work but dreaded the thought of going home each day to face the pressure cooker of a family. He hated it when his wife Min shouted at the children, or when she took it out on him. His feelings for her alternated between pity and anger. But any feeling of love had died. They had not slept together for months. He asked me, "Is our marriage dead? Can two persons who no longer love each other have a marriage?"

LOVE IS WHAT YOU DO

Ben's questions raise an issue which I believe is pivotal to our understanding of marriage. Men and women today fail to grasp this aspect of marriage, and consequently give in too readily to separation and divorce. I have seen marriages in trouble, and spoken with desperate husbands and disillusioned wives. If their marriages are still holding today, it is because they understand this issue. They understand the essence of their wedding vows.

I answered Ben's questions with another, "What did you promise Min on the day of your wedding?"

"I promised to love her for better or for worse till death do us part," he replied.

"Was there any condition attached to your promise to love her?" I asked.

"No." Ben remembered what we had covered together in our premarital counselling sessions.

"Does that promise still hold, now that your marriage has turned out for worse?"

"I guess so," Ben said, his voice laden with a definite sadness.

"If your promise to love Min still holds, will you love her?"

"But I feel I no longer love her," Ben protested.

At this point lies the crux of the matter. Is love something we *have* or something we *do*? Is it something we either have or don't have? Or is love

something we do if we want to do it? Ben felt that love was something he no longer had, but I tried to point out to him that love was something he could do if he meant to keep his promise. To put it bluntly, if you have promised to love your wife, whether you feel you love her or not is unimportant; you made a promise and you jolly well keep it!

Two authors helped me understand that dimension in marriage we call *commitment*. One is the German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote a wedding sermon from his prison cell for his niece during the Second World War.

Your love is your own private possession; marriage is more than a private affair, it is an estate, an office. As the crown makes the king, and not just his determination to rule, so marriage and not just your love for each other makes you husband and wife in the sight of God and man... As God is infinitely higher than man, so is the sanctity, the privilege and promise of marriage higher than the sanctity, the privilege and promise of love. It is not your love which sustains the marriage, but from now on the marriage that sustains your love.²

Ben's loss of love in no way invalidates his marriage. His love for Min and her love for him may have led them to marriage. But from the day of their wedding onwards, when their vows before God sealed their relationship, it is no longer their love that determines the marriage but the marriage that determines their love. Hence the marriage remains even when love subsides.

Another author who spells out this commitment is Walter Trobisch, a missionary pastor in Cameroon, West Africa. He explains the relationship between love and marriage:

Love needs marriage as much as marriage needs love. In the sad hours when love is in danger of growing cold, husband and wife cling to the fact that they are married and remind each other of their mutual promise, "After all, I married you," they say. Thus, marriage becomes the protector, the guardian of love.³

To some, saying “After all, I married you” sounds resigned, a far cry from the romantic “Honey, I love you”. Yet that difference represents the distance a relationship has travelled from naïveté to maturity. Love is too precious to leave at the mercy of changing feelings. Love needs the protection of a commitment which, once made, never changes but always remains. Marriage provides that sanctuary within which love grows, flourishes, fades, and grows again.

That morning in my office with Josephine, I witnessed the fragility of love. Thankfully, her tears washed away only her make-up, not her resolve to take the step of holy matrimony. Like her, all of us need something greater than our uncertain feelings to preserve the love we have found. God who gave us love, also gave us marriage to preserve it.

Thus we are delivered from the naïveté of young and reckless love, and saved from the cynicism of love grown old and cold.

CHAPTER TWO

ON THE
THRESHOLD OF **PAIN**

“Pain is life — the sharper, the more evidence of life.”

Charles Lamb

“Nothing is so certain as death, and nothing
is so uncertain as the hour of death.”

Saint Augustine

“Don’t be a pastor if you want to keep office hours,” the veteran pastor told us in a class on Pastoral Theology in Bible College. “I have been called up at odd hours. I have left my home and returned at sane and insane hours of the day and night. Whether we like it or not, we are on twenty-four-hour duty.” How true! Crises do not give advance notice. A heart attack, a suicide attempt, a domestic fight, a death — any of these could call a pastor to the scene. He drops whatever he is doing, and for the next few hours or more, the emergency exacts his time and attention.

Thankfully, emergencies do not happen every day. Much of what we pastors do is routine. We go into our office, plough through our paperwork, reply letters, read reports, take and make phone calls, prepare schedules, write memos, work on sermons, hold staff meetings, and so on. But the element of the unexpected always features in the pastoral ministry. A phone call or a beep on the pager, especially late at night, is a signal that something is amiss. As if on cue, the pastor’s adrenaline bursts forth, quickening his heart and alerting his mind to answer the call of duty.

SUPERPASTOR TO THE RESCUE!

Such an occupational trait lends both glamour and stress to the ministry. At times, the pastor resembles Superman, darting into his closet, changing within minutes and dashing out to solve someone’s problem. It does not matter if he does not speed like a bullet or leap tall buildings, but as long as he is there at the scene, everyone feels safe. For some unbiblical reason, people believe that the prayers of a pastor reach higher towards heaven than a layman’s.

But the demand for the pastor’s presence adds considerable stress to him and his family. (Superman never had that problem because he never married Lois Lane and had a family.) Blessed is the pastor whose elders and deacons share in his crisis ministry and whose members accept his limitations of time, especially when a crisis stretches into days and weeks. But pity the pastor who thinks he is the only one who can do the work, and needs to be needed to feel good. He basks in his Superman’s status, not realising he may simply be nurturing his own insecurity.

I learnt a hard lesson about being Superpastor. A fine line runs between a healthy sense of responsibility and an unhealthy sense of megalomania. I

worked for several years with Tina, someone who had attempted suicide so many times that I had lost count. My wife and I rushed to her doorstep on the first few occasions, but when it became a pattern, we realised that it was her way of getting our attention. Thereafter I refused to speak to her; my wife took all the calls. Of course, I felt terribly guilty. I was not able to help her out of her condition, and I did not want to respond to her call for help. What if she really killed herself?

Someone who knew more about guilt manipulation than I did counselled me, “Not all of us can help everybody all the time. There comes a point when you have to admit that you have tried your best, and that you are not the person who can help. It is not a failure on your part, unless you consider yourself the Messiah who can save everybody!” I saw how my guilt had arisen because I thought no one but I could help Tina since she had called for me. It was a delusion, as I soon realised. In fact, my attempt to help had actually worsened her condition. When I kept my distance, she improved. In crisis counselling, there comes a point when helping the counsellee ends and helping the counsellor begins. A counsellor needs counsel as much as a counsellee.

I have received as much from counselling situations as I have given. Often I come away enlightened by fresh insights into the workings of the human heart. Since I worked with so many couples before and after they were married, I have seen a good number of domestic crises. I shall never forget how, as a young pastor, I was called away in the middle of a catechism class to talk with a distraught wife standing on the ledge of a twelve-storey building, threatening to throw herself to her death. Household quarrels that turn violent and life-threatening require prayerful and sensitive handling. A pastor who has won the prior confidence of the parties involved has the advantage in managing the crisis. I have seen how the police (if they are called in) quietly leave when the pastor arrives.

DWELLING AMONG STARS, WALLOWING IN MUD

It has often puzzled me how mild men turn violent and meek wives turn vicious in marital conflicts. Marriage seems to bring out the best as well as the worst in all of us. Some of the couples whose feuds I had moderated were the gentlest people I knew. Someone said that we are like tea bags; we never know