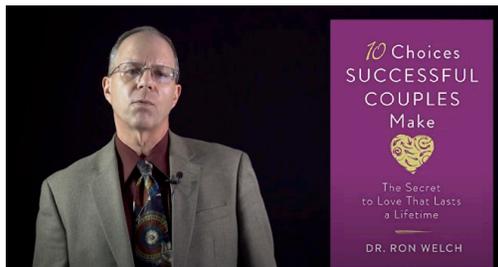


Choosing the Future Over the Past



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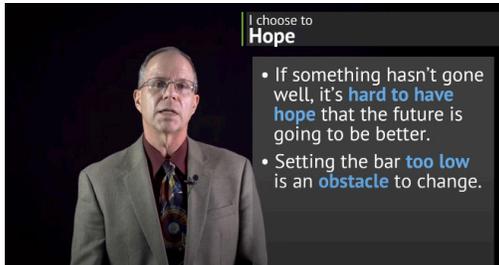
Hi, I'm Ron Welch, and I am really pleased that you joined us for this lesson. We're going to be talking about choices throughout this series. The book is 10 Choices Successful Couples Make. And a lot of what we're talking about is that you can choose to follow biblical principles that can change the way your relationships look. And this series is largely about how you can make specific choices in your marriage that will lead you to be able to focus on each other and create a marriage that transforms the relationship for a lifetime.

So I want to start by talking with you a little bit about how change works. And in marriages one of the things we found is that people have a tremendous ability to think about what the consequences are of their choices when they take the time to do that. One of the problems is that we tend to want to be a certain way that God would like us to be, but we don't take the time to think before we take action.

And so a lot of people will think, "I can't change my relationship. This is the way the marriage has been for five years or twenty years or thirty years." And, in my belief, there is a level of hope that is created by the lesson for today in this message. "I know that the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and to not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." That's from Jeremiah 29:11.

And the reason hope is so important in this process is that for many people there have been problems in the relationship and things haven't gone well. And one of the things that happens is you start to believe that this is just how things are going to go. It may be something small like which way the toilet paper is left on the particular bathroom stand. Or it might be who leaves the knives turned the wrong way on the table. But whatever it is that creates conflict—even something big like an affair or a betrayal—if something hasn't gone well, it's hard to have hope that the





future is going to be better.

And one of the things we want to talk about today is the idea that there are challenges in hope and ways that we can make that change. And one of the things we've learned is sometimes you set the bar kind of low and you start settling for your partner not to be the kind of person God intended them to be. I know this was true in my marriage. And in later lessons in this series, we're going to talk some about what happened between my wife and I over our thirty-four years of marriage, and how I became very aware of the degrees to which I was falling short of what God intended for my marriage and myself as a husband. And I want to share some of that story, so it'll help provide some hope for you in terms of what kind of change and transformation is possible.

In many ways, once you have a failure or something goes wrong in a relationship, you can start repeating that pattern. And I have a metaphor that I've used with many couples over many years. I learned this in the federal prison system. (I wasn't an inmate in the federal prison system. I was working as a psychologist, just for those of you who may wonder.) But I learned from a man named Bill Flayman that Niagara Falls can provide a tremendous understanding of what it's like to be in a relationship when conflict occurs. I don't know how many of you have been to Niagara Falls, but it's a big waterfall, lots of water. My Canadian friends want me to make sure I mention that the Canadian side is much prettier than the American side, just so you're aware of that.



But the process about Niagara Falls is to not think of the falls. When you see the falls, you think of the power of them, but I want you to think about what it would be like, maybe two or three miles upriver. What would the water be like before you ever hear the sound of the falls or the power? It's actually fairly calm. You can get in and out of the water, you can move in and out of the river. And there's a lot of ability to be able to think about what you're going to do and change course. As you get closer to the falls (when we've been there), the power gets stronger. You hear a roar off in the distance. Occasionally, there're signs saying, "Hey, you in the barrel, please get out." You know how that works. And you reach a point of no return.

I saw this with the inmates in the prison system, where their anger reached a point of intensity. They couldn't turn it around. And this is what it's like with the couples I've worked with over the years. And you probably know what that's like in your life, when you

thought about, “I know who God wants me to be in this moment. I know what the Bible teaches about the kind of person I should be. I have some hope, and I believe I could act differently.” And then the next thing you know, you’re apologizing for something you said or something you did. And now we have to go through the whole process of forgiveness that we’ll talk about in one of the later lessons in this series. And you can prevent that, if you can start to see the warning signs.

Husband's lists		Wife's lists	
			
I know I am not okay when...	I know she is not okay when...	I know I am not okay when...	I know he is not okay when...
1. _____	1. _____	1. _____	1. _____
2. _____	2. _____	2. _____	2. _____
3. _____	3. _____	3. _____	3. _____
4. _____	4. _____	4. _____	4. _____
5. _____	5. _____	5. _____	5. _____
6. _____	6. _____	6. _____	6. _____

So our exercise that I’m going to ask you to consider engaging in after this lesson is to start to make some lists. And I want you to make two lists each. If you’re a couple, it would be four lists altogether. And the list would look like this. A husband would make a list about how he knows when he’s not okay and not doing well. A wife would make a list about how she knows when she’s not doing well and things are not okay in her life. The wife would also make a list about what she sees in her husband. How does she know that he’s having a bad day or things aren’t well with him? And the same for the husband, of course, in terms of his wife. So you each have two lists. What we do with these is we rank in order the things you list. And you’re putting down anything from “my head hurts when I know I’m not doing okay.” “I hear a tone of voice.” I’ve had couples tell me, “He doesn’t even have to say anything. He raises his eyebrow and I know I’m in trouble.” Okay, whatever it is that creates those warning signs, we want you to be able to write all of those down, identify them, and then rank order them.

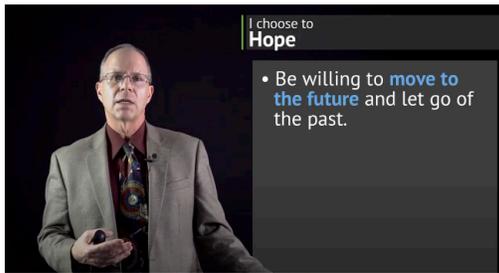


Exercise:

- Make a list of things that signal to you that **you aren't doing okay**.
- Make a list of things that signal to you that **your partner isn't doing okay**.
- Rank the items on each list.
- Talk with your partner about how to identify each other's warning signs.

So we have a list way upriver, where the first sign is he’s hungry. That may be all it takes: he’s hungry and we’re in difficulty. We can do something about it then. But if he’s hungry, and he’s had a bad day at work, and, I don’t know, the dog made a mess in the house, who knows. Whatever has happened, those things start building up, and now you have many warning signs. So what we want to do is be able to write those down, understand the progression of how they get closer to the falls, and then be able to do that as an exercise.

That’s going to take you some time. I want you to take it very, very seriously—make them very clear—and then share the list with each other and start figuring out how you can identify the warning signs. I have couples who have posted a picture of Niagara Falls on their refrigerator, and they have their warning signs marked and all that kind of thing, so they know what’s coming. Okay?



Part of the other element of hope in this process that I want to share in this series is that you have to be willing to move to the future and let go of the past. If you stay in the past, then you're not going to see the warning signs because you generally kind of assume that what happened in the past is going to happen again. And it's hard because partners have difficulty believing their partner can change when they've seen things go wrong in the past.

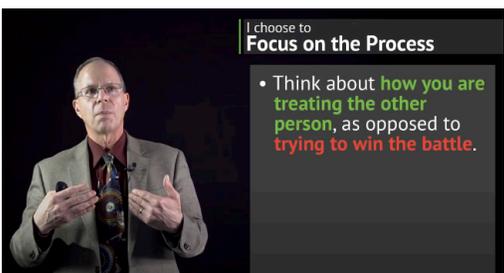
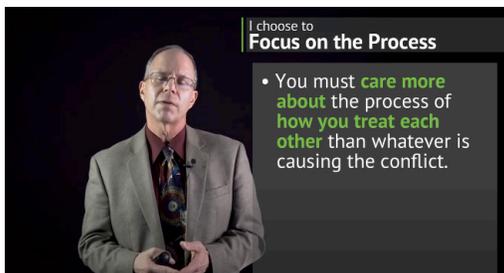
So in order to do that, you have to let go of the baggage that you each bring with you. And that can be family of origin stuff from when you were five, to a previous marriage or relationship, to how you get along with a post man. I don't know. There're all sorts of ways that you learn how to relate to people. And you bring that into your relationship.

What we know about this is a concept called learned helplessness, and I want to take a second and talk about what this looks like. Learned helplessness came from dog experiments that were done way long ago, back before PETA protected animals and all that. So I'm not saying I endorse these experiments. Please don't do this with your animals at home. But they used to do something where they would have electric shock grids. And the dogs would be shocked, and then they'd jump to get away from the electrical shock, and then they'd land again. They would do this with cats too, by the way. And the animals would jump, and then they'd come down. They jump and they come back down.

Eventually, the animals looked at the experimenter and just laid down on the shock tray and said, "Go ahead, shock me. You're not going to make me jump. I'm not that stupid." And the idea was, gosh, I can't avoid it. So I'm not even going to try. And then we started realizing this is what learned helplessness looks like in our relationships. I see this all the time in couples who have decided, "I know I'd like to be the kind of husband or wife God would like me to be, but I've kind of given up hope on that being possible. So I pretty much just want to settle; and I'll do my best, but I'm not really going to try hard." And they give up. That's when we lose hope. And when we lose hope, we have some significant relationship problems.

The last thing I want to mention to you in this lesson is to give you a little insight into how you could change that. Again, to give you some hope that your relationship doesn't have to be the way it is. I want you to hear that message: It doesn't have to be the





way it is. God performs miracles every single day. And in your relationship, He can do exactly the same thing. Here's how this works. You have to care more about the process of how you treat each other than about whatever it is that's causing conflict.

Let me give you an example. There's an episode of a show called Everybody Loves Raymond that I think all sorts of good stuff about marriage is shown in. But in one episode, Debra is trying to buy a new can opener. And Ray looks at it and says, "Well, do we need a new can opener? I don't see what the problem is." And they show the story from his perception when he comes home, and her perception, when she sees him come home. When he comes home, he's all excited; and he's giving her a big kiss and asking her, "What's for dinner?" And he's like, "Oh, you didn't have time. I'll make my own. Oh, it's tuna fish. Okay." And then there's tuna fish that drips out of the jar. And he's like, "Oh, it's okay. Not a big deal."

In her story, he comes home, says, "What's for dinner? What do you mean you haven't made my dinner? Tuna fish, I can't believe this. There's tuna fish all over my hands. What's wrong with you? Do we need a new can opener?" And by the time that's done, you see what really mattered in that whole process. In the second video, she walks away crying because . . . And he says, "What did I say?" And what he said was, "I don't love you. I don't care about you," because his delivery was so poor.

I want you, in your interactions with your partner, to think about the process of how you are treating the other person, as opposed to being worried about winning the battle. So many couples I work with are like two attorneys trying to make points with each other. And I want you to think about these things that I mentioned. Content is the specifics, the issue, the information, the details. In most discussions, does that really matter? Is that going to be what you walk away from that you care about?

What you're going to care about is, Does the other person feel closer to God? Are they more empowered? Are they encouraged? How you treat each other, how you feel after you encounter each other, those are the things that really show God's love and God's understanding of transformation in relationships.

I want you to think about that—in addition to doing the Niagara Falls exercise—think about that while you're thinking about these lessons and this particular lesson, and try to come to an

understanding with your partner of how you treat each other, how it feels after you engage each other, and if you really feel like you're honoring God in the process. If you do that, I believe your marriage will be really, really transformed.