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ON THE FAMILY

breaking the cycle of divorce

how your marriage

can succeed even if your

parents' didn't



JOHN TRENT, PH.D.
WITH LARRY K. WEEDEN

“If your parents were divorced, you need to read this compelling book. *Breaking the Cycle of Divorce* acts like an inoculation against the divorce epidemic, preventing its spread from generation to generation. It will assure you that your marriage *can* be for a lifetime and give you a very practical road map to get you there.”

SHAUNTI FELDHAHN, author of *For Women Only*

“Dr. John Trent is honest. He is vulnerable, and he is right! Adult children of divorce (like me) *can* begin a new cycle of successful marriage in their family. I know because I’ve been married 41 years! Start reading, because this book gives you practical steps to take you to a lifelong love.”

LINDA DILLOW, author of *Calm My Anxious Heart*
and co-author of *Intimate Issues*

“While acknowledging the detrimental influence of parental divorce on children, this book gives compelling evidence that the negative power of parental example can be broken. John Trent is ‘living proof’ that the insights of this book can lead to a successful marriage.”

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“John Trent takes the family portrait of divorce and changes the frame to one of hope. He shows us how to paint over the broken lines of divorce with brushstrokes of enduring love, gives us the tools to break the cycle, and shares how to create a legacy of love for a lifetime.”

SHARON JAYNES, author of *Becoming the Woman of His Dreams* and *Becoming a Woman Who Listens to God*



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❧ Introduction ❧

THE CHALLENGE

Children of divorce have no idea how to create and maintain a healthy relationship themselves. Typically, therefore, the idea of getting married fills them with both joy and dread at the same time.

Imagine growing up in a big city in the eastern United States, having never set foot outside the “concrete jungle.” One day a person you care for a great deal asks you to paint a picture of the Arizona desert in spring bloom, with flowering cacti of various kinds and a brightly colored carpet of wildflowers covering the sand—a scene you’ve never witnessed or even viewed in photographs.

Would you be able to do it?

Almost certainly you’d find it impossible, even if you had artistic talent. How could you hope to paint a landscape you had never seen? You might worry about hurting your loved one’s feelings; you might wish desperately that you could satisfy the request. But you’d find yourself asking, “What does one kind of cactus look like, let alone a dozen different kinds? And since when do cacti bloom? And while we’re at it, what’s a wildflower?”

Adult children of divorce who are considering the possibility of marriage—or who are already married and struggling to keep it together—face a challenge that seems nearly as inconceivable. Like every human being, they want to be loved and accepted. Like most people, they long to find those things in a marriage relationship that will be strong and thriving and mutually fulfilling “for as long as we both shall live.”

Unfortunately, those adult children of divorce have never seen such a marriage relationship. They have no idea what it looks like. Their only experience is with a relationship that, for any of a thousand reasons, didn’t last. In their experience, when the going gets tough, men and women bail out of a “bad” marriage.

A number of surveys and studies have discovered that adult children of divorce are far more likely to get divorced themselves than are the adult children of intact families (i.e., families in which Mom and Dad did not divorce).

So these children of divorce very often have no idea how to create and maintain a healthy relationship themselves. Typically, therefore, the idea of getting married fills them with both joy and dread at the same time. As Judith Wallerstein, one of the leading researchers on the effects of divorce, puts it, “When children of

divorce become adults, they are badly frightened that their relationships will fail, just like the most important relationship in their parents' lives failed. They mature with a keen sense that their growing-up experiences did not prepare them for love, commitment, trust, marriage, or even for the nitty-gritty of handling and resolving conflicts. . . . [T]hey are haunted by powerful ghosts from their childhoods that tell them that they, like their parents, will not succeed.”¹

Those fears are well founded. A number of surveys and studies have discovered that adult children of divorce are far more likely to get divorced themselves than are the adult children of intact families (i.e., families in which Mom and Dad did not divorce).² Depending on the survey, the child of divorce is at least two to four times more likely to divorce.

As if the divorce statistics weren't scary enough, the children of divorce are also more prone to other problems. For instance, they are twice as likely as children from intact homes to drop out of high school. They're twice as likely to become teen parents and unmarried parents. They're also far more likely to become dependent on welfare as adults.³

THE RE IS HOPE

If you're reading this as an adult child of divorce, you're probably familiar with those statistics and the fear they produce.

You may be wondering, as I suggested at the beginning, how you can possibly be expected to paint a picture of something you've never seen—how you can have a strong, intact marriage when your own parents' marriage failed. And you're probably wondering whether this book can really help.

To you, the anxious reader, I have two things to say here at the outset. *First and foremost, yes, it is possible to break the cycle of divorce.* You *can* learn to create and maintain a healthy, strong, lasting marriage relationship. You *can* learn to paint that picture of something you haven't yet seen. There is real hope for your future and your marriage.

Second, it may encourage you to know that I don't address this topic as an academic who simply thought it would make for an interesting study. No, this book is rooted in my own experience and grows out of my own passion and need to know. You see, I, too, am an adult child of divorce. My father actually went through three divorces, my mother through two.

So, like you, as I met and fell in love with the person of my dreams, I had to wonder whether I could enjoy a healthy marriage. When conflicts arose after the wedding, I had to consider whether we could work through our differences.

Could I succeed where my parents had failed, or was I doomed to repeat their mistakes, their choices, . . . their patterns?

Because I was privileged to marry the most wonderful woman in the world, because of lessons I've learned along the way (from

my mom and others), and especially because of God's grace, I will have been married for 27 years by the time this book releases, and the future looks even brighter than the past. My wife, Cindy, and I are living proof that the cycle of divorce can be broken. My parents' marital failure does *not* have to dictate the fate of our relationship, and your parents' divorce doesn't have to doom your marriage either.

You, an adult child of divorce, can create a strong, lasting marriage. When conflicts arise between you and your spouse, the two of you can work through them and find healthy resolution. In the face of other challenges (health issues, the everyday trials of life, etc.), you and your mate can draw closer together rather than drifting apart.

Walk with me through the pages of this book and let me show you how to start a new cycle in your family. It all begins, as we'll see in chapter 1, with recognizing that because you grew up in a home of divorce, you also grew up facing a greater challenge than you may have imagined. For, realize it or not, even in the twenty-first century, you're facing the effects of a curse.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

1. As a child of divorce, what is your greatest fear in getting or being married yourself?
2. What do you think a healthy marriage should look like? Why?
3. Right now, on a scale from 1 (no confidence at all) to 10 (absolutely certain), how confident are you that you can break the cycle of divorce and build a strong and lasting marriage?

UNDER THE CURSE

The picture is clear that children and adults whose parents divorce really are living under a curse. And the curse spreads from generation to generation until someone manages to break it and establish new patterns.

In the introduction, I had you imagine being asked to paint a landscape that you'd never seen. Now let me give you another word picture to help you understand what adult children of divorce (ACODs) are up against.

Today, when we hear the word *curse*, we envision a horror movie or an image out of a Stephen King-type novel of someone standing in a graveyard at midnight, shaking a bloody chicken leg at us. Those are imaginary pictures that may haunt us but don't really touch us. But the "curse" you and I grew up with, if you're from a divorced family, is real.

In the Bible, when it speaks of someone's being "under a curse," the image is that of a stream that has been dammed up. Much of the Holy Land is arid. So streams flowing with fresh, life-giving water—when they can be found—are vitally important.

Imagine, then, that you're stumbling through a desert, exhausted and thirsty. Your water gave out days ago, and your mouth feels as dry as the sand. The relentless sun bakes your brain and blinds your eyes. The bleached-white bones of a long-dead camel remind you of how perilous your own situation is.

What keeps you going? What gives you hope? You know that somewhere up ahead—not too far now—is a spring-fed stream. Even in the driest times, this stream is known to keep flowing. If you can just get to it, this water will give you new strength and energy, refreshing you enough to complete your return to civilization.

At last, the stream comes into view as you crest a hill! At first you're afraid it might be a mirage. But as you lurch down the far side of the hill, gathering speed as you go and drawing closer and closer, you recognize that it is, indeed, the stream you've been counting on to keep you alive.

Stumbling to the stream's edge, you want to just wade in and immerse yourself in the cooling water. As you plunge in, though, the realization hits you—there is no water! Finding yourself in the middle of a dry, rocky creek bed, it dawns on you that you had heard no sound of running water as you approached.

What could have happened? Where's the water?

Driven by your thirst, you head "upstream" to search for the problem. You know that the spring feeding the stream is not supposed to be all that far away. Staggering with weakness and fatigue, you move out.

Before long, your journey takes you around a hill and up a small valley. And there you find the problem. A short distance from where the water springs out of the hill, before it has had a chance to grow into a stream, someone has built a tall, solid dam. The flow of water down the hill, into the valley, and then into the familiar stream has been cut off.

And there you have a picture of what the Bible means when it says someone is under a curse. The flow of life-giving love and encouragement has been cut off. The person is without hope in a “dry” land.

Everyone and everything below the dam is now without water in a dry and barren land.

And there you have a picture of what the Bible means when it says someone is under a curse. The flow of life-giving love and encouragement has been cut off. The person is without hope in a “dry” land. It’s a picture of life-giving water, dammed up and out of reach.

ACODs like me grew up under this kind of curse. The flow of love, support, and good modeling of a healthy marriage that should have been theirs from two parents while growing up was instead cut off. And they live with the effects of that curse every day of their lives.

Perhaps you’re thinking that *curse* is too strong a word to

use in describing the impact when parents divorce. Don't try telling that to Allison.

ALLISON'S STORY

As a young girl, Allison watched her parents fight constantly. Her mom took to drinking, and Allison became the de facto parent. Then one day her dad caught her mom in bed with another man, and the marriage was over.

Allison now found herself torn in half. She loved both parents, but any loyalty she showed toward one of them was seen by the other as treason. Her father sued for custody and got it, but it soon became clear that he was only using her to get revenge on her mother.

When Allison went to spend time with her mom, Mom's new boyfriend saw Allison as competition for Mom's time and attention. So he berated her, kept her under his thumb, and generally tried to make her life miserable.

At age 15, Allison came to the realization that the guidance and care she still desperately needed from loving parents were never going to be hers. She was on her own.

Not surprisingly, Allison developed a chronic mistrust of relationships. How could she believe anyone who claimed to love her (as her parents had)? How could she trust that others wouldn't try to manipulate her? And how was she supposed to

get over the anger? She became convinced that if she ever did marry, she was doomed to repeat her parents' history.¹

LIFE UNDER THE CURSE

Allison's case highlights what life under the curse of being an ACOD is like. Seeing her parents divorce makes an Allison wonder if any marriage can survive. Knowing that one of her parents committed infidelity makes her doubt that any marital partner can ultimately be trusted. Or maybe, she thinks, she herself will eventually follow her mother's example, even though that's the last thing she would intend right now.

In addition, if Allison marries but feels that her spouse doesn't understand her anxieties and so can't offer the support she needs, that, too, could become a source of constant tension in the home.

Statistically, studies have shown that children of divorce suffer from more depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, feelings of rejection, drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, poor interpersonal relationships, and criminality than children from intact homes.² Sixty-five percent of children from divorced families will never build a good post-divorce relationship with their fathers. Thirty percent will be unable to develop a good post-divorce relationship with their mothers.³

As cited in the Introduction, ACODs are also at least two

to four times as likely to divorce as are adult children of intact homes. (And if both spouses come from divorced homes, the odds that they will divorce increase by 189 percent.⁴)

The effects of divorce on childhood happiness may be more pronounced than the effects of death and may have deeper consequences on quality of life or emotional health.

Statistics like these led one expert on the impact of divorce to write, “The effects of divorce on childhood happiness may be more pronounced than the effects of death and may have deeper consequences on quality of life or emotional health.”⁵

As further evidence of the dramatic impact of parental divorce, consider the case of Frank and Betty. They met at college and became romantically and sexually involved. Then Betty discovered she was pregnant. They lived together until they graduated, then got married shortly afterward. But it was an unhappy marriage, marked by emotional abuse, constant fighting, and failure to resolve conflicts. After eight years of this, the relationship ended in divorce.

And not one bit of that was surprising.

Why? Because 20 years earlier, Frank’s parents had met in college, become romantically involved, and gotten pregnant.

Then they had married and fought amid emotional abuse and unresolved conflict. Finally, after 10 years of contention, they had divorced.⁶

I could go on and on, but the picture is clear that children and adults whose parents divorce really are living under a curse. And the curse spreads from generation to generation until someone manages to break it and establish new patterns.

MY STORY

I, too, should have been one of those stories of living under the curse of divorce and the aching thirst it creates. My mother had been divorced once before meeting my father. My dad left my mom and divorced her when their three boys were all still under the age of three. He would go on to divorce twice more.

My own marriage, therefore, should have been a train wreck waiting to happen. To say I was a mess growing up would be putting the case mildly. As a young boy and then a teen, I longed for my dad's presence in my life. I was painfully aware—especially in my high school years—that other guys had dads who played catch with them, helped with their homework, attended their ball games to cheer them on, and then took them out for burgers afterward. *Am I really such a rotten kid, I wondered, that my dad couldn't stand to be here and do those things for me (and my brothers)?*

Like any child of divorce, I grew up asking all the “why” questions. I grew up with a model of marriage that said it’s not permanent. I grew up with anger and frustration and got in trouble as a result. Early in dating, I broke off my relationships with girls whenever the girls started to get serious, because I didn’t want to be hurt again.

By God’s grace and with the help of a number of people, however, I beat the odds. I’ve been able to break the curse and avoid the wreck. I have a strong marriage, and I’ve worked hard at being a loving father to my two girls. I’m far from perfect in any way, but I have discovered that there’s a way to “reverse the curse” and move toward the commitment and caring you and I really long for.

This book is designed to help you break the pattern, or cycle, of divorce as well—the curse you grew up with—and experience success in life and in marriage. To begin, let’s look at some of the common manifestations of living under the curse in case you have any doubts about whether you’re still under its spell.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION
AND APPLICATION**

1. How well can you relate, as an ACOD, to the word picture of thirsting for life-giving water, water that was cut off by your parents' divorce? Why?
2. In your own words, why are ACODs so prone to repeating their parents' mistakes and getting divorced themselves?
3. How important is it to you that I, though a fellow ACOD, am able to write from the experience of having built a lasting marriage? Why?

