The Story of Marriage
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To our children, their spouses, and our grandchildren, in so many ways you are the reasons our story of marriage was written. We rejoice as we watch each of you rise and love one another so well.

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About This Interactive Book

This book may be read cover to cover, just like any other book. However, we encourage you to explore the optional interactive elements for a more personalized experience:

Each chapter of this book is divided into five suggested daily readings with corresponding devotions at the end of the chapter. You can choose to complete one reading and one devotion per day, or you can adapt these elements to your preference. We suggest that those participating in a group study complete the reading and devotions for one chapter per week.

If you are reading this book as part of the Messenger Series study on *The Story of Marriage*, we recommend that you watch or listen to each week’s teaching session and answer the discussion questions as a group. Then, read the chapter in the book and complete the devotions. There is one teaching session for each chapter in this book. Discussion questions for each chapter are located after the daily devotions.

Enjoy!
You may be asking, “Why another message about marriage?” This was our first reaction as well.

There are three reasons we wrote this book. First, we felt God leading us to. Next, our children and staff asked us to. And finally, many of you requested it as well.

We felt there was an abundance of excellent marriage resources on the market, many of which we have benefited from ourselves. Yet when we looked a bit closer, we noticed a gap. We discovered that a number of these resources were written predominantly from the viewpoint of one spouse or the other. A great marriage is the product of great partnership, so we believe there is value in our being able to share on this topic together.

We also know that every story is different—ours included. We are both, shall we say, strong-willed individuals. We have been married for more than three decades, and during that time, we have faced unique challenges. We realized that because our experiences were unique, our perspective would be as well.

Furthermore, we wanted to encourage men and women to see that marriage is not a mold that confines them. We believe everyone has the creative license to design their marriage as best suits their individual needs and divine purpose. We hope this book helps you discover and write your unique story.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for those preparing to marry, the already married, and anyone who wants to gain a better understanding of marriage.
Because we live in a day when there is so much divorce and distortion, many are afraid to even begin their stories. What you have seen need not define what lies before you.

Then there are those who feel trapped in the middle of a chapter they don’t like. We don’t want you to close the book on your marriage. We want to help you turn the page.

There are also countless friends who believed their love stories would never end, only to discover the pages had been abruptly torn from their lives by divorce or the loss of a spouse. Your story isn’t over.

This is not a comprehensive book discussing every facet of marriage. Volumes could be written on the subject, and we don’t have all the answers. Yet we decided to pen our story—including many of our most broken moments—because we know what we have lived and believe it will help others.

Finally, Jesus still thinks marriage is a story worth telling. It is His framework for how He loves us. We pray these pages stir faith, hope, and love in both the single and married, both the young and the well along in years. We dare you to dream again!
The Original Plan

The Lord God made all sorts of trees grow up from the ground—trees that were beautiful and that produced delicious fruit. In the middle of the garden he placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

—Genesis 2:9

Day 1

Once upon a time, there was a garden wrapped around two trees. As you may already know, this was no ordinary garden. It existed free of struggle and decay. Rivers traversed Eden’s landscape, supplying pure, crystalline water to all that inhabited the garden.

We can only imagine the magnificence of the trees that grew in such an environment. Each was a flawless symbol of life rooted in rich soil, awakened by cascading water, and nourished by radiant—yet tempered—sunshine. There were many trees in the garden, but Scripture only mentions two: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Both of these trees enjoyed the same immaculate and uncontaminated conditions—a state of existence that this fallen earth could never replicate. Yet one tree spawned life, the other death.
The story of marriage

You have probably heard this tale before, for every story of marriage has its origin with these two trees of Eden. In so many ways, our marriages can be likened to trees of life. Marriages grow at different rates in different seasons and do best when anchored by mature roots. They experience both fruit-bearing and barren years, as well as years of exceptional growth and others when growth is stunted. Each marriage is affected by its native climate, varying seasons, and buffeting storms, yet marriage offers shelter from life’s ever-changing winds.

The image on this book’s cover provides a glimpse into the life of a tree. What we see in this collection of rings is actually the story of the tree’s life—the fingerprint of its journey.

In school, many of us learned basic dendrology (the study of woody plants) and can roughly determine the age of a tree by counting its rings. While the two of us might be proficient at counting a tree’s rings, we are far from being dendrologists (although we do love a good tree). In addition to a tree’s exact age, experts of tree lore could provide us with intimate details of a tree’s life simply by observing its cross section. To the trained eye, each ring is a story. The varying band widths tell if the tree experienced a mild or exceptionally harsh winter, revealing patterns of drought or abundant rain. A close inspection would reveal incidents of injury and attacks of pestilence. Each ring is a year of seasons, circular in fashion and unique in nature.

Each year of marriage could be likened to the path of a tree ring: circular in fashion and unique in nature. Anniversaries note the end of one year and the beginning of the next. The annual date is explicitly marked, but the months, weeks, and days that fill the calendar year are a collection of joy, pain, work, and even surprises.
As you begin this journey with us, remember that your story (or future story) is just that: it is yours. Every life and marriage is a collection of joys, victories, and challenges. For too long, much of the Church has been content to offer generic prescriptions for the problems ailing our marriages. We’ve heard, “Wives, submit. Husbands, love.” Although there is truth and value in this, frankly, there is no one-size-fits-all guide to building a marriage, because each marriage comes with its own unique fingerprint.

Let’s look at it this way. The blueprints for every home include a foundation, supporting walls, and a roof, but the architect has the creative freedom to vary the design according to the specific needs and desires of its inhabitants. So it is with our marriages. We are granted the creative license to design them so they will be best suited to us. Each domain should look different and have the freedom to vary with the seasons of life. In our marriage, for example, we are moving into a time in which parenting will no longer be our dominant household role. This means it won’t be long before our house will not need as many bedrooms as it has in the past. Such change in our marriages is as natural as the changing of seasons. All of this is normal.

There are universal, eternal truths and values that will propel your marriage into everything God has called it to be. God wants each marriage to be built with love, respect, joy, submission, provision, faithfulness, nurture, intimacy, and legacy—to name a few. But the way these building blocks are expressed in your life will reflect the uniqueness of your personality and the season of your marriage. God outlines the major principles but leaves room for your expression in the particulars.

God loves diversity. One glance at creation will confirm this. We want to make it clear from the start that we do not believe all couples
fit into a generic marriage mold. In our day, more often than not both spouses work outside the home (in 2012, nearly 60% of working age women in the United States were active in the labor force), and a wife might earn more than her husband. Her ability to produce income does not mean that she is not submissive or that he is not a leader. It simply means that both are contributing to the household income, which means their marriage most likely looks different than their grandparents’ did.

Our marriage does. We both work and we are both leaders outside of our marriage. Sometimes we work together (as with this book), sometimes we work apart, but the goal of our marriage and our underlying values do not waver. The husband and wife relationship roles do not vary with our ability to produce income.

In that first garden, God told both Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. He did not say that Eve was to stay home and manage Adam’s multiplication. The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 was an amazing household manager and entrepreneur. If that is what sounds right for your marriage, do it! Or one of you may want to stay home full-time— with children or without them. There is nothing wrong with either of these approaches.

At first it seems natural to assume that what has worked so well for others will work well for all. But we are in unique days with unique challenges on every front. We want your marriage strong. This means you must have the freedom to build the marriage of your dreams, not the marriage of someone else’s dreams.

We encourage you to take a moment to ask God’s Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth, to reveal how His eternal truths can transform your marriage into a specialized union—the one He designed just for you before the beginning of time.
Day 2

When Your Story Is Challenged

The number of years in a journey doesn’t tell its full story. A marriage of fifty years might be fifty years of hardship or fifty years of perpetual bliss. But more often than not, marriage is a collage of varying and diverse seasons.

When we look at the image of the tree on this book’s cover, it is evident that every ring increases the diameter of the tree. Regardless of whether a year was one of difficulty or abundance, it added breadth to the story and meaning to the journey. Would John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—a book that has been in print for over three centuries—be an enduring masterpiece if Christian (the story’s main character) had arrived at the Celestial City (his destination) without experiencing the Slough of Despond or triumphing over the giant Despair? Without the complex weaving of joys and challenges, his story would be boring and uneventful. The perils Christian endures and overcomes are what make his story worth reading. The challenges in our marriages have the potential to infuse our stories with similar excitement and meaning.

Don’t despise moments of discouragement. Use them to draw on the grace of God and discover His divine strength that will defy the limits of your emotional and spiritual capacity. Over the course of more than three decades of marriage, we’ve discovered that the very moments that seemed to be the darkest later became beacons to light our way. They compelled us to rise up and take a stand. Your current struggles can become some of the greatest moments in your story.
The Spirit of Marriage

Before we dive into the story of marriage, let’s take a moment to explore its purpose. There is no doubt that marriage is wonderful, but at times it is a painful process. Most of us tend to have a lot more patience with the pain of a process if we understand its purpose. For instance, you can endure a couple of hours in a dentist’s chair if you know the procedure will accomplish the purpose of eradicating an incessant toothache. In your marriage, you have probably experienced days that feel more like time in a dentist’s chair than a stroll on a beach (and if you haven’t yet, you will). It’s in those painful moments that an awareness of your purpose is most vital.

Today the purpose of marriage is in question, and because many people don’t understand the purpose of their unions, they are quick to jump ship when turbulent waters rock their boats. Others argue that the entire institution of marriage is more broken than whole and it needs to be renegotiated or expunged. Some even suggest that marriage contracts should be limited to a predetermined length of time—forever is too much to expect of any of us, it seems. These people argue that it is unrealistic to make decisions about how we’re going to feel twenty years from now when we can hardly control how we’re going to feel tomorrow.

In the well-known song “Ms. Jackson,” hip-hop group OutKast expressed a popular sentiment:

Me and your daughter
Got a special thing going on
You say it’s puppy love
We say it’s full grown
Hope that we feel this, feel this way forever
You can plan a pretty picnic
But you can’t predict the weather
“Ms. Jackson” is a man’s apology to the mother of a young girl he impregnated but no longer feels love toward. Sadly, this song perfectly reflects a prevalent view of love and marriage: they’re supposed to make me feel good. This perspective is based on the beliefs that our emotions tell us what is right and wrong and that we are incapable of managing them. If I don’t feel happy, then obviously I have to make a change. After all, I can’t control how I feel any more than I can control the changing of the seasons. Or as OutKast puts it, you can plan a pretty picnic but you can’t predict the weather.

There are others who want the definition of marriage to adapt with the times. They ask, “Why can’t we be more flexible? If this institution is going to survive, it needs to expand to include unions between a man and a man or a woman and a woman.” Certain celebrities are even refusing to get married until the parameters of marriage have been renegotiated. (To be clear, each marriage should always be growing and adapting, but the definition and participants of marriage do not change.)

So to whom should we listen? Who has the right to define—or redefine—marriage? Who has the credentials to tell us how marriage should impact our lives?

We believe that God is the only One who holds this right. His Word declares:

God, not you, made marriage. His Spirit inhabits even the smallest details of marriage. ...So guard the spirit of marriage within you. (Malachi 2:15 The Message)

This verse leaves no room for doubt: “God, not you, made marriage.” Not only did He create marriage, but He is also personally involved in the process of two people becoming one. Every marriage is made up of many different elements, some simple and some wildly complex,
yet God quickens (or brings life to) marriage’s most intimate details by His Spirit.

Notice that Malachi 2:15 says, “[God’s] Spirit inhabits even the smallest details of marriage.” In other words, God allows us creative expression in marriage, but He retains all Creator rights as to what it is and whom it includes. Marriage cannot be recreated without His consent and participation, and He is clear on foundational issues: “I am the Lord, and I do not change” (Malachi 3:6).

Back Again to Eden

Let’s head back to the garden. Remember the two trees? One of them, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was the only tree whose fruit was forbidden to Adam and Eve. God warned that if they ate its fruit, they would die. But something about the tree caused them to turn a deaf ear to God’s warning and partake of the forbidden fruit.

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom…

(Genesis 3:6 NIV, emphasis added)

Certainly many trees in this garden were good for food and pleasant to look at. But a tree whose fruit had the power to elevate one to the status of God was quite another thing. Eve thought there was something more than what she had already been given. We find it amazing that the woman would grasp at something she was not to have (equality with God) and in the process lose something she already had the potential to possess (wisdom).
Adam and Eve desired to be like God apart from His influence and authority. They grasped at a role that was not theirs to take. This stands in stark contrast to the choice made by one of their descendants:

[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped… (Philippians 2:6 NIV)

Adam and Eve were made in the image of God, but not equal to Him. The image of something speaks of a reflection, not a representation in its entirety. The false promise of equality with God caused the man and woman to think they were receiving something, when in actuality they both lost. They did not receive wisdom; they accepted a deception.²

The deceived and disobedient couple was banished from the garden. They would never again have access to the fruit found on the tree of life. Without this living fruit, Adam and Eve were doomed to mortality. They died, and their garden is long gone. Yet in a way they live, because we are their offspring. Men and women no longer have individual immortality on this earth, but marriage is a way for life to continue through reproduction.

The good news is that the cross of Christ is now our ultimate tree of life. It restores everything that was lost in the garden. And a godly marriage can serve as a life-perpetuating tree. It provides the necessary framework for both legacy and intimacy. This is why it is so important to God that we honor marriage, guard its spirit, and love each other well.

It doesn’t take a relationship guru to tell us something significant has been lost in translation between the garden and now. Many marriages are the opposite of a life-perpetuating tree. Divorce, adultery, disappointment, unhappiness, and offense ravage our marriages and homes. Because of these lapses in love, many do not understand the purpose of marriage—or why they’d even want to marry. Others who
are married are just trying to survive the crossfire. To them, marriage isn’t a safe haven. It’s a war zone.

Day 3

The Source of Love

…”The Gentiles blaspheme the name of God because of you.”
(Romans 2:24)

When we, the Body of Christ, do not live and love well, people will blaspheme the name of God. This isn’t surprising, for if we call ourselves “Christian,” we claim to be ambassadors of Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote:

For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ’s ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ… (2 Corinthians 5:19-20)

An ambassador is an authorized messenger or representative. As Christians, we speak for Christ. What a privilege! We have been invited, even charged, to participate in God’s ministry of reconciliation. We speak for God with our words and actions. This is our purpose in life. We are co-laborers with God who advance His kingdom on the earth.

So what has Christ asked us, His ambassadors, to do? Jesus said, “So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other” (John 13:34).
Thankfully this mission is not something we must accomplish through our own willpower. Scripture makes it clear that to fulfill our purpose, we must first be in Christ—heirs of His grace through His saving work on the cross. Only then can we operate in the transforming power of His Spirit, and only then can we love one another as He loves us.

Under the new covenant of grace, God never gives us a command that He will not empower us to fulfill. Because we are in Christ, His Spirit will enable our marriages and individual lives to reveal His presence and love to the world. However, we cannot reveal His love until we first experience it for ourselves. In Ephesians 3:16-19, Paul offers the key to receiving the power of Christ’s love:

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. (emphasis added)

In order to receive the revelation of Christ’s love, we first have to allow God to empower us with inner strength through His Spirit. But this cannot happen if you have not surrendered your life to Him. Once your life is His, you will have the opportunity to continually grow in His love, a journey that will ultimately lead to a full and whole life. (To learn more about surrendering your life to Christ, see page 243.)

Just two verses after Paul wrote about the power that comes from knowing Christ’s love, he explained this power’s purpose:
Therefore I...beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3, emphasis added)

Notice Paul wrote, “lead a life worthy of your calling.” Again, he is speaking of our purpose: to reveal God’s love, truth, and way of life (His kingdom) to the world. None of this is possible without an experiential knowledge of God’s love. Theoretical knowledge won’t do. Only when we possess personal experience of God’s love are we empowered to build lives—and marriages—worthy of our callings.

In this passage, Paul described certain behavioral patterns that sound a lot like marriage best practices: be humble, be gentle, be patient, make allowances for each other’s faults, and make every effort to keep yourselves united in peace. It’s no coincidence that in the very next chapter of Ephesians, we find some of the Bible’s most famous verses on marriage. (Remember, chapter and verse designations were added by the church in the thirteenth century and did not appear in Paul’s original letter.) Could it be that in Ephesians 1-4, Paul was preparing the hearts of his readers for what he was about to share—radical truths about marriage that would require radical knowledge of the love of God?

So here’s the progression: Before you can love well (whether it be your spouse or anyone else), you must first discover the depths of God’s love for you. Your knowledge of God’s love cannot be based on second-hand information; you have to experience it for yourself. When you experience the love of Christ, “you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.” Only then can you lead a life worthy of your calling. The power for living and loving well comes from intimate knowledge of God’s immense love for you.
The Purpose of Marriage

If your individual purpose is to be a representation of Christ on the earth, what is the purpose of your marriage?

Let’s start with this: God is love. Love isn’t just something God does. It’s not just something He has. It’s who He is. Marriage is an institution of love, the first institution God established. Not only is marriage the first institution established by God, it is also the poetic symbolism that He uses to represent the depths of His love for and commitment to us, His Church and bride. The bride and groom are a picture of the Church and Christ.

Because of this profound symbolism, there is an even deeper, darker intent behind the assault against marriage, a motive too few recognize. The attacks against marriage—its definition, designation, and divine roots—are about more than politics or social progress. Scripture makes it clear that we do not merely wrestle with flesh and blood, that our adversary is not a government or organization (see Ephesians 6:12). There is an ancient foe—the enemy of our souls—working behind the scenes to twist and pervert the divine merger. He will not stop attacking marriage until he has utterly distorted our frame of reference for the way God loves and relates to His people. The last thing Satan wants is for us to discover and receive God’s transforming love. But by the grace of God, we can defeat our foe and embrace everything that God desires in and for our marriages.

What Does Jesus Think?

Not only did God make marriage; He also has a plan and purpose for it that hasn’t changed. Although the debate about the particulars of marriage has been a hot topic for thousands of years, He still stands
firmly behind His original plan. Look at what Jesus said to the Pharisees in one of His most famous conversations concerning marriage:

One day the Pharisees were badgering him: “Is it legal for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?”

He answered, “Haven’t you read in your Bible that the Creator originally made man and woman for each other, male and female? And because of this, a man leaves father and mother and is firmly bonded to his wife, becoming one flesh—no longer two bodies but one. Because God created this organic union of the two sexes, no one should desecrate his art by cutting them apart.” (Matthew 19:3-6 The Message)

The Pharisees were content to know what was legal, but Jesus wanted them to comprehend the power of love.

We can’t deny the fact that God originally planned men and women for each other. In marriage, they leave their parents to form living unions. Once the two sexes are joined, no one should sever their merger.

Why Does God Care about Divorce?

*The Message* calls divorce a desecration of God’s art. It’s the fact that marriage is God’s art—something He created—that makes divorce such a big deal.

To *desecrate* is to treat something sacred with violent disrespect. Synonyms of *desecrate* include words like *blaspheme*, *malign*, *defile*, *vandalize*, *insult*, and *violate*. These extreme terms all convey a sense of violence. We have referenced *The Message* paraphrase, but every
translation conveys the weightiness of dividing what God has united. And through proper contextual study, we can safely deduce that Jesus is speaking of all marriages.\footnote{5}

Can you imagine how the world would respond if someone desecrated Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*? Every news outlet would pick up the story. The perpetrator would be condemned by society and would probably spend the remainder of his or her life in prison. How could anyone dare to desecrate one of humanity’s greatest works of art? Leonardo would roll over in his grave.

Well, God views marriage as one of the greatest works of art to be expressed through His favorite creation. His passion for marriage is evident in Jesus’ response to the Pharisees. They found His words too great for them to handle, so they simply refused to answer Him. Unable to comprehend marriage in light of God’s original intent, they hid behind the Law of Moses—an approach that gave them the license to leave rather than the empowerment to stay.

They shot back in rebuttal, “If that’s so, why did Moses give instructions for divorce papers and divorce procedures?”

Jesus said, “Moses provided for divorce as a concession to your hard heartedness, but it is not part of God’s original plan. I’m holding you to the original plan, and holding you liable for adultery if you divorce your faithful wife and then marry someone else. I make an exception in cases where the spouse has committed adultery.” (Matthew 19:7-9 The Message)

Under the Law of Moses, concessions were made because of the hardness of the human heart. This was a provision, not God’s original purpose. Make no mistake; God hates the effects of divorce. When a
husband and wife are separated, one of the mysteries of God’s creation (as marriage is described in Ephesians 5:31-32) is violated and torn apart.

Day 4

A New Heart

...“I’m holding you to the original plan, and holding you liable for adultery if you divorce your faithful wife and then marry someone else...” (Matthew 19:9 The Message)

Again, Jesus will never ask us to do something that He will not enable us to accomplish. He holds us to God’s original plan for marriage because He is willing to equip us to live it. The Law of Moses made allowances for the hardhearted, but through Jesus’ sacrifice we receive new hearts born of the Spirit rather than of stone.

“...I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.” (Ezekiel 36:26)

We see this echoed in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul encouraged us with these words:

...We know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. (Romans 5:5)

This newness of heart is not something we can muster. It’s dependent on God’s power and the might of His love. We are, however, responsible to humble ourselves and accept that power. Keep in mind that God
will never force His love on you. He is a gentleman who never imposes Himself on us.

Because we have new hearts, ones capable of receiving Christ’s love, we can now embrace Jesus’ daunting statement on God’s original plan for marriage and divorce.

*The Message* uses the word *liable* (meaning “responsible by law; legally answerable”) to describe the state of someone who divorces a faithful spouse. We know this may sound like a tall order, but if God holds us to this standard, He is more than willing to give us the grace to fulfill it. But because the journey isn’t easy or automatic, too many opt out exactly when they should press in.

According to one study, two out of three unhappily married couples will become happy with their marriages within five years, provided they don’t divorce.7 So don’t give up! We don’t know the state of your marriage at this moment, but even if you feel helpless, there is hope. Your breakthrough may be just around the corner. Jesus came to make good marriages better and broken marriages whole.*

**The Exception**

…”I make an exception in cases where the spouse has committed adultery.” (Matthew 19:9 The Message)

Jesus made it clear that there is an exception to the original plan. Even in the case of adultery, however, ending a marriage is a matter of choice. If your spouse has been unfaithful, you don’t have to stay, but you also don’t have to leave. Whichever course you choose, you do have to forgive.

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*You should never stay in a situation that is dangerous to you or your children. If there is abuse in your marriage, please take immediate action to stay safe. Contact your church or local authorities for further support and guidance.*
There is a vast difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. You should forgive someone who robs from you, but that does not mean you have to invite the thief into your home. Reconciliation is only possible if a couple can be restored to a place of oneness after a grievous breach of covenant, faith, and trust.

We have never suffered the breach of adultery, but we have stood by friends who experienced its horrors. Some of these couples chose to embrace reconciliation. They did the hard work of repairing the broken pieces of their covenant. In each case, the unfaithful spouse came to a place of brokenness and repentance. Let us be clear: there cannot be reconciliation without repentance. Even God, in His infinite kindness and mercy, requires us to repent—to have a change of mind and heart—before we are reconciled to Him.

We have also known couples who couldn’t reconcile. They need not feel a weight of condemnation. Jesus understood the gravity of the betrayal and made a necessary concession. We’ve watched God bless these friends as they recovered from divorce’s wake.

If you have suffered a divorce, we encourage you not to allow it to define you. It is a part of your past, but it does not have to determine the landscape of your future.

The past is not yours. It belongs to God. The enemy of your soul will try to use your past to thwart God’s plans for your future. Remember that God has given you today and that the choices you make today will shape your tomorrow—not your yesterday. If you’ve made poor choices, embrace the wisdom and power of God. Humble yourself through repentance and experience the wonders of His grace, which has the power to transform the bleakest of circumstances.
Am I Stuck?

Jesus’ description of God’s design for marriage must have been a radical departure from the norm. Rather than inspire His disciples, His words stressed them out. Look at their complaint:

Jesus’ disciples objected, “If those are the terms of marriage, we’re stuck. Why get married?” (Matthew 19:10 The Message, emphasis added)

Stuck? What a terrible perspective of married life! Yet, like the disciples, many of us view marriage as constricting and confining. How many single men and women are plagued by the fear of marrying the wrong person and getting stuck?

What we have learned is that marriage is not as much about finding the right person as it is about being the right person. Don’t get us wrong, when searching for a spouse, it is important to seek godly counsel and the peace of the Spirit. But too often we believe Mr. or Ms. Right will miraculously fill all the gaping holes in our lives. No human being is up for that task. It’s a role only God can fill. And you can’t manage the condition of anyone else, reforming them into exactly what you think you need. What you can do is embrace God’s process of refinement and become a man or woman who selflessly lays down your life for your current or future spouse. In the process of laying down your life, you will discover more fulfillment than if you’d sought your own interests.

Matthew 6:22 says that the light of the body is the eye. This means that your perceptions will be your reality. An “I’m stuck” outlook will limit what God can do in and through your marriage. If you perceive your marriage as a trap of hopelessness, that’s what it will become. Your
natural circumstances will ultimately be determined by your spiritual vision, and marriage is no exception.

You might be thinking, *John and Lisa, you’re asking too much. You want me to lay down my life for my spouse? That’s ridiculous. What about my needs, hopes, and dreams? Jesus wants me to be happy. What you’ve shared is just a nice thought, something to aspire to.* We can assure you, God does want you to be happy—but true happiness is the byproduct of a greater pursuit. Happiness comes from fulfilling a higher purpose, and any worthy purpose will require you to lay down your life. In the eradication of selfishness, we find true happiness. Marriage provides the perfect environment for this faceoff with self-centeredness.

“If two spouses,” write Timothy and Kathy Keller, “*each say, ‘I’m going to treat my self-centeredness as the main problem in the marriage,’ you have the prospect of a truly great marriage.*” Self-centeredness keeps us from enjoying great marriages, which means the sacrifice of self is the key to enjoying marriage in its fullness. If you are struggling in your relationship with your spouse, self-centeredness is probably the source of the problem.

Day 5

The Largeness of Marriage

But Jesus said, “Not everyone is mature enough to live a married life. It requires a certain aptitude and grace. Marriage isn’t for everyone. Some, from birth seemingly, never give marriage a thought. Others never get asked—or accepted. And some decide not to get married for kingdom reasons. But if you’re capable of growing into the largeness of marriage, do it.” (Matthew 19:11-12 The Message, emphasis added)
While the disciples were focused on feeling stuck, Jesus was making a statement that had the potential to increase the limits of their existence. Jesus doesn’t see marriage as a trap. He sees it as something that can *enlarge* your life.

It may seem that marriage diminishes the number and value of its participants; after all, isn’t it two becoming one? Rather than diminishing or dividing, however, marriage causes increase. When two become one, there is multiplication in every area of life. Not until the creation of Eve could God give Adam the command to be fruitful and multiply—a decree that wasn’t limited to making babies. The true potential of multiplication in marriage is impossible to quantify and too expansive to measure.

We can assure you that you wouldn’t be reading this book (or any book by either of us) if it wasn’t for our marriage. We would have lived small lives. I (John) am who I am today because of the grace of God and because of His gift of Lisa Bevere. Has our marriage always been easy? Absolutely not! But God has used our marriage to enlarge my life in every way.

I (Lisa) feel the exact same way and am so thankful for the way God has expanded my life through my husband. When we were first married, I was terrified of people, largely due to insecurity over having lost an eye to cancer when I was five. John knew my fear yet spoke to the gift of God on my life anyway. His encouragement helped release me into God’s plan and a larger life, which to my surprise has involved a lot of ministry to people.

As we mentioned, when God charged us to multiply, He wasn’t just talking about making babies. God realized that the joining of the man and woman (what appears to be the simple addition of *one plus one*) would create the opportunity for great multiplication. This principle holds true in every area of life: your career, your family life, your spiritual life, and more. In marriage, God has given us something that can
THE STORY OF MARRIAGE

push back our boundaries. If your life lacks blessing and multiplication, it’s time to stop striving and start honoring and adoring your spouse.

It’s Not Easy

A good military strategist will tell you that a significant element of every great battle plan is an intimate knowledge of the enemy and his schemes. (Why do you think football teams spend so much time watching video of their opponents’ games?) When the enemy attacks marriages, especially Christian marriages, his intention is to divide and conquer. This knowledge should give us the motivation to withstand his schemes.

When we fight for our marriages, we are fighting for a God idea. Remember: God, not you, made marriage. Satan hates marriage because it’s much more than a sexual connection—it’s a spiritual union. Because your marriage possesses such significance, it will encounter opposition. But you must press on to reach the prize (see Philippians 3:14). Jesus never said it would be easy. In fact, He challenged us with these words:

…“Not everyone is mature enough to live a married life. It requires a certain aptitude and grace.” (Matthew 19:11 The Message)

A big part of maturation is the willingness to grow and learn. In his book Sacred Marriage, author Gary Thomas writes, “If you want to become more like Jesus, I can’t imagine any better thing to do than to get married. Being married forces you to face some character issues you’d never have to face otherwise.” Jesus made it clear that married life is going to expose our immaturities, but if we’re willing to grow in His grace (which requires humility, selflessness, and patience), we will eventually enjoy the largeness of marriage.
Contract or Covenant

People often view a marriage covenant as a contract. This is a problem. A contract is simply an agreement that is created to restrict movement. It implicitly says, “These are the boundaries. You will not break this agreement. If you violate our terms, then I have the right to get out of this.” In other words, I’m not stuck.

Contract is also a verb, one the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as “to reduce by squeezing or forcing together.” That doesn’t sound anything like what Jesus called the largeness of marriage. Marriage is supposed to enlarge our lives, not make them smaller.

God doesn’t view marriage as a mere contract; He sees it as a spiritual covenant. It’s an agreement that exclaims, “I am giving all of me to all of you. Everything I am and everything I have is yours, and everything you have is now mine. Everything we do will be multiplied, enlarged, and increased because of this beautiful exchange.” Covenant gladly proclaims, “I’m stuck! And I’m happy about it!” That’s enlargement.

Paul told the Ephesians:

Husbands…love your wives, just as Christ loved the church…
(Ephesians 5:25, emphasis added)

Paul encouraged husbands to love their wives just as Christ loves the Church. This love is a covenant love that’s much more than a contract. Husbands, aren’t you glad that Jesus loves you even when you aren’t very loveable? Aren’t you glad that Jesus never views His relationship with you as just a contract, something He’s “stuck” in? Our goal must be to imitate Jesus’ love in our responses and attitudes toward our brides. (Paul doesn’t stop there, by the way. He goes on to tell us to forfeit our lives for our wives. What a command!)
Keep in mind that in Ephesians 3, shortly before he wrote these words, Paul described the depth of God’s love for His people. Only two chapters later, he commanded that the same kind of love be found within our marriages—that we love “just as Christ loved the church.”

Our marriages are meant to model Christ’s love for His Bride. Why would those who don’t know Jesus want to be in relationship with Him if the relationships between His people are void of love, power, harmony, and commitment? Are you seeing why your marriage is so important? It’s not just about you. It’s about God’s longing to reach the world with His love.

As we previously shared, true love for your spouse must be an overflow of receiving God’s love for you. A love this profound cannot be fabricated. It must be received from the One whose love defies human understanding.

We will be the first to tell you that God’s approach to marriage is not easy. There have been times in our marriage when we would have preferred to cut ties. It seemed like all hope was gone. But after being married for over thirty years, we are happier today than we’ve ever been, and we look forward to the next thirty years with hope and expectation.

A Tree of Life or a Tree of Death?

I (Lisa) love to garden, but John doesn’t share my interest. He enjoys what the garden produces but not the toil it requires. Gardens are a lot of work, and they demand a lot of time. Fortunately for John, we live a few minutes from Whole Foods, so he doesn’t need to get his hands dirty.

Much like gardening, cultivating a marriage requires a lot of time and energy. If we want our marriages to be healthy, there is no fast food option that will allow us to circumvent the necessary work, which is a good thing. Why? Because we value what we work for, and we need to value our marriages.
The good (and sometimes bad) news is that everything you plant in your marriage, you will harvest in different areas of your life. Earlier in this chapter, we explored the concept of our marriages as trees of life. The converse is also true. Your marriage can also be a tree of death.

Let’s revisit our description of the two Eden trees:

Both of these trees enjoyed the same immaculate and uncontaminated conditions. Yet one tree spawned life, the other death.

God’s institution of marriage is like soil, and your current or future marriage is like a tree. The original plan for marriage is good ground in which your union can grow, but the choice is yours: Will your marriage be a tree that produces life? Will your spouse, family, friends, and coworkers experience love, joy, and peace through its nourishment? Or will it offer discouragement, selfishness, and bitterness to those who eat its fruit?

Many of us have viewed the institution of marriage itself as the source of our problems. Others have sought to blame their spouses. Both perspectives expose a refusal to acknowledge and address the depravity of our own hearts. We hope this is no longer the case for you.

Before you continue this journey, a decision must be made. You must choose to believe that your marriage can and will become everything God has destined it to be.

Maybe you’re inclined to think, I’ll believe it when I see it. But belief in change always precedes the evidence of change, for all of God’s promises are received by faith. The good news is that your marriage is not about you—it’s all about Him. All you have to do is get over yourself and let God be God. After all, your marriage is His work of art. If you let Him, He will transform it into a beautiful masterpiece.
End of sample.
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