




A Note from Lysa

When things were falling apart with my marriage, I felt like I had been in the equivalent of a serious head-on collision and desperately needed to go to an emergency room. The intensity of the pain and the severity of the trauma made it seem like I was emotionally bleeding out. After all, a part of me had just been severed . . . cut off . . . ripped apart. If my injuries had been physical, someone would have called 911 and the ambulance workers would have attempted to stabilize me and get me to the hospital. The ER trauma doctors would have known what to do to get my pain under control and take me into surgery to fix what had been severed. But there wasn't that level of care and help immediately available to me with the emotional trauma I was experiencing. No doctor could surgically fix my broken heart.

What would have helped me, in my pain and confusion, was a book like this. And, honestly, what has continued to help my healing post-divorce has been writing this very resource you now hold in your hands.

Please know from the start that I still wish there was no need for a book titled *Surviving an Unwanted Divorce*. The devastation of an unwanted divorce is horrific. So in no way, shape, or form do I ever want to glorify divorce or make it seem as if it's an easy solution to marriage difficulties. If you and your spouse are both





willing to make the necessary changes with humble hearts and there is hope for you to get your marriage to a healthy place, please fight for that relationship.

But I know personally that sometimes that is just not possible. When the destruction and devastation have reached a point where you are now facing the death of your marriage, you need a resource like this. It's written not just from my personal experiences but also from the wisdom of trained professionals to help you navigate everything you are dealing with, both emotionally and spiritually.

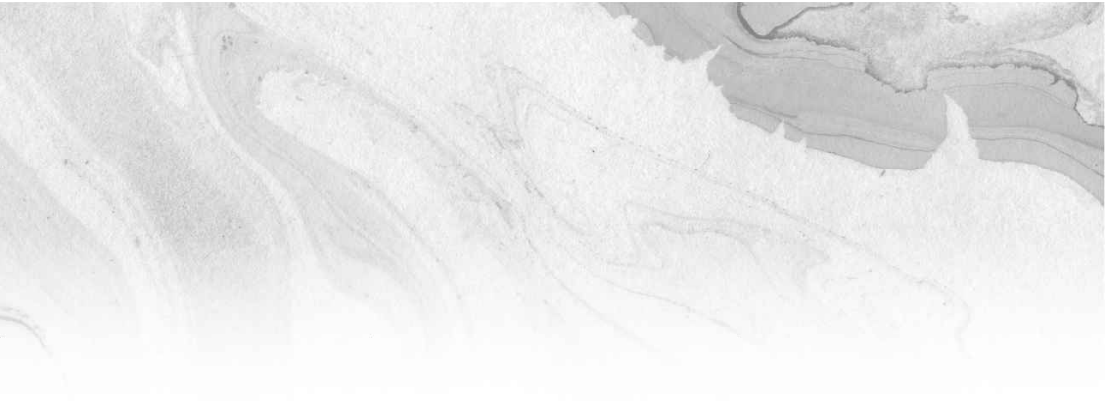
While this book isn't an ultimate resource that will help you know what to do and what to say at every turn, my prayer is that this book will start to give you the emotional fortitude and biblical confidence to work through what you walk through along the way. Whether you're in the throes of a divorce, still processing things that happened years ago, or helping someone you love through a devastating season, this book is for you.

In full transparency, I feared writing a book like this would make it seem I am pro divorce. Please know, I am not that. I am pro healthy marriages and I am pro helping women who desperately need the support and information in this book. And, sister, if that is you, you are worth it.

Finally, I should also mention that certainly there are men on the receiving end of marriage devastation, too, and I hate that the Enemy is tearing families apart in every which way he can. I'll mostly be addressing other women throughout this book, because that is the experience I'm writing from. But I hope the principles help you, regardless of who you are.

I'm so grateful to be able to hand you this resource and tell you with full confidence that God loves you and you don't have to walk this road alone.

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Introduction

Secrets Always Take a Toll on Their Keeper

Hello, my name is Lysa, and I have experienced a divorce. For a long while, I couldn't say those words. I couldn't wrap my brain around the word *divorce* being attached to my life. So my therapist, Jim, told me to say "the death of my marriage." That helped. But just changing the phraseology didn't change the intensity of my shock and pain.

I remember the night when I first knew the end was near. I was trying to process what had happened that day. I wasn't crying. And it felt weird that I wasn't slumped over and sobbing. I'm not sure if it was because I'd run out of tears. Or maybe holding back the tears gave me a sense of control to keep me from falling apart. Or maybe I wasn't crying because there was relief in finally knowing what was really true. But as quickly as I felt the relief of the truth, it was followed by a fear of finality.

Clarity didn't give me comfort. Clarity did, however, allow

me to see what I needed to see in order to know what I needed to do.

I was sitting on my bed, staring out the window. I couldn't take my eyes off the night sky. But I wasn't looking at the darkening scenery. I wasn't really looking outward at all. I was making my way through the internal realizations I'd resisted for so long. Instead of shoving them away, I let the thoughts of divorce stay with me. And I hated those thoughts. But staying in this marriage just wasn't an option any longer.

The dysfunctional dance had ramped back up. I knew the steps. I knew his promises were empty. I knew the vicious spins were starting again. I knew exactly where the choreography would take us. I knew nothing was going to magically make it all better this time. I knew the only way I could stay was if I was willing to pretend I didn't see what I saw. Pretend I didn't know what I now knew. And pretend that this level of ongoing heartbreak wasn't breaking me apart. But if I did that, his secrets would have to become my secrets. And I wasn't willing to do that.

Jim, my counselor, who had always been careful to let me come to my own conclusions, had taught me that we are as sick as our secrets. That statement got my attention! Before seeing Jim and another counselor I worked with, I thought I was being a good wife when I kept secret my suspicions and the later revelations of alarming things happening. Part of it was because, in the early stages of my marriage imploding, I didn't yet have solid proof of what I feared. But then, even when I made more and more discoveries, I still kept them secret from mostly everyone because I was riddled with fear, and I didn't know who I could trust to help me. I also knew the consequences of his choices wouldn't affect just him but our entire family. So, in my mind, I hadn't been keeping secrets; I had been trying to keep our world

together and make hugely challenging choices in a situation I was ill-equipped to handle.

But holding all this inside me was making me sick, physically and emotionally. I didn't need to tell everyone, but I should have told some trusted people who could have helped me think through this more clearly. By trying to protect our marriage, I wound up not protecting myself. By not revealing the secrets, I was actually paying a very high cost.

There really are no free secrets.

They all have a cost, an impact, a toll that they take on their keeper.

By not saying anything, I was, in essence, preventing him from facing the consequences of his choices, which, looking back, I can see was not at all helpful. Yes, it temporarily protected me and our kids from what we would suffer if he was exposed. But we eventually paid an even greater cost because of how long that secrecy strung things out and how much worse it got in that time.

Sometimes stepping in and preventing natural consequences gets in the way of God using those consequences to bring about some sort of repentance.

Again, I'm not talking about telling everyone what's going on and inviting public opinion into your very private world. But telling the right people is crucial. If we think we're honoring our husbands by not doing this, we are, essentially, honoring what is dishonorable. So, when Jim told me that secrets can make people sick, I realized I had not been protecting our marriage. I had actually been preventing us both from getting the help we desperately needed.

But please understand, I get the fear of telling others. I get the fear of what it could unleash in your life. And I get the need to take the time to count the cost on both sides of this choice. Only

you can make this decision. I just wish I would have told others sooner than I did. I think I prolonged my suffering and missed an earlier opportunity for me to hand him over to God and stop the madness of trying to change him myself.

Do you recognize yourself in my story? Have you caught yourself saying any of these things?

“I just don’t understand why he can’t see what I see.”

“I can’t wrap my brain around why he’s doing this.”

“I would never do this to someone I loved.”

“How can he not know what breaking apart our family will do to our children?”

It’s taken me a long time to come to grips with statements and questions like these. Of course you don’t understand it. Because you don’t think like he thinks. You aren’t doing what he is doing. And you aren’t blinded by the same behaviors he is engaging in.

Unhealthy choices will never make sense to a healthy person. And health has a very hard time bonding with unhealth. You can’t make sense of things that make no sense. You can’t make normal outcomes from dysfunctional ingredients. You can’t bring into order someone who is constantly drawn to chaos. And you can’t walk forward hand in hand with someone who is going

Unhealthy choices will never make sense to a healthy person.

in the opposite direction. At some point, the connection will slip, and though you’re desperately grasping to hang on, their determination to pull away wins.

When I finally did get my counselor Jim involved, he started to equip me with therapeutic insights to help me better understand

what I was really dealing with. One day, he held up a glass with water in it and said, “Water seeks its own level.” He put the glass on a table and pointed out how the water on the left side of the glass was even with the water on the right side of the glass. The only way to keep one side higher than the other was to tilt the glass. But that tilted glass would never be stable enough to stand without crashing over. In the same way, if one of the two people in a relationship is striving to make the relationship healthier but the other refuses, there is a high probability that the instability will lead to a crash.

It’s a fool’s game to drink the poison someone keeps giving you and hope that there are enough other good aspects in your relationship that you’ll survive it.

By the time that night came, when I was staring out the window I understood this reality and had started to gain the emotional fortitude to take the hardest step of my life. Even though I knew this was the step I needed to take, I felt more alone than I’d ever felt. And all I wanted to do was to text my then-husband and ask him to come back home. For my entire adult life, he had been the one I wanted with me when I was processing something hard. He had been (as far as I knew) as invested in what affected me as I was. I always thought we would carry life’s hardships *together*, figure it out *together*, and get through it *together*. So, of course, I wanted to text him.

But I’d been in this place before. Afraid. Lonely. Minimizing what kept happening. Missing him. Thinking things would surely be different this time. Giving in. Texting him. Getting a jolt of hope when he texted back all the words I’d hoped he would say. Believing the love bombing was true evidence of him changing. Taking him back. Enjoying a short season of reconciliation. Letting my guard down. Feeling a sense of safety and hope again.

Then the weird feeling that something was off again would start. The fears, the suspicions, the searching for evidence, being told I was crazy and wondering if I really was, in fact, crazy. Confrontation would lead to life turning upside down again, I would feel like I could barely function, and hopelessness would envelop me.

And here I was again.

Right back at another ground zero.

That's when the tears came. I put my phone in the drawer of my nightstand and rolled over in the darkness, where a fitful night of very little sleep awaited me. There would be a cost to finally saying *no more*. The fact that he could no longer be my person was one of the many costs I would have to pay for finally making the decision to leave. But the cost of continuing to stay was more than my body, mind, and heart could afford to keep paying. I wasn't giving up. I was finally accepting the reality that changing a marriage really isn't possible if one of the two people is unwilling or incapable of making the desperately needed changes. So I drew the finish line and stepped over into this terrifying unknown. I wrote this in my journal during that season:

I have so much fear. I am heartbroken and devastated. I tried for years to prevent the reality I'm now living. I feel awful and lost and intensely alone. And it's even worse when I'm in a crowded room. That's actually the loneliest place for me, because I can hear the buzz of other people who like their lives and it's unsettling. I used to be one of them, who had a general sense of where my life was headed, but I was wrong. I used to love looking forward to the future. Now it just seems to be a dark blur of uncertainty. I want to move forward. But where do I go? Which direction is forward? What does

it even look like to be a Christian woman who is headed toward divorce?

Getting to the place where I finally was able to make the decision to divorce was a long process.

In 2016 I realized my then-husband was being unfaithful. In 2017 I announced we were divorcing. In 2018 we tried to reconcile, got a lot of counseling, and renewed our vows. In 2019 I started sensing things weren't right again. And it's been almost six years since I realized my marriage wasn't going to make it.

The process and time frames will look different for each person. Maybe you're still in the thick of heartbreaking discoveries or realizations that you are in a destructive marriage and aren't sure what to do. Or maybe you are in the very messy middle of a divorce. Or maybe you've made the brave decision to continue processing and healing from the fallout from your divorce years ago. Whatever your circumstances are, I'm so glad you're here. I know firsthand how long and painful the journey is. But I hope you will find a friend in me throughout the pages of this book, as you experience the healing and redemption you may have determined would never be possible for you.

I'm thankful to be in a different reality now. Because I'm in a different season, there's a part of me that just wants to move on and leave all this divorce stuff in my past. But almost every week I get another message about a woman's life being ripped apart by secrets she didn't know her husband was keeping. Or her husband's temper has reached a place where his verbal abuse or abuse of any kind is crushing her. Or his hidden spending habits on activities that aren't in keeping with their marriage vows have stolen her family's ability to pay the bills and he's refusing to stop the financial betrayal. Or there are things happening with him that

she's afraid to tell anyone, because he's told her over and over that she didn't see what she saw or she didn't hear what she heard. His gaslighting has her starting to believe that she's the crazy one. Or she tried to confide in someone after he pinned her against a wall and broke his hand by punching a hole in the wall, but they made it seem like it was all her fault with statements like "Don't trigger him," "Don't instigate any hard conversations," "You should be having more sex with him," and "What could you do better so he will act better at home?"

Whatever the toxic dynamics are, we need to remember, like my friend Leslie Vernick taught me, there is a big difference between a difficult marriage and a destructive marriage. A difficult marriage is a good reason to go to counseling and marriage conferences to work on things together. A destructive marriage is a whole different beast.

This is a somber place to start a book. But if I'm not honest about where I was, your broken heart won't trust me enough to walk you on from here. More than teaching you anything right now, I want you to feel understood. That's why I'm so glad you're here. Rather than googling late at night trying to figure out what to do now, I hope you can find what you need in these pages. You are walking through a significant, life-altering tragedy. And I want you to know you're not alone.

I'm inviting two people along for this journey who helped me the most throughout my own path. My counselor, Jim Cress, who you'll be hearing from at the end of each chapter in the "Counselor's Corner," and a theologian friend, Dr. Joel Muddamalle, who you'll hear from throughout this book. If you've recently been hurt by a man in your life, I hope Joel's and Jim's biblical wisdom and tender voices of encouragement will be redeeming for you. I can't wait for you to learn from them!

Together, we want to take your hand and lead you to real wisdom, help you walk further in your healing journey, and equip you with solid biblical truth. Whether your story is very similar to mine or the reasons for your divorce are different, we want to enter the story of your healing. We want to help you find your way.

I want to make a few special notes so I make sure to include all who could benefit from this message. Certainly, like I said before, those of you in the messy middle of discovering infidelity and marriage implosion leading to divorce, this book is for you. But it's also for those of you whose spouse didn't cheat on you but instead broke your marriage vows in other destructive ways. We will get to this specifically in chapter 4, "Is the Only Valid Reason for Divorce Sexual Infidelity?" I pray that having Dr. Joel unpack the scriptures that have possibly confused you or left you feeling like leaving your emotionally destructive marriage wasn't biblically justified will ease the burden of shame you may be carrying.

This book is also for those of you whose divorce happened years ago and the intensity of the hurt isn't as all-consuming as it once was. The best way I can describe why this book will help you is to give you a mental picture one of my daughter's tutors once showed me. She held up a chart of all the building-block lessons a child has to master in order to be successful as they move through the higher grades. My daughter had missed some building-block basics, which was making moving forward challenging once she hit middle school. The tutor helped her go back to get a solid footing built in her educational pyramid. It took time to accomplish this, but once she did, her school experience improved immensely. I believe this book will be like that building-block exercise for you.

And, finally, this book is for the friend who wants to better understand how to help another friend facing a divorce. Read this book alongside her. Process it with her. And seek to understand

what she's going through so you can support her. She doesn't need to face any of this alone, and you can be one of the most important people God uses in her life right now. You don't have to come up with all the wisdom. Just join her in reading this book so you can learn alongside her.

For whatever reason you're picking up this book, I'm so glad you're here. And while I can't promise you'll get the answers you want about what happened, I can help you find the answers you need to move on in healthier ways from here.