

[00:00:00.730] - Lisa Qualls

Hello, friends. Welcome to episode 198, and this is Lisa today. And I want to spend a few minutes talking about five ways to hold on to your marriage in a hard season. Now, you probably know so full well that parenting at this level, the level that's required of us to love and care for our children who experienced early adversity and developmental trauma, it takes a lot from us, and that can be really hard on a marriage. This particular topic, I'm also talking about grief. And while you may not have experienced grief the way we have with the loss of a child, you probably have experienced some grief and loss in the ways that your life has changed. As your parenting world has gotten so much more complicated, you may have experienced some grief just coping with the gap between what you expected life to be like as an adoptive parent, and the reality of what it is like. And Melissa and I support a lot of adoptive parents, and we see marriages really struggle, we see marriages fail. And so I hope these thoughts that I'm sharing with you today will be helpful.

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My husband, Russ and I are the parents of twelve kids through birth and adoption. While having a big family brings lots of joy, it also means there's a lot of work to be done just to keep us functioning. Some of our children experienced trauma in their early lives, which added many needs to our family. The strain of parenting placed a heavy load on our marriage, and we were not always one another's best supporters. In order to care for so many children, we often had to divide and conquer. Two of our children had medical needs requiring us to travel 300 miles each way to a children's hospital. Often, I would take a few children with me while Russ held down the fort at home. On one trip, our daughter was unexpectedly hospitalized on the inpatient psychiatric unit, and I found myself stuck in a big city with four other kids to care for. I was unbelievably stressed, and I snapped at Russ when we talked on the phone, I felt very alone.

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It was difficult to support one another and feel connected from a distance. I was overwhelmed and I was scared, but my fear, it looked a whole lot like anger. I remember the moment when Russ walked into that hospital room, though. All of my resolve failed, and I fell into his arm sobbing like a child who's been injured, and they finally see their mother and they start crying. That's what this felt like. I had been strong for days, and now he could be strong for me.

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Parenting kids with early adversity and all that comes with it could have done us in. But we held on to Jesus, and for the most part, we held onto each other. But little did we know that these years were preparing us for the hardest year of our marriage yet. On an icy highway in a tangle of metal crushing pain and the loudest, shattering sound you can imagine, our lives changed forever. We lost our 13 year old daughter, Kalkidan, in a tragic car accident. We were injured, in shock and devastated. Our initial instinct was to do what we've done in every other crisis of our lives, wrap around each other, hold on, protect one another, and walk together every step of the way. And we did, until we didn't. Months past, the shock wore off, and grief set in. While we wanted to grieve together, grief has its own rhythm, and it's not the same for everyone, not even husbands and wives who love each other. Russ went back to work far too soon, we agree, and I stayed home. Russ talked to friends and even strangers. I was silent. Russ wanted to be with people. I couldn't bear to be in public. Russ wanted to visit our daughter Kalkidan's burial site, and it terrified me to go there. Russ wanted to choose a statue for her garden. I couldn't think about it because nothing seemed right. The easy flow of our marriage disappeared in this complex maze of loss and pain and grief.

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A friend who had lost his young daughter to cancer told us that 85% of couples who lose a child end up divorcing. I find that statistics sad, yet I understand how it happens. You may not have walked through the darkness of losing a child, but if you're an adoptive parent, you are likely to have experienced losses. The gap between our expectations and our reality can feel more like a canyon sometimes. And there is grieving that needs to be done. While we walked through this dark valley, Russ and I found five practices that helped keep us connected, and I'd love to share them with you.

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Number one, turn to the Lord. He is a sure foundation for your marriage. When the storm rages around you, he is solid. Pray for one another and for your marriage. Remind yourselves of all the times he has been faithful to you and trust Him to carry you through. It may help to write these down even as bullet points, so you can read them over and over again.

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Number two, turn to the Word. There was a period of time after our accident when my brain couldn't focus enough to read. Grief can do that to you, but we can immerse ourselves in the Word in other simple ways. Try listening to an audio version of a familiar book of the Bible. I asked friends to email me their most comforting verses, and then I wrote them on index cards that I tucked in my Bible, put on the kitchen window sill, and taped to my bathroom mirror. Listen to music that is filled with truth from the Word, and let it just soak into you as you go about your life.

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Number three, turn to your people. This is not a time to hold it all together or act like everything is okay. Ask your most trustworthy friends and family to faithfully pray for you and your spouse. In times of crisis, people want to help, and they don't know how. Giving them a specific task will help them as they grieve alongside you. And they can still bring you a meal, too.

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Number four, turn toward each other and not away. I found myself withdrawing from nearly everyone after we lost our daughter. For months, I only left our house for weekly physical therapy. I found it hard to be around people, and I wished I could wrap myself in a blanket and never leave home again. This sense of feeling removed from life made it harder for me to connect with Russ. But a few simple things helped us turn toward each other. Hold each Other. Physical touch and affection are like glue for a marriage. Hold hands, hug, make love, kiss when you greet each other and say goodbye, go to bed together each night. It's so easy to get off schedule when your entire world has fallen apart. If you can't sleep, that's okay. You can get up again. But the simple act of getting ready for bed and lying close is important for connection. Create simple touch points during the day. Words may be too difficult sometimes, but you can find little emojis that means something to you and text them back and forth. When I send Russ a pink tulip, he knows exactly what I mean. Spend time side by side. Take a walk, take a drive, ride bikes, or even sit together and watch a movie. Just spend time being physically close.

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Number five, see a counselor or a spiritual director. Or better yet, see both. You need someone who can guide you through this hard time. Your world may feel as if it has shattered. Let a wise person walk alongside you and help you find your way through. And this is, again, not just if you've gone through the severe loss of facing death, of losing a child, of losing someone you love. This applies toward all of us who are processing the grief and the losses and the changes that come into our lives.

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So here we are, more than 38 years from the day we promised our lives to one another. It's been 16 years since we began our journey of adopting, and it's been seven years since our precious daughter Kalkidan went to be with Jesus. I love rest more than words can say. We've been together since we were 17 years old, and we've weathered so many challenges. Life has been hard, and through it all, our faith in Jesus, our love for one another, the vows we made, and the rings we wear keep us clinging to one another. Can't imagine where we would be without the Lord carrying us through. Friend, if you're in a season of hard, we're with you. Hold on and remember, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part. Lord Jesus, give us strength and joy and have mercy on us. We love you, we trust you, we live and breathe in you. I hope you're encouraged by these words today. Hold on, my friends.