Preparing for your Marriage



Drs. Claudio and Pamela Consuegra

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DRS. CLAUDIO AND PAMELA CONSUEGRA


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Preface

If you are reading this book, it is probably because you are ready to look for someone to spend your life with, you are wondering whether the person you are currently dating may be the one, or you are already engaged to be married. In either case, we are delighted that you are willing to dedicate your time to learn how to ensure your marriage will be the kind of relationship that endures the test of time and honors God.

For nearly three decades, we have worked with couples in marriage preparation by using a tool called Prepare/Enrich. It is one of the most widely used marital preparation tools not only in the United States and Canada but also in many other countries of the world. Through Prepare/Enrich, a trained facilitator works with the couple to teach them and help them improve some of the most important relational skills. The online assessment will identify your strengths as a couple and show you areas where you need to grow.

Please understand that this book is not meant to take the place of Prepare/Enrich or working with a trained facilitator. Rather, the purpose of this resource is to serve as a supplement to that process and be one more tool a couple may use to prepare for their lifetime together.

We encourage you to read this book together as a couple and talk about what you are reading. Also, throughout this book, you will discover several activities to do together as a couple. It is important that you do not skip over them because they will provide rich insights and opportunities to grow.

May God bless you as you prepare to take one of the most important steps in your life—joining your life to another in the loving ties of marriage. It is our prayer that God will direct and guide you to a covenant relationship that will last a lifetime!

Yours because of Him,

Claudio Consuegra, DMin
Pamela Consuegra, PhD

Chapter 1

Preparing for Your Marriage

He who finds a wife finds what is good
and receives favor from the LORD.
—Proverbs 18:22, NIV

Before you say, "I do," there comes a time of searching and dreaming about the one with whom you will spend your life. But how do we go about finding that special someone? Do we sit back and wait for them to walk into our life, or do we go out in search of them? Does it often seem as if you are looking for love in all the wrong places? Does Mr. or Ms. Right seem like an extinct species? Perhaps you have cried, you have prayed, and you have done everything you can think of to find your partner in life, and yet, the void is still unfilled.

Have you ever considered the possibility that perhaps you are going about this search for a mate all wrong? We invite you to suspend the search long enough to read this chapter because you may need to approach a few things differently from now on.

Looking for love

Are you currently looking for love? The paradox is that the grass is greener on the other side of the marital fence. While many singles are seeking a spouse, many who are married are seeking to be single again. Perhaps if we got the initial part of the process right, our marriages would last a lifetime. For many, desperation sets in, and they give up some of their dreams and aspirations and settle for anyone who comes along. A pastor friend of ours used to say that when a girl is about

fourteen (some even younger than that), she starts to make a list of the qualities she would like her future spouse to have. He will be tall, dark, and handsome; someone with a good education; hair of this or that color; eyes of this or that color; from a good family; a spiritual man, serious, but with a good sense of humor; spontaneous, but a good planner; a good listener but also well-spoken; not necessarily rich, but definitely not dirt poor … , and the list goes on and on. But as the years go by and she finds herself still not married, that list gets shorter and shorter. By the time she reaches the age of thirty-five or forty, desperation sets in, and her list has come down to just two items: warm and breathing!

While we may laugh at this exaggerated view of a young, unmarried woman, it is not too far-fetched. Through the years, we have met women who are so desperate to get married that they are willing to bend the rules, make compromises, abandon principles, ignore the red flags, and accept anyone, no matter how questionable, problematic, or even dangerous that decision may be. We have met them and talked with them before they said "I do," and we have met many that have lived to regret that decision.

Not too long ago, we received a letter at our office. Since we are the Family Ministries directors and marriage and family professionals, one gentleman thought perhaps we could assist him in his search for a wife by playing the role of "matchmaker." In his letter, he proceeded to share with us a list of what we were to search for. This is what the list contained: ruby red lips (yes, this was on there), long silken hair of gold, hourglass-shaped body, clear complexion, beautiful eyes, obedient to her husband, hard worker, gourmet cook, loves children, and a woman of faith. We must admit, it was hard for us to get past the first item on his list—ruby red lips! Yes, all these were on his list of "must haves." Needless to say, we declined his request to assist him in finding such a woman and invited him to continue his own search. If he stuck to that list, there is no doubt that he is still searching!

Things to consider

Here are some of our thoughts and things we share as we speak with single adults:

Be Mr. or Ms. Right yourself. "Finding the right [person] is not going to change you into a better person than you already are. If you are lazy

and self-centered, finding a generous, hardworking [mate] is not going to transform you. If you are a boring one-dimensional person, finding an intellectually challenging [mate] is not going to change who you are."[1] You must be the best person first! Pray that God will reveal things to you that need changing, and commit to making those changes. "No man [or woman], no matter how right he [or she] is, is going to make you happy [if you are not already content]. You will only be happy in your new relationship if you are happy with yourself first. **Happiness comes from within**."[2] Be healthy in all areas of your life—spiritually, physically, emotionally, socially, financially—before you seek to join your life with someone else.

Define what you are looking for in a spouse. What is important to you in a spouse? Define what that looks like, but be realistic. Some qualities to consider may include common faith values, similar interests, financial health, emotional health, career goals, or family goals. What kind of person would draw you closer to Jesus and help you be ready for heaven? What you choose today will impact the rest of your life (and eternity), so choose wisely.

"*Examine past mistakes in relationships*. Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it. Forgive yourself. Our heavenly Father opens His arms wide to welcome us back after we have made mistakes. We can change and grow and become new creatures in Christ Jesus."[3] It's important to own and admit our past relationship mistakes so that they are not repeated in the future.

"Look in places where you would expect to find persons of value." [4] Have you been looking for love in all the wrong places? "If you want a man of faith you will be more apt to find him in church than in a bar or club."[5] And we must add a comment about looking for love online. Yes, there may be those of you reading this book who know someone who truly found the love of their life online. But in today's technology world, we are surrounded by too many tales of scam artists, people pretending to be someone they aren't, people attempting to take your money, and worse. There is still no better way to develop a relationship than by spending quality time together, face to face.

Don't expect perfection. Just like you, they will make mistakes. "Relax a little and stop being so picky. … If you are looking for [perfection] you should know that Jesus is not available for dates. Allow for human frailty. Look beyond physical attractiveness, and look for a

strong God fearing man [or woman] with a good heart."[6] After all, let's be honest, are you perfect?

Seek godly counsel. Surround yourself with people who will pray with and for you as you seek God's will in a lifetime partner. Listen to godly counsel. Seek out the advice of matriarchs and patriarchs in your faith community. There are times when others see what we fail to see, so we must be open to the godly wisdom of others.

Does this person draw you closer to Jesus? What kind of person are you in the presence of this person? Do you compromise your spiritual beliefs? Does this person draw you closer to Jesus or push you further away from Him?

Remain prayerful and patient. "It may take time to discover the one God has for you. In His time, He will answer your prayer. Keep praying and know that He is looking out for your best interests.

Now that you have been reminded of the guidelines related to the search, how do you know when you have found Mr. or Ms. Right? When do you consider the search to be over?

Blinded by the light: Don't believe in fairytales

Driving on a country road in the middle of the night and during certain times of the year can be a treacherous experience. When deer are preparing for winter or during the mating season, they wander around looking for love or food and find themselves in the path of oncoming traffic. As they often stand in the middle of the road, you would think that the lights of a fast-approaching car would scare them, and they would run away. Instead, they stand there, looking straight at the vehicle, not realizing it's getting dangerously closer to them. They are "blinded by the light." Many unmarried people act much like the deer during mating season. They look for love in all the wrong places. They stand in the middle of the highway of life, and when they see a person they believe is Prince Charming or the girl of their dreams, they too are "blinded by the light."

Often, because of their personal circumstances or experiences, unmarried people come to believe in fairy tales they have heard, read in romance novels, or perhaps even seen again and again in movies or television shows. They have gotten the message so often and so many times that they have come to believe those stories as if they were true.

Someone who may be living at home and feel their freedom is limited may come to believe the fairy-tale myth that *love will be the answer to all the problems I have*. They say to themselves, "When I am married, I won't have to be accountable to anybody. I will be treated as an adult. I will do whatever I want." Those of us who have been married for some time know that the only thing that's true is that marriage is not the answer to all our problems but more of a reality check. Or, as someone stated, marriage is not the answer but a whole new set of questions.

Through the many years of working with couples, we have encountered several men who were consumers of pornography before marriage and who believed that marriage would be the answer or solution to their compulsion (addiction), only to find themselves married and still deeply involved with this destructive habit. In an article on the website For Your Marriage, Sam Meir shares his experience:

> One week before our wedding, I walked into a convenience store telling myself it was the last time I would ever use porn. I had been using porn since junior high, but thought I wouldn't "need" it after getting married. After all, my bride Beth was gorgeous, smart, athletic, cared about her faith, and was my best friend.
>
> Sadly, the first several years of our marriage were filled with heartache, loneliness, and broken trust due to my use of pornography. We reached out for help to multiple counselors . . . , but there were not many people who knew how to help us in the early 2000s.[7]

Thinking that getting married will give you freedom from your addiction to pornography (or any other addiction) is like thinking that drinking milk will help you overcome your alcoholism. We will speak more on the topic of pornography in a later chapter.

The second fairy-tale myth is the belief that *divorce could never happen to me.* Whenever we work with a premarital couple, as part of their marriage preparation, we ask them to consider several questions. One of them is, "How long do you plan to stay married?"

With that same deer-in-the-headlights look on their face, they respond, "Forever."

We then ask a second question, "Can you think of anything that might cause you to consider getting a divorce?"

Back to the deer-in-the-headlights look they go. Of course, no one gets married thinking of a time when they will get a divorce. While the ideal is that we will live together "until death do us part," many believe the falsehood that "divorce could never happen to us." Again, that is the ideal and the goal we should shoot for. However, divorce could happen to any of us if we become complacent in our relationship and are not intentional about keeping our relationship healthy and strong. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the Bible, renders Paul's words to the church members at Corinth this way: "Don't be so naive and self-confident. You're not exempt. You could fall flat on your face as easily as anyone else. Forget about self-confidence; it's useless. Cultivate God-confidence" (1 Corinthians 10:12, *The Message*).

Fairy tales often end with the words "and they lived happily forever after." While the longer we're married, the better it gets, it's only in fairy tales that *spouses never argue.* When two people from different backgrounds—with different personalities, likes, tastes, and preferences—get together, conflict is natural. People shudder at the thought that their Prince Charming or the girl of their dreams could possibly ever say or do anything that would hurt their feelings, but the reality is that we all have an inherited a selfish nature that makes us want, at times, what is best for us, even if that makes the other person unhappy. We often tell couples that conflict in marriage is not bad. In fact, conflict is very natural and nothing to be feared. It is how we manage conflict that will determine a life of success or a lifetime of sorrow. (More about this later.)

One of the most common fairy-tale myths unmarried people believe is that *after they're married, their spouse will change for the better*. When we're dating, we often wear blinders. As they do for horses, blinders give us a sort of tunnel vision that keeps us from seeing everything. We have an idealistic view of our future spouse and of our relationship, and even when we notice something we don't particularly like, we tend to ignore it, overlook it, or think to ourselves, *That (or rather, they) will change.*

One anecdote we heard from the late Pastor Charles D. Brooks provides a humorous depiction of the misconception of changing a spouse's character. Picture in your mind the scene: As the ceremony

begins, you can see the participants. On the platform in front of the altar stands the pastor who will conduct the ceremony. To his left stands the groom, handsome, nervous, and excited. To the groom's right stands his best man and the rest of the groomsmen. To the pastor's right stands the bridesmaids. Perhaps in front of the bridesmaids and groomsmen stand the flower girl and the Bible boy. And there, at the back of the church, stands the bride, her hand on her father's arm, looking radiant. On this day, she looks gorgeous, particularly to her husband-to-be. As she stands there, at the back of the church, said Pastor Brooks, she notices three things in particular: The aisle, the altar, and her groom. As she proceeds, she's thinking, "Aisle, altar, him." Gradually, it sounds like, "I'll alter him."

We laugh every time we remember Pastor Brooks describing this scene. And yet, it is no laughing matter because often, that is exactly what people think about their spouse-to-be before they marry them: "I will change them." While it is true that marriage changes us—many of us for the better—our goal going into marriage should not be to try to change our life partner. Let the Holy Spirit be the one to make the appropriate changes.

There is another sad fairy-tale fiction that many believe: *our spiritual differences are not that important; we'll work it all out after we're married.* Yes, perhaps one of the biggest and most dangerous myths of all is to minimize spiritual differences or to try to ignore them altogether. Many have concluded that they will simply work out their spiritual differences after they are married. Spiritual differences can create some of the most difficult and heartbreaking problems of all. The most serious occurs when a believer marries a nonbeliever. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, renders the apostle Paul's words of warning to the members of the church at Corinth, "Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership; that's war. Is light best friends with dark?" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Another common difficult situation exists when one partner was reared in one faith and the other was reared in another, which is known as an interfaith marriage. A Pew Research Center study on interfaith relationships found that "adults in religiously mixed marriages are, by and large, less religious than their counterparts who are married to spouses who share their faith. They attend religious services less often,

pray less frequently, tend to be less likely to believe in God with absolute certainty and are less inclined to say religion is very important in their lives."[8]

The real problem begins when children come along and parents must make decisions about their upbringing. Will they be christened or dedicated? Will they attend one church or another, or none? Will they be enrolled in a faith-based or public school? Whose parents' religious practices will be observed? Parents wake up and recognize the importance of these spiritual differences after their child is born, but it's is too late . . . and you can't put them back. All spiritual differences should be reconciled before any wedding takes place!

Believing and accepting fairy-tale myths at face value leads many to make bad decisions. One myth many believe about marriage is that once you're married you won't feel lonely anymore. While marriage enhances human connection, and ideally adds to other family relationships and friendships, it will not completely remove loneliness. And many singles have testified that they don't feel alone. After all, the last person they talk to at night is Jesus, and the first person they seek in the morning is Jesus. He is the truest Companion. He is all we need. Nobody knows us individually as He does. And look at what He promises, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5, NIV). With Jesus in your life, you'll never be alone—whether married or single.

Now, if you are already dating someone, we recommend you have a conversation with them and discuss these questions:

1. Do we share the same basic beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, salvation (including the meaning of justification, righteousness, and sanctification), sin, heaven, hell, the second coming of Jesus (what glorification is), God's judgment, the church, the law of God (including the Sabbath), and what happens after death?
2. How will we rear our children spiritually?
3. Will church attendance be a part of our lives? If so, which denomination and which church will we choose? How will we choose the church we'll attend?
4. Are we committed to being a godly couple from whom our children can learn spiritual values?

Once again, what is most important is to decide that all spiritual issues should be settled before the wedding, or there should be no wedding. *It really is that important*. At the same time, any engaged couple that is in tune spiritually should not take their spirituality for granted but instead should be spending time individually and together in prayer and in the study of God's Word to continue to grow in relationship with Jesus as an individual and as a couple.

Time is of the essence

Through the years, after talking with countless couples, we have heard some of the most fascinating stories. We recall several who have told us that the very first time they saw or met their future spouse, they knew they would marry them. Some have told us that just a few months later, or even a few weeks later, they were married and have been married for many, many years. We know a couple who were friends in elementary school, dated as young people, got married soon after high school, and have been married for more than forty years. Many have known each other or have been together longer than they have been alone.

But we have also talked to couples that met and had a whirlwind romance and got married as soon as they could, only to find themselves in an incompatible relationship full of conflict, chaos, and calamity. Many have told us, "We wish we had not rushed into marriage." For some, the rush came when they became sexually involved and found themselves expecting a baby. For others, it was a new job that would mean a change of location, a deployment, or the fear of losing that person. And for some, in our technologically connected society, it was a long-distance relationship that became untenable, the need to be married in order to secure the proper immigration documents, or the need to leave their own country, looking for better opportunities in life.

We recommend,[9] as do many marriage and family counselors, a period of dating long enough to allow the future couple to truly get to know each other. As Shakespeare wrote in King Henry VI, "[A] hasty marriage seldom proveth well."[10] It takes time to know another person well enough to decide to spend your life with them. Listen to these wise words:

If you plan and work hard,
you will have plenty;

if you get in a hurry,
you will end up poor (Proverbs 21:5, CEV).

Often, couples will spend much more time in the wedding preparations—choosing a venue, deciding on their wedding party, designing, addressing, and mailing the invitations, making arrangements with musicians and caterers, purchasing a wedding dress, renting the tuxedo, and other wedding-day details—than they spend preparing to live as a married couple. While the wedding ceremony is important, they fail to remember that an actual wedding ceremony is a one-day event, but a marriage is a lifetime. We wonder what would happen if couples would spend half as much time and energy planning for their lifetime together as they do in planning for the wedding ceremony. Take the time necessary to learn everything you can about the person with whom you plan to spend a lifetime.

Several areas should be seriously considered during this time together:

Residual emotional baggage. As we travel throughout the world, we have concluded that it is better for each of us to have our own individual suitcases. It is not a good thing to try to put everything in one suitcase. We each pack the things that we need, the way we like, and we each may pack as much as we want. Trying to fit our things in his and her luggage is a formula for conflict because, after nearly forty years of marriage, we are still two different individuals. In the same way, we bring into our marriage our own emotional baggage that often does not fit neatly into the other person's life. A sufficient period of dating helps you examine each other's emotional baggage—the things we learned as we were growing up in our family of origin, the experiences of pain (sexual, verbal, or emotional abuse), any addictions, the places where we have lived, other relationships we might have had, and other issues. We can't ignore the baggage we bring into our current relationship, much less into our marriage, because it will have an effect, for good or for bad, for the rest of our lives.

Ask anyone who has been married for any length of time, and they will tell you that no matter how well they thought they knew their future spouse, there were still many surprises after they married. Ideally, it's beneficial to observe a potential marriage partner in as many situations before marriage as possible. Notice how the person reacts when angry,

under stressful situations, and in difficult times. Learn about the other person's needs, likes, dislikes, quirks, habits, weaknesses, strengths, and annoyances and about what makes them happy. Ellen White's advice is very valuable:

> Before giving her hand in marriage, every woman should inquire whether he with whom she is about to unite her destiny is worthy. What has been his past record? Is his life pure? Is the love which he expresses of a noble, elevated character, or is it a mere emotional fondness? Has he the traits of character that will make her happy? Can she find true peace and joy in his affection? Will she be allowed to preserve her individuality, or must her judgment and conscience be surrendered to the control of her husband? … Can she honor the Saviour's claims as supreme? Will body and soul, thoughts and purposes, be preserved pure and holy? These questions have a vital bearing upon the well-being of every woman who enters the marriage relation.[11]

The family of origin.[12] Another area that needs exploration is the person's family of origin. It's critically important that you spend time getting to know the other person's family. Perhaps you have made the mistake of thinking the other person's extended family doesn't matter. The fact is, we don't marry one person; we marry, or join ourselves to, the entire family. You must meet the potential in-laws and other family members and spend time getting to know them. Observe how they interact with each other. An old adage fits very well here: "An apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Your future spouse grew up in this family, so you need to know who they are and what they believe.

The more differences between you and your spouse there are, the more important it is that you spend time with each other's family. For example, we come from different racial backgrounds. Pam is Caucasian, born and raised in the state of Virginia, the oldest child of four siblings. Claudio is Hispanic, born and raised in Colombia, South America, the fifth child of six siblings. The three years that we spent dating helped us to get to know each other and each other's families, to appreciate the differences, and also to be aware of possible challenges to our relationship. If you two are from very different cultural or racial

backgrounds, it is even more important that you spend lots of time exploring, observing, and learning from each other and each other's family.

Learn what it means to "leave" and "cleave." As God joined the first couple, He reminded them of the pattern He set for marriage. We recall the Lord's words, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24, KJV). But what do those two words (*leave* and *cleave*) really mean?

> **Leave—**To *leave* means that your allegiance shifts from your parents to your spouse. It does not mean you abandon your parents or have nothing else to do with them. Instead, it means that you will first seek your spouse for wisdom, comfort, and support. One of the mistakes many young couples make is to try to maintain their relationship with their parents as if they were still single. They will consult first with their parents rather than with their spouse, or they will make decisions following their parents' advice even if it's in direct contradiction with their spouse's opinion or wishes. In Claudio's homeland, they refer to young grooms who fail to leave their parents as "unable to go from under their mother's skirt." They always want to be a momma's boy first and husband second.
>
> Leaving also means to cease the relationship of dependence from one's parents. You can no longer go back to your parents for your every need, financially or otherwise. And as parents, even if we see our married children struggling a bit, we need to make sure we give them room to make their own decisions and come up with their own solutions instead of running to rescue them every time they seem about to fall or fail.
>
> **Cleave—**The word *cleave* means to lean toward, to be joined, or to hold on to your partner. To cleave to your marriage partner means to choose your spouse above others, even yourself. You cleave, lean toward, join, or hold on to your partner by meeting their needs, hearing their words, and understanding their feelings and desires.

A covenant marriage. Marriage is not just a piece of paper. Wedding vows are not just a declaration of present love but a mutually binding

promise of future love. “You promise to be loving, faithful, and true to the other person in the future regardless of … internal feelings or external circumstances.”[13] But what makes this covenant even more important is who is witnessing it. We make the covenant before the officiant (pastor, priest, justice of the peace, etc.) and before family and friends. But more important, we make it before God; and for God, those promises are very important and meant to be kept. “When you make a vow to GOD, your God, don’t put off keeping it; GOD, your God, expects you to keep it and if you don’t you’re guilty. … If you say you’re going to do something, do it. Keep the vow you willingly vowed to GOD, your God. You promised it, so do it” (Deuteronomy 23:21–23, *The Message*).

Who you will marry is one of the most important decisions you will make in your lifetime. Apart from accepting Jesus as your personal Savior, it is perhaps the most important. It is one that needs to be made with that understanding.

Conclusion

- Before seeking a spouse, be the person God wants you to be.
- Don’t expect perfection in your future spouse.
- Pray for guidance and wisdom from God.
- Rely on God’s Word—don’t believe the fairy tales and myths.
- Understand the importance of “leaving and cleaving.”
- Understand the permanence of a covenant relationship.

Reflection questions

1. So, do you have a list? No one goes on a hunt to find something without first knowing what it is they are seeking. What should be included that is not negotiable?
2. Which of the fairy tale myths mentioned have you seen, heard, or come to believe yourself?
3. If a person’s character is pretty much cemented by the age of six or seven, do you think you can change another person to fit your wishes or desires?
4. What does 2 Corinthians 6:14 mean to you?
5. What traits should you consider in your future mate? Are there any areas of concern in the person you are currently seeing?

How do you think your future mate might answer this question about you?

6. How do we reconcile the command to "leave our parents" (see Genesis 2:24) with the command to "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12, NIV)?
7. What changes do we need to make in order to sever the cords of allegiance and dependence from our parents?
8. What changes do we need to make sure we "cleave" to one another?

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Chapter 2

Preparing to Be the One

That's why a man will leave his own father and mother.
He marries a woman, and the two of them become like one person.
—Genesis 2:24, CEV

Most of us need to prepare ourselves for our future. If I want to get a good education, I have to begin preparations from the first day I begin attending school. If I goof off in school and don't do my homework, chances are that I will have a difficult time in school and may even end up dropping out altogether. On the other hand, if I listen to my teachers, follow their directions, do the homework they have assigned, read, and study, there's a better chance that I will get good grades from the beginning.

If I pay attention at work and do what I am asked to do carefully and responsibly, I may get noticed and be rewarded with a promotion. If I study, practice, and prepare, there's a good chance I will pass the tests and will get my driver's license, and new opportunities and independence will open up to me. If I want to prepare a special meal, I gather all the ingredients and follow a trusted recipe, and the result will probably be a delicious, nutritious, savory delicacy.

Everything good in life needs a certain amount of preparation on *our part*. Please notice that we emphasized "our part." Yes, sometimes we may be fortunate enough to receive a gift or a special favor from someone that will enable us to move up to a higher level or get further along in life. But most of the time, we must do our part to accomplish our dreams and goals. However, when it comes to marriage, one of the

most important decisions we will ever make in life, we often leave that up to chance with little or no preparation at all.

The best advice to young women is this—be more concerned with being the right woman than finding the right man—and the reverse may be said to young men! As stated in the previous chapter, finding Mr. or Ms. Right really has more to do with being the right person yourself. Being must precede finding; otherwise, you are setting yourself up for heartbreak. The truth is that, all too often, we have it backward. We think that finding the right person will help "fix" our brokenness when, in reality, we need to be whole in order to truly experience the intimacy with another person that God wants for us.

Suggestions for becoming Mr. or Ms. Right

We are usually so obsessed with finding that we skip over the all-important step of becoming. Think about this—that Mr. or Ms. Right that you are seeking is also seeking their own Mr. or Ms. Right. In other words, you must be that person in order for them to discover you. The search works both ways. It's a two-way street. So, how do you become Mr. or Ms. Right?

Make your own spiritual growth a priority. Prioritizing spiritual growth is the main ingredient to becoming the person God intends you to be—married or single. Here are some suggestions (along with a Bible promise) to achieve that spiritual growth that needs to happen on your way to becoming the person God intends:

- **Pray—**Be in constant contact with Jesus. Tell Him your heart's desires, your dreams, your wishes, your concerns.

> Delight yourself in the LORD,
> And He shall give you the desires of your heart.
>
> Commit your way to the LORD,
> Trust also in Him,
> And He shall bring it to pass. …
>
> Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him (Psalm 37:4–7).

- **Trust—**Trust God to lead. Do not trust your own desires or instincts because all too often, they are flawed. Trust the One who is the Author of matches made in heaven! "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5).
- **Wait on the Lord!—**Learning this one thing—to wait on the Lord—has saved so many couples from the break-up of their home. Don't rush into a relationship that may not be God's will. Wait on His timing, and remember, it may be different from your own.

> Wait on the LORD;
> Be of good courage,
> And He shall strengthen your heart;
> Wait, I say, on the LORD! (Psalm 27:14).

Pray and seek God's will. As mentioned earlier, prayer is a critical element, and yet, we so often fail to take advantage of this powerful tool. Many of you will attest to the fact that you have prayed countless times for God to lead you to the right spouse. For some of you, the wait has been long, and the prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling of your home or off the walls in that heavenly throne room. Stop! Wait! And wait some more! Wait until He reveals the right partner. Again and again, we have told single adults, "It is better to be single and alone than to be married and alone."

We often ask God for patience but then follow with, "Please hurry up!" Patience is in short supply these days, and we want instant gratification. When we ask for something, we are assuming that it is for our good, but what if it's not? Maybe God knows that if He answers that prayer, it will be to our detriment. After all, He sees the end from the beginning. His timing never fails. So pray for His will to be revealed and patience to trust His timing.

Keep in mind that it's never too early to begin praying for your future spouse. Pray that the person will be a man or woman of God who seeks to become the person God has designed him or her to be. Pray that this person will be successful in their life, education, or career and that he or she will use the talents He has given him or her to bless others. Pray that

your future spouse will be in good health—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Pray that this person will enjoy a close walk with God and give her- or himself to God unreservedly. Pray that the Lord will protect her or him from temptation and attack. Ask God to bless the person with good friends and an encouraging family, to make him or her wise and strong, and to bless the work of the person's hands. Then pray that God will bring out the best version of the man or woman He created you to be. Pray that you will draw closer to God and that you will follow Him and His will—no matter what it is, whether you understand it or not, and whether you like it or not. Those prayers alone will increase your own faith. And write those prayers, because one day, the person God gives to you will be blessed to read your prayers!

Who is perfect?

There's a story about a couple on their honeymoon. The groom took his bride by the hand and said, "Now that we're married, dear, I hope you won't mind if I mention a few little defects that I've noticed about you."

"Not at all," the bride replied with a deceptive sweetness. "It was those little defects that kept me from getting a better husband."

While it is true that we should not seek perfection in a spouse, it's also true that we should have some nonnegotiable qualities on our list for a potential life-partner that do not change over time. That's the list of things that will be our guide as we make decisions about the future of our relationship. What are the nonnegotiable characteristics? Here are some of our suggestions:

- *Shared faith.* Do you know this person's faith beliefs? Shared faith is key to a happy marriage, and this should be your top nonnegotiable item because it affects everything else that follows.
- *Spiritual growth.* Is continued spiritual growth important to the person? Does he or she have personal daily worship? Does the person enjoy an active prayer life?
- *Verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.* If abuse of any kind happened in your spouse's life, he or she needs counseling to deal appropriately with the past and become emotionally healthy. Instances of past abuse can and will affect future relationships if not addressed. If the abuse has taken place

between you two during your dating period, you should not move one step forward before it is dealt with through extended counseling, a plan of action, drawing appropriate boundaries, and having a clear understanding of what consequences there will be if it were to occur again (which may include the abused person leaving the relationship temporarily or permanently).

- *Substance abuse.* Is there any history of substance abuse? Don't think this will change after you are married. If it is an issue now, it will remain an issue later. Address it before any thoughts of a wedding take place.
- *Values.* Remember that list you previously made of values that were important to you? Those values should also be on your list of nonnegotiable qualities. What is important to this person? What do they treasure or value?
- *Honesty and trustworthiness.* Do you trust everything this person says and does? Can you trust him or her in public and in private, when you are together and when you are apart? If you cannot trust them now, you surely cannot trust them as your spouse.

Above all, when you have your own list of nonnegotiables traits, do not compromise by crossing items off that list. The list needs to remain intact until God reveals the one He has chosen for you.

Premarital counseling

When you have done all of the above and you are still asking, "Is this the one?"—STOP! Do not set a wedding date until you have sought biblically based premarital counseling. This one thing could determine whether your relationship will endure for a lifetime or end in heartache. We highly recommend that couples who have been dating for some time and are beginning to consider the possibility of getting married consult with their pastor or a counselor to begin the process of marriage preparation. For many years, we have used and trained pastors and counselors in the use of Prepare/Enrich[1] as a valuable tool for both the couple and the person facilitating the process of marriage preparation.

Premarital education and counseling are designed for engaged couples and for persons considering marriage. In this program, "persons interested in marriage receive education on topics relevant to marriage,

such as … communication,"[2] conflict management, budgeting, finances, how to relate to in-laws and friends, sex, parenting, and relationship roles. It facilitates conversation and improves how the couple relates to each other in each of these areas.

> [The sessions are] most often done by professional counselors, spiritual leaders, or others specifically trained in this area. …
>
> … One helpful aspect of premarital preparation is that couples have time to stop and reflect over their time together. This slows down the relationship process making it more difficult to rush into a decision. After [engaging in this process], some couples [may even] decide not to get married, and taking [this] time to evaluate their relationship was important in that decision. Deciding to end a relationship before marriage [may prevent] a potentially painful and expensive divorce. … This underscores a major benefit of premarital [counseling].

Appropriate marriage preparation will help you set the stage for a lifetime of happiness by forcing a discussion on topics you may previously have considered unimportant or irrelevant. It will assist you in developing healthy ways to communicate and manage conflict. Once the couple has gone through a process of marriage preparation, which may take six to ten weeks, depending on the couples' needs, they can then decide to take it to the next level and become engaged. The period of engagement and wedding preparation may take several months, which gives the couple additional time to continue the preparation for marriage as well. "Research conclusively shows that couples who succeed, gain the knowledge they need before they settle into destructive patterns that often lead to divorce. In fact, you're 31 percent less likely to get divorced if you get some sort of premarital training before you marry. … Marriage expert David Olson reports that 80 percent of the couples that did premarital training, stayed together."[3]

The best gift you could possibly give to each other before your wedding day is to invest time in the premarital counseling process. In fact, if you think the cost of premarital preparation is too high, consider it an investment in your future. The reality is that, compared to the cost

of the wedding, the cost of marriage preparation is often minimal. Premarital education and counseling is a gift that is priceless!

Frequently asked questions

As we work with premarital couples, counsel married couples, and hold couples' retreats, we're often asked some questions. Here are a few questions and responses for your benefit:

1. How long should a couple date before getting married? While there is no uniform rule of how much time should pass before a couple gets married, in general, we recommend dating for over one year. In fact, some people refer to the first year of dating as the "Halloween Year." No, it's not because it is scary and mysterious. Rather, they refer to this year as the "Halloween Year" because during this annual festival, children, and sometimes adults, dress in costumes and wear masks to hide their true identity. In the same way, during the first twelve months of dating or so, people tend to be guarded and protective, hiding their true self from the other person. They tend to be more polite, more selfless, kinder, a better listener, and more willing to please the other. But after the first year, the masks begin to come off, and people show more of their real selves. Therefore, if you don't spend at least one whole year dating before making the decision to get married, you may be seeing only part of who the other person is. When it comes to marriage, time is truly of the essence—not the least amount of time but, rather, a good length and quality of time.

2. What is the best age at which to get married? There are varying thoughts on what is the best age to get married. Some of the factors for consideration are physical, historical, and emotional in nature. Physically, research suggests that the frontal lobe of the brain (which is the seat of emotions, decisions, and judgment) is not fully developed until about the age of twenty-five.[4] The frontal lobe is also important in understanding and reacting to the feelings of others, impulse control, reward-seeking behavior and motivation, and managing attention.

> [People in their late twenties and early thirties] are old enough to understand if they really get along with someone or are just blinded by hormones. They've already made significant life choices [such as a career, a home, where they live and work] and

> taken on some responsibilities. And they may be financially solvent enough to contemplate supporting someone should the need arise.
>
> On the other hand, they're not so old and set in their ways that they can't make the myriad of little adjustments in habits and lifestyle and goals and personal hygiene that marriage requires. [More than likely,] they … don't have ex-spouses or children with whom they need to divide their time, resources, and loyalty.[5]

3. Is online dating a good way to find a mate? Online dating is a multibillion-dollar industry. According to some reports, "over 40 million Americans have given online dating a try, and over a *third* of the American couples married between 2005 and 2012 met online."[6] We have met some couples that met online and appeared to be doing well. But we have also spoken with several couples for whom online dating turned into heartache and disaster. According to Ryan Anderson, PhD, writing in a *Psychology Today* article, "the problem with a lot of online dating applications is that they don't really work,"[7] particularly because people often lie on their online dating profiles. It was reported that "a total of 53% of US participants admitted to having lied in their online profile. Women apparently lied more than men, with the most common dishonesties being about looks. Over 20% of women posted photos of their younger selves. But men were only marginally better. Their most common lies were about their financial situation, specifically about having a better job (financially) than they actually do. More than 40% of men indicated that they did this, but the tactic was also employed by nearly a third of women."[8]

As if that were not enough, those looking for a possible future mate online have to be on their toes when it comes to internet scammers. According to research, there are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of online scams. Perhaps the question should be, "Do online relationships last?" The same article on *Psychology Today* concludes, "According to research conducted at Michigan State University, relationships that start out online are 28% more likely to break down in their first year than relationships where the couples first met face-to-face. And it gets worse. Couples who met online are nearly three times as likely to get divorced as couples that met face-to-face."[9]

Earlier in this chapter, we spoke about the benefit of spending good, quality time getting to know each other. In online dating, we tend to portray only the best we have to offer. When we spend a few minutes each day online, we will do our best to be our best. To really get to know a person, we need to spend quality time as well as quantity time face-to-face, in as many situations as possible—at work, home, church, with family, with friends, while shopping, while dealing with decisions, and with challenges and frustrations.

We were once challenged by an unmarried person who told us the online service they participated in was not truly online dating but rather an online meeting site. We may give them the benefit of the doubt and say that online "dating" websites are simply an opportunity to meet possible dating mates. However, the work of getting to know each other must still take place in person over an extended period of time.

In addition, as the article in *Psychology Today* states, these online dating sites may make you too picky and judgmental. "It's very easy to send one course back (or even one after another) when the menu is overflowing with other potential courses. … Reviewing multiple candidates causes people to be more judgmental and inclined to dismiss a not-quite-perfect candidate than they otherwise would be in a face-to-face meeting."[10]

4. Is cohabitation a good idea? While cohabitation (living together before marriage) has become very common, much research has shown it can be very problematic and potentially damaging to the individuals and to the couple if they eventually choose to marry. According to marriage researchers Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades, the top three reasons people gave for cohabiting were (1) to spend more time together; (2) convenience (especially financially); and (3) to take a step-up in commitment.[11] In addition, "women who reported cohabiting for reasons of convenience were more likely to report lower levels of confidence in their relationships, less commitment, and higher levels of negative dynamics with their partners."[12] Stanley and Rhoades also "examined the personal and relationship characteristics of both men and women who reported testing [the relationship as a reason for cohabiting], and found that:

- " 'For men, higher levels of depressive symptoms, generalized anxiety symptoms, difficulty depending on others, and anxiety

about abandonment were significantly associated with higher scores on testing.' …

- " 'For women, … greater abandonment anxiety was significantly associated with higher testing scores.' …
- " 'For both men and women, greater negative interaction and psychological aggression and lower relationship confidence and adjustment were significantly associated with higher scores on the testing subscale. For men only, greater physical aggression and lower levels of dedication were significantly associated with testing the relationship.' "[13]

Some cohabiting couples may tell you that it is easier to break up than to go through a divorce. The truth is that breaking up from a cohabiting relationship is not as easy as it sounds, either. Stanley and Rhoads explain that "the number one thing people miss about the risk of cohabiting is that it makes it harder to break up. … [They concluded that] a couple who is cohabiting will have a harder time breaking up than a couple who is only dating."[14]

Probably the most common belief is that "testing the waters" or "taking your relationship out for a test drive" (just two of the metaphors we often hear) will decrease your chances of marrying the wrong person and therefore also decrease your chances of divorce. However, research does not confirm such conclusions. In another article, published in 2014, Stanley argues, "Those who live together before marrying tend to already be at greater risk in marriage because of other factors."[15] He mentions, for instance, "having parents who divorced or never married, having fewer economic resources, less education, and so forth."[16] Stanley also writes about two facts that those considering cohabitation as an option should keep in mind:

> First, cohabiting relationships are far less stable than marriages. While many marriages end in misery, far more cohabiting relationships break up than end in lasting love or family stability. Most couples who cohabit these days do so before having formed or signaled a commitment to the future (marked by marriage, engagement, or a declaration to others that they intend to stay together). I believe that this point is routinely missed by

researchers and family policy experts. Part of the power of marriage, for all its historical flaws, lies in the way it can signal an *intention* of a lifelong commitment between two partners and to those around them in a particular sequence; the formation of commitment prior to living together or pregnancy provides for better relationship outcomes on average… .

Second, the relative instability of cohabitation has important implications for children. An ever-greater number of unmarried, cohabiting couples have children, and these couples are far less likely than married ones to raise their children together. And it has become increasingly clear that children tend to fare best when raised by their own two parents. In fact, as Wendy Manning makes clear in a recent review, *unmarried* biological parents who are continuously raising their children together are likely to see outcomes for their children rivaling those for married couples. But as Manning also points out, "only one out of three children born to cohabiting parents remains in a stable family through age 12, in contrast to nearly three out of four children born to married parents." This matters because family instability is well understood to be a risk factor for the wellbeing and development of children.[17]

In addition to the factors stated earlier, one consistent finding among researchers is a higher rate of domestic violence among cohabiting couples as compared with married couples. For instance, according to Katie Moritz (2018), Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania discovered that more than 80 percent of incidents of domestic violence reported to the Philadelphia police in 2013 happened between current or former unmarried couples.

These relationships were also more violent than those between married couples.[18]

Even children suffer the consequences of cohabitation by one or both of their parents. An article in Marripedia states, "A recent analysis of data from seventeen countries found that, despite cohabitation becoming normative, cohabiting unions still provide less stability for children than marriage."[19] In addition, "children living in cohabiting households are

more likely to suffer from a variety of emotional and social problems, including drug use, depression, and dropping out of high school, as compared to those in married homes."[20] When it comes to the education of children, the article goes on to state, "Family instability, a trait of cohabiting families, was linked with lower task orientation and lower academic grades for adolescents."[21] And, as if these were not enough, the article points out that "children raised in cohabiting families are particularly vulnerable to abuse. … Children raised by their cohabiting biological parents are 4.3 times more likely to suffer from physical abuse and 5 times more likely to experience sexual abuse as compared to children raised by their married, biological parents."[22] And finally, "Children raised in cohabiting families face an increased risk of falling into poverty. … This is partially because cohabiting couples lack the relationship stability and material pooling [of resources] that married couples experience."[23]

Cohabiting may seem like a good idea, but research and our personal observation has proved otherwise for a great majority of couples choosing this step in their lives.

5. How can I make the right decisions about a possible life partner? You have found a person you like, you enjoy spending time with that person, and it seems as if this may just be the one. And yet, you have that uneasy feeling in the back of your mind as to whether you are making the right decision. We hear this often, particularly from those who are dating a person of a different faith or one from no faith background at all. Prayerfully read the Bible to discover what God says about choosing a life partner. In addition, seek counsel from godly mentors. Don't rationalize or try to explain away your actions; instead, follow God's Word and commit the decision, and yourself, to Him.

Reflection questions

1. Why is it so much easier to focus on the faults of the other person? Consider these words: "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3).

2. How do we change our focus and become the person God wants us to be? "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5, ESV). How do we do that, in practical terms?

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1. More information about Prepare/Enrich can be found on the website https://www.prepare-enrich.com.

2. "Benefits of Premarital Education," Center for Healthy Relationships, accessed December 3, 2020, http://liferelationships.com/resources/benefits-of-premarital-education/.

3. "Benefits of Premarital Education."

4. Mariam Arain et al., "Maturation of the Adolescent Brain," *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment* 9 (2013): 449–461, https://doi.org/10.2147/NDT.S39776.

5. Belinda Luscombe, "Math Says This Is the Perfect Age to Get Married," *Time*, July 21, 2015, https://news.yahoo.com/math-says-perfect-age-married-230324711.html.

6. Nicole Flores, "Where Will You Find Your Soulmate?" Media and Globalization, November 7, 2017, https://mediaandglobalizationblog.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/where-will-you-find-your-soulmate/; emphasis added.

7. Ryan Anderson, "The Ugly Truth About Online Dating," *Psychology Today*, September 6, 2016, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mating-game/201609/the-ugly-truth-about-online-dating.

8. Anderson.

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11. Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades, "Testing a Relationship Is Probably the Worst Reason to Cohabit," *Institute for Family Studies*, July 19, 2016, https://ifstudies.org/blog/testing-a-relationship-is-probably-the-worst-reason-to-cohabit.

12. Stanley and Rhoades.

13. Stanley and Rhoades.

14. Stanley and Rhoades.

15. Scott Stanley, "Why Doesn't Living Together Before Marrying Decrease the Risk of Divorce?" *Institute for Family Studies*, August 4, 2014, https://ifstudies.org/blog/why-doesnt-living-together-before-marrying-decrease-the-risk-of-divorce/.

16. Stanley.

17. Scott Stanley, "Is Living Together All It's Cracked Up to Be?" *Institute for Family Studies*, January 14, 2016, https://ifstudies.org/blog/is-living-together-all-its-cracked-up-to-be/; emphasis in original.

18. Katie Moritz, “How Domestic Violence Is Different for Unmarried Couples,” Rewire, February 16, 2018, https://www.rewire.org/love/domestic-violence/.

19. Patrick F. Fagan, ed., “Effects of Cohabitation on Children,” Marripedia, accessed December 16, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/y26wgmyq.

20. Fagan.

21. Fagan.

22. Fagan.

23. Fagan.

Chapter 3

Preparing to Complement Your Mate

Then the man named the tame animals and the birds
and the wild animals. That's how they got their names.
None of these was the right kind of partner for the man.
—Genesis 2:19, 20, CEV

Marriage, by its very nature, involves two people: a husband and a wife. The idea that marriage completes an individual has been held by many—especially in recent decades. While the idea may sound romantic, it underlines the common misconception that single people are not complete and must find someone to help them achieve fulfillment.

When God created the world and all that is in it, He declared everything to be good. But when on the sixth day of the week He created human beings, He declared the crown jewel of Creation "very good" (Genesis 1:31, CEV). God didn't create Eve because He felt Adam was incomplete. If Adam came out of the hands of God, Adam was not incomplete. Eve was created to complement Adam, not to complete him. God made Eve for Adam not just to procreate but to have like companionship in life.

Interestingly, God made Eve from Adam to reflect the unique relationship husbands and wives have and to express the complementary aspect of their relationship. The King James Version of the Bible uses the words "an help meet" (Genesis 2:18) to describe Eve—someone equal to Adam. As *The Seventh-day Adventist Commentary* explains, "This fact indicates the equal partnership that the woman should enjoy with the man. No real companion could be found for Adam among creatures inferior to him."[1]

The question for you is, what are you looking for in a life partner? Someone who completes you? Or someone to complement you? If you're looking for someone to complete you, you're declaring that you are unfinished or that you lack all the necessary or appropriate parts. In a sense, we are all incomplete. John wrote, "My dear friends, we are already God's children,

though what we will be hasn't yet been seen. But we do know when Christ returns, we will be like him, because we will see him as he truly is" (1 John 3:2, CEV). We will not be complete until the return of Jesus. The point is that it is Jesus who completes us, not another human being. When we marry, we hope to complement our spouse and help them in those areas where their knowledge, skills, or experience is not the same as ours, and vice versa.

Who are we?

In order to see how we can complement each other, we first need to understand who we are. There are different ways of looking at what makes us think and act the way we do. One of those ways is by looking at our temperament.

Temperaments are those personality traits with which you are born that determine how you react to the world. For instance, do you tend to be quiet or loud? Are you laid-back or anxious? While some of these are innate, they can also be influenced by your family, culture, or experiences. Your temperament plays a role in how you behave and interact with other people and within your world. One of the more common classifications of temperaments comes from Hippocrates and correlates personalities into four main types. This classification is known as the Four Temperaments Test.[2] These are the four fundamental personality types that we may be most familiar with:

- Sanguine—enthusiastic, active, and social
- Choleric—ambitious, goal-oriented, and (at times) irritable
- Melancholic—analytical, wise, and quiet
- Phlegmatic—relaxed, easy-going, and peaceful

So look at the list above once again, think about the characteristics that are associated with each personality type, and choose the temperament you think best describes you. Your potential spouse should do the same. Then, complete the activity below together. Take some time to discuss the answers you wrote. What new insights into your relationship does this information provide? If you are unsure as to what your temperament is, before proceeding, you may take a free online temperament test on the Psychologia website at https://psychologia.co/four-temperaments-test/.

	You	Your Potential Mate
Write the temperament that you feel best describes you.		
Write an example of how this		

temperament is manifested in your life.		
Write an example of how you see your fiancé or fiancée's temperament displayed in their life.		
How does each of your temperaments complement the other's?		
How could each of your temperaments be a source of conflict in your relationship?		

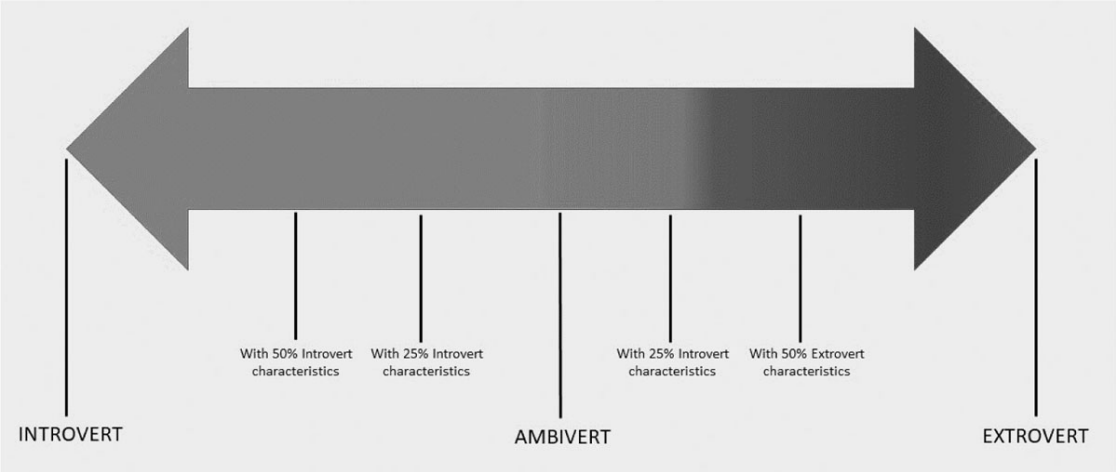
Another tool that helps us look at our temperament is the Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis (T-JTA). This quick and convenient method measures important personality traits that influence your personal, interpersonal, scholastic, and vocational functioning and adjustment. "The T-JTA measures 9 personality traits and their opposites:

Nervous ↔ Composed
Depressive ↔ Light-hearted
Active-social ↔ Quiet
Expressive-responsive ↔ Inhibited
Sympathetic ↔ Indifferent
Subjective ↔ Objective
Dominant ↔ Submissive
Hostile ↔ Tolerant
Self-disciplined ↔ Impulsive"[3]

One of the interesting features of the T-JTA is that you can not only take the test for yourself but also take it to see how you perceive your partner. They refer to this as crisscross testing. Any similarities, differences, and areas of misunderstanding between the couple become readily apparent. For more information about the T-JTA, see tjta.com.

A third way of looking at who we are and why we act and think the way we do was introduced by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (Jung Typology Test, 2020). He proposed a theory in 1921 in which he conjectured that people experience the world using four principal psychological functions—sensation, intuition, feeling, and thinking. He also believed that one of these four functions is dominant in each of us. The four categories Jung used were introversion versus extraversion, sensing versus intuition, thinking versus feeling, and judging versus perception. Evidently, every individual has one

preferred quality from each category, producing sixteen unique types. Many years later, using this same principle, Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers constructed what is commonly known as the Myers Briggs Type Inventory, or MBTI. Probably the best-known category of the MBTI is that of the introvert versus extrovert. In simple terms, an introvert is someone who draws their energy by being by themselves, while an extrovert is someone who gets their energy by being with people. While these are two extremes, no one is a complete extrovert or introvert. Rather, most people fall somewhere along a continuum that looks like this:



Once you take the MBTI, it will describe your particular personality type with four letters, one for each of the categories we mentioned before. The sixteen types are found in the table below:

ESTJ	ISTJ	ENTJ	INTJ
ESTP	ISTP	ENTP	INTP
ESFJ	ISFJ	ENFJ	INFJ
ESFP	ISFP	ENFP	INFP

We can't cover each of the personality types here, but you can find good, short descriptions online.[4]

Once you learn which is your type, compare it with your significant other. Again, the object is not to learn how different you are from each other but rather how your differences complement each other. For instance, if you are more of an extrovert and therefore enjoy spending time with people, you can help your introverted partner to get out of her or his shell and socialize. If, on the other hand, you're more of an introvert, you can help your partner spend some alone time for personal introspection.

During our almost thirty years of premarital and marriage counseling, we have been using a tool called Prepare/Enrich. This is not a test but rather an inventory that may be used to enhance your relationship. Research has shown it to be pretty accurate in showing your chances of success. What the Prepare/Enrich research has also shown is that by just taking the inventory and going through the program with a trained facilitator, your chances of success increase. It would be to your benefit to look into this tool at prepare-enrich.com. After all, the more you know about yourself and each other, the better prepared you will be for your marriage.

All we need is love

The Beatles, one of the best-known and successful musical groups of modern times, sang, "All you need is love."[5] We wish that were true. Many years ago, we heard someone repeat a Jewish proverb that states, "Love is wonderful, but it tastes better with sugar." The point is that even when we have love, we still need to eat. Love will not feed us, put clothes on our backs, or provide shelter. If love were all we needed, no one who gets married would ever fall out of love or end up in divorce court.

Perhaps part of the reason for all the confusion on love is that we don't understand what love is. Do a simple online search for a definition and be ready to spend hours going from website to website, getting all kinds of different answers. Even the ancient Greeks, before the internet was even an idea, used seven different words in their attempt to define love. While reading the following is not essential (and maybe a little boring to some of you), we think it may be helpful in order to get a better, clearer understanding of what love is. The ancient Greeks used these seven words to define the different states of love we can experience. Please take time to write down the people in your life that would fit in each of these definitions of love:

Storge. The word *storge* describes natural affection or familial love. For instance, we would use this word to describe the love that parents have for their children and vice versa. We find many examples of this type of love in the Bible: In Genesis, we see the love and mutual protection among Noah and his wife and their sons and daughters-in-law, or the love of Jacob and David for their respective sons. In the Gospels, we read of the strong love the sisters Martha and Mary had for their brother, Lazarus.

Who in my life fits this description of love?_____

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Philia. The word *philia* describes a close friendship or brotherly love. It is the most general form of love in the Bible, encompassing love for fellow humans, care, respect, and compassion for people in need.[6] One of the best-known stories of *philia* love in the Old Testament is that between David and Jonathan. Their relationship was such that "Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:3). The word *philia* and other forms of this Greek noun are found throughout the New Testament. For instance, Christians are frequently exhorted to love their fellow Christians. *Philadelphia* (brotherly love) appears several times (particularly in Revelation), and *philia* (friendship) appears once in James. Here are just a few examples:

> "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10, ESV).

> "Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another" (1 Thessalonians 4:9, ESV).

> "Let brotherly love continue" (Hebrews 13:1, ESV).

> "And godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love" (2 Peter 1:7, ESV).

> "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1 Peter 1:22, ESV).

> "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (1 Peter 3:8, ESV).

Who in my life fits this description of love?_____

Eros. *Eros* is the name of the mythological Greek god of love, sexual desire, physical attraction, and physical love, and it appropriately describes the romantic attraction as well as the physical, sensual, and sexual intimacy between a husband and wife. The Bible teaches in various places that within the boundary of marriage, *Eros* love is to be celebrated:

> "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous" (Hebrews 13:4, ESV).

> "Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Corinthians 7:5, ESV).

> "Sex as God intended it is a source of delight and a beautiful blessing to be shared between married couples"[7] not just for procreation but for mutual enjoyment:

> > "Let your fountain be blessed,
> > and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
> > a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
> > Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight;
> > be intoxicated always in her love" (Proverbs 5:18, 19, ESV).

> "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 9:9, ESV).

In the most romantic book of the Bible, Song of Solomon, the writer celebrates the romantic aspects of *Eros* as he described in poetry the passionate love he and his bride enjoyed:

> > Oh, that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
> > For your love is more delightful than wine.
> > The fragrance of your perfume is intoxicating;
> > your name is perfume poured out.
> > No wonder young women adore you.

Take me with you—let us hurry.
Oh, that the king would bring me to his chambers (Song of Solomon 1:2–4, HCSB).

Who in my life fits this description of love?_____

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Agapē. "The essence of *agapē* love is goodwill, benevolence, and willful delight in the object of love. … *Agapē* is not used in the New Testament to refer to romantic or sexual love [but rather to the unconditional love of God for His children]. Nor does it refer to close friendship or brotherly love, for which the Greek word *philia* is used. *Agapē* love involves faithfulness, commitment, and an act of the will. [*Agapē* love is a decision.] It is distinguished from the other types of love by its lofty moral nature and strong character. *Agapē* love is beautifully described in 1 Corinthians 13,"[8] where Paul describes three main general characteristics of this type of love: what it does do, what it doesn't do, and how important it is.

What love does:

- It is "kind and patient" (verse 4, CEV).
- It "rejoices in the truth, but not in evil" (verse 6, CEV).
- It is "supportive, loyal, hopeful, and trusting" (verse 7, CEV).

What love does not:

- It is "never jealous, boastful, proud, or rude" (verses 4, 5, CEV).
- It "isn't selfish or quick tempered. It doesn't keep a record of wrongs that others do" (verse 5, CEV).
- It "never fails" (verse 8, CEV).

Love is more important:

"For now there are faith,
hope, and love.
But of these three,
the greatest is love" (verse 13, CEV).

The cross of Calvary was God's greatest demonstration of His love for us: "God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,

even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ —by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4, 5, ESV). God didn't send His Son to die for us because of our love for Him; rather, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8, NIV). God's *agapē* love is not a sappy, sentimental feeling, like that shown in romantic comedies or TV soap operas. His love is unmerited, gracious, and constantly seeking the benefit of the ones He loves. What is interesting is that *agapē* love is not unique to God. As His children, "we are to love others with *agapē* love, whether they are fellow believers (John 13:34) or bitter enemies (Matthew 5:44). . . .

". . . [But] *agapē* love does not come naturally. . . . Because of our fallen nature, we are incapable of producing such a love. If we are to love as God loves, that love—that *agapē*—can only come from"[9] Him who is love personified (1 John 4:8).

Perhaps we can picture *agapē* love as "the person in your life that is always giving to others, and needing nothing in return. This is the way they show their love, and … they are energized through love. By giving all that they have, and all that they are, to those around them, they find beauty in life."[10] They embody joy, generosity, kindness, selflessness.

Who in my life fits this description of love?_____

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Ludus. "*Ludus* is the flirtatious and teasing kind of love, the love mostly accompanied by [friendly kidding] or laughter. It's the childlike and fun kind of love."[11] In today's world, *ludus* love describes two people who just want to have fun together, with little need for security or roots.

Who in my life fits this description of love?_____

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Pragma. *Pragma* describes the everlasting love between a married couple that develops over a long period of time. *Pragma* was, in the secular world, the highest form of love, the true commitment that comes from understanding, compromise, and tolerance. Being *pragmatic* (a derivative of *pragma*) "is

referred to as ‘standing in love’ rather than ‘falling in love’ because it grows over time and requires profound understanding between lovers who have been together for many years.”[12] *Pragma* is committed, married love. Perhaps a personal example of *pragma* love for many of us is our grandparents who met and fell in love, and perhaps even married, while they were teenagers, and lived in love together for fifty, sixty, or more years, until death.

Who in my life fits this description of love?_____

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Philautia. The ancient Greeks distinguished between a *philautia* love that is selfish and seeks pleasure, fame, and wealth, often leading to narcissism, and the type which is a healthy kind of self-love. *Philautia* is essential for any healthy relationship because we can love others only if we truly love ourselves, and we can care for others only if we take care of ourselves. This is perhaps what Paul had in mind when he wrote, “So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself” (Ephesians 5:28).

On the other hand, selfish *philautia* love is seen in the person that takes and never gives in return, the one who only uses others to get ahead in life, the social climbers of the world. The good kind of *philautia* can be seen as two different, self-actualized individuals unite. They can both do their own thing, but ultimately, they come together and support each other as they grow as individuals and as they grow together as a couple.

Who in my life fits this description of love?_____

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Epithumia. Epithumia is used in Greek literature (including the New Testament) and can be translated “desire.” When meant negatively, it’s translated “lust” (Mark 4:19; 2 Timothy 2:22; 4:3). In a positive sense, it’s a genuine physical desire or appetite (Luke 22:15; Philippians 1:23). So *epithumia* plays an important part in the marriage context, where a physical union is both natural and proper. It is the normal, natural desire to be with the

person they love and have joined their lives in the sight of God and those gathered to witness their union.

Who in my life fits this description of love?_____

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Take a careful look at the people you have written for each of the definitions of love. Some love can and should be shared among many, while other love is exclusive to the marriage relationship. Understanding this can help you maintain proper boundaries in your premarital relationship.

The English language is not as specific or as descriptive as the Greek, which is why we often use the same word for people as we do for animals or for objects. We just as easily say, "I love vanilla ice cream," as we say, "I love my mom." We can tell a dog or a person that we love them. We use the word *love* to describe so many different things, even though the particular feeling may be different. For example, we use it to describe the passion we have for a sports team—"I love the Yankees"—or for something we enjoy doing—"I love skiing"—or for something that holds our attention—"I love studying the Bible." As you look at the seven different expressions of love in the Greek language, which do you think is most accurate to describe the relationship between a husband and a wife?

Pure chemistry

When we find it difficult to define love, we turn to describing it. Some people talk about having *chemistry* between them and their significant others. Thinking about love as chemistry has a certain element of truth to it. When a person lusts, there is an increased release of testosterone and estrogen in the brain. However, the short spike caused by lust doesn't last, but true love is consistent and is expressed and experienced in a variety of ways. For instance, the body gets excited and produces adrenaline. That's why when you first meet someone you find attractive, adrenaline causes dilation of the eyes, increased sweating, a faster heartbeat, heightened feelings of anxiety, and nervousness (which we describe as having butterflies in the stomach). Once you find yourself attracted to someone, the brain produces more testosterone in men and more estrogen in women, which boosts that attraction.

As attraction increases and love begins to develop, your body begins to be flooded with what is known as "happy hormones," including dopamine and oxytocin. Dopamine triggers an intense rush of pleasure. Once it is released

into the body, dopamine increases energy, and people have less need for sleep or food. At the same time, they focus more of their attention on the person they like and enjoy a unique delight in all the smallest details of that person. They feel excitement and happiness when they are with the other person but also develop a need for attention from them. Oxytocin is released in the brain when love begins to form between two people, so it is also known as the "love hormone."[13]

When two young, unmarried people are in love, it indeed can be said that the hormones are raging and that there is chemistry between them. But love is much more than a chemical reaction or being bombarded by hormones from every direction. We could delve into the philosophical study of love, the sociological implications of love, the economic benefits of love, and so many other areas. However, let's proceed by looking at love in very simple but practical terms.

Caring love versus romantic love

While it's nice and enlightening to know and understand the different words used in the classical and biblical languages, we want to simplify it a bit more. Clarifying the types of love in a relationship will help us understand one of the basic concepts about marriage that so many of us have misunderstood.[14] Those two types of love are (1) romantic love and (2) caring love.

Romantic love is really defined by one key word: feelings! It is based on feeling an incredible, unstoppable, and at times indescribable attraction for another person. We frequently make mention of the "star-struck lover." They have met the love of their life, and the feeling of love is in the very air they breathe. They may feel so in love with the other person that they have butterflies in their stomach every time they think of the other person. Sometimes, we tell those people that what they feel in the pit of their stomach may not be love but indigestion.

We found a typical portrayal of romantic love in a letter that a young teenage boy sent to a girl he liked. On a piece of notebook paper, with somewhat shaky handwriting and grammar and spelling mistakes, he wrote this to her (Note: original errors have been included):

> Dear Ashley,
> Would you please be my girlfreind I like you a lot!
> YES, NO, or MAYBE.
> PS. Please circle YES NO or MAYBE.

On the same sheet of paper Ashley responded:

Im sorry I allready have a boyfreind named Kyle. But, when we brake up your my next choice.

PS. That will probly be in a month or too.

Once the romantic feelings leave, which Ashley recognized would happen in a month or two, she could move on to the next person that made her feel loved and special, and for whom she could have those feelings of attraction and "love." Chances are that the young man probably also moved on to the next girl that responded to him and whom he "loved."

Romantic love is what many movies are made of. What people refer to as "chick flicks" are usually sappy, romantic movies in which boy meets girl, they fall in love, they have fun and laugh together, they get married, and the tears roll down the audience's cheeks when one breaks up with the other, leaves, or dies in some tragic way. It's all about feelings of euphoria and excitement, the heights of desire and passion, and the rush of happiness and joy. Everything is perfectly choreographed to elicit such feelings from the audience. The light, the music, the camera angle, the weather—everything is done to manipulate the audience's emotional reaction.

Unfortunately, many fail to understand that the producers, the directors, and the actors want to evoke such feelings in you so that you will come to see their movie (and the sequel). And many walk away from these types of movies wanting and wishing for a similar experience in their own lives. Tony Campolo, the well-known Baptist preacher and sociologist, explains, "The first problem with romance is that it is not very stable. A normal person has at least six romantic experiences prior to marriage."[15] He then adds, "Once you are married, romance often shows signs of rapid decline."[16] No wonder so many divorces take place during the first five years of marriage. As the couple's romantic feelings plummet and their conflict increases, they find themselves disillusioned with their marriage, unhappy with their spouse, trapped in a loveless relationship, and with no hope for ever being happy again. So as soon as they can, they fly the coop, looking for the next person to bring romance back into their lives, often repeating the same sad cycle again and again.

So what happens when those romantic feelings begin to go away? Feelings are not a safe bet on which to base any decision, much more so on a decision as important as marriage. Chart your own feelings, and you will see that they fluctuate from day to day. There are those days that you feel so in love with your spouse, and then there are those days when he or she gets on your last nerve. When couples depend on romantic love (or feelings) for their happiness, they will be on a roller coaster of emotions. What often happens is that when the butterflies in their stomach learn to fly in formation and away from the

stomach, the person chooses to fly out of the cocoon and into the arms of someone else who makes them feel the butterflies fluttering again.

On the other hand, there is another vital form of love in marriage, caring love. Unlike romantic love, caring love is not based on feelings. Rather, it is based on a decision. In other words, I make a conscious decision to love you, knowing full well that we will go through good days and bad days. There will be ups in our relationship, as well as downs. We will disappoint each other and not always be in full agreement. Yes, the feelings of love may go up and down, but I am committed to loving you.

Remember that covenant relationship we discussed in a previous chapter? That is really what we are talking about here. Caring love acknowledges that covenant relationship. It acknowledges those times of feeling in love as well as those times of disagreement and conflict that will enter our homes. Our marriage vows are not based on how we may be feeling at any particular moment; rather, they are based on a decision. Depending on which vows you may have repeated on your wedding day, in general terms, we vow to take the other person:

From this day forward,
For better or worse,
For richer or poorer,
In sickness and in health,
Till death do us part,
To forsake all others,
To love and honor you,
All the days of your life.

The only feeling expressed in most of the marriage vows, depending on which religious tradition they may be, is love. But as we stated before, it is important to understand that true love, between a husband and wife, as God intended, is not a feeling but a decision. We decide that from this moment on, through thick and thin, whether we have a lot of money or no money, whether we are perfectly healthy or sick as a dog, we will have an exclusive relationship, and we will be respectful, kind, and loving as long as life shall last.

In a recent sermon series at our home church, our pastor, Tim Madding, defined love as “seeking the best interest of another, even to one’s own detriment or hurt.” You see, love is so much more than a feeling, more than just having butterflies in your stomach when you’re with the other person, melting in their presence, or going crazy for them. It is a decision to do the best for them, to meet their most important needs, and to do all in your power

to keep them from being hurt or from hurting them. Author and journalist Mignon McLaughlin is attributed with the nice expression, “A successful marriage requires falling in love many times, always with the same person.”

Couple activity: Discover and decide on your individual roles

We encourage you to take some time and separately make a list of what you believe should be your responsibilities and your spouse’s responsibilities as they relate to the household and/or children. Your soon-to-be spouse should create the same list. After you have written these lists separately, come together and share them with each other. Are you surprised by what you discovered as you compared them? Did you find that your roles and responsibilities are mainly based on each person’s interests and skills, or do they follow more traditional male/female roles? How similar or different are your roles compared to what you witnessed in your home growing up?

Now that you have had a chance to talk about what you observed and learned from your lists and from your families of origin, talk about what each of you would like to change. If you need to, find a way to agree on how you might revise your current lists. Once you revise your current lists, develop a plan and agree on how each of you will handle your individual roles and responsibilities in the future. Try your new plan for some time, perhaps a month or two, and then sit down again to review your new lists.

How do my family and friends feel?

Do you know how your friends feel about your relationship? Are they positive about it? Or have they expressed their concerns to you? And what about your family? How do they feel about your relationship and upcoming marriage? Are they happy and excited, or are they concerned? Have you talked to them about it?

You may think that what others think is not important, but when those closest to you express their concern about your partner or your relationship with them, you should stop and listen. Sometimes we are so involved in the relationship that we have developed blinders that keep us from seeing certain things about the other person that others pick up on.

Because this is a two-way street, how do you feel about your partner’s family members? Do you have any concerns about any of them? Do you dislike how they relate to one another at times? You may say to yourself that you’re marrying your partner, not their family, but that is far from the truth. Because we are the product of the family in which we grew up, when we marry someone, we marry their family too. And even if you move far away from your families, you will have to deal with them at some point in time. The inventory we mentioned before, Prepare/Enrich, will help you learn more

about you as a couple and also about each other's family of origin. The more you learn, the better prepared you will be for your marriage to your partner and their family.

Do I need to be married in the church?

This is a question that we're often asked, so we thought we'd include it in this chapter. A wedding does not have to take place in the church in order to be recognized legally. In many parts of the world, the couple needs only to be married in the court, and then they can choose to have a religious ceremony to solemnize their commitment and union before the church. In the United States, a church wedding ceremony is also a legally binding one. When the officiant (pastor, priest, rabbi) signs the marriage license and it is recorded in the local county court, the couple is officially and legally married.

At the same time, in many parts of the world, including the United States, when a couple lives together for a certain length of time, the government recognizes their union as a "common law marriage." The question is, which one does God recognize? Marriage, in the Bible, represents the greater reality of the union between Christ and His church. We are "married" to Christ through the ceremony of baptism by immersion (Matthew 3; Ephesians 5:25–27). In the same way, a wedding ceremony, as simple as it may be, in the courthouse or in a church (or any other venue you choose), solemnizes the union of the husband and the wife.

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Chapter 4

Preparing to Communicate

When you talk, do not say harmful things, but say what people need—words that will help others become stronger. Then what you say will do good to those who listen to you.

—Ephesians 4:29, NCV

Why is it so hard to communicate? It should be a normal, natural thing to do for all of us humans, and yet, even though we have the ability to speak, we fall short when it comes to communicating. American journalist Mignon McLaughlin once stated, "We hear only half of what is said to us, understand only half of that, believe only half of that, and remember only half of that."[1]

You may be thinking to yourself that you and your significant other don't have a problem communicating. After all, you see each other most days and spend lots of time talking. When you're not together, you call each other. If you can't talk at the moment, you send each other text messages, and occasionally you may send emails. That sounds like a lot of communication, doesn't it? Well, in some way, that is true because everything we do is a form of communication. Unfortunately, a lot of our communication is not healthy or good.

Basic concepts

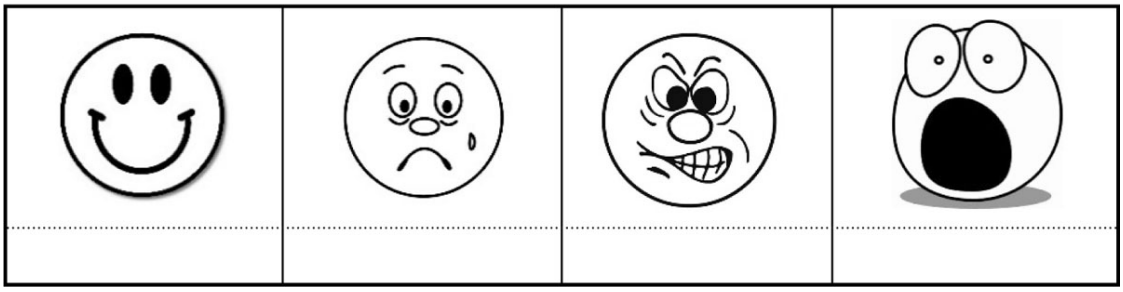
Let's begin our conversation around communication by understanding the basic concepts that surround it. First, there are four basic avenues through which we communicate with another person.

1. *Verbal*. The first, verbal communication, is necessary for healthy relationships. You must make a commitment to communicate verbally, even if it is sometimes uncomfortable or painful. Good communication makes everyone feel valued and may keep resentment and anger from building up and

erupting. People who don't talk don't know each other and won't have a way to understand one another or heal damaged relationships. When communicating, you must understand the power of words and choose your words wisely because they can either hurt or heal. In fact, the Bible states in Proverbs 18:21, "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (NIV). Successful verbal communication begins by using words that are bathed in love. Good words are honest but also caring, calming, and not volatile; they are appropriate words, not harsh or demeaning. The old saying "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is simply not true. According to Ephesians 4:29, only a certain type of communication should be spoken within the family. It says, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (NIV).

2. *Nonverbal.* The second form of communication is nonverbal body language. We give each other nonverbal cues all the time. These may include posture, gestures, eye movement, or facial expressions. Even so, we can only pick up certain clues from a person's nonverbal behavior. It's impossible to know what another is thinking simply by looking at them. For example, someone may be a deeply caring person who comes to tears easily. The tears may be misread by people who think the person is troubled or hurt when the tears are really the result of great joy or compassion. We will only know for sure if they choose to tell us why they are crying. Nonverbal communication gives us clues, but we should never rely on it alone to determine another person's motives, feelings, or thoughts.

How good are you at reading nonverbal communication? Can you give a label to these four common facial expressions?



These four facial expressions are pretty much universal around the world. You probably didn't have a difficult time recognizing happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. But there are many other expressions of body, or nonverbal, language. For each of the following categories, write down some examples of things we use in that manner (we have given you one example for each):

- Gesture: Waving _____
- Paralinguistic: Tone of voice _____
- Posture: Arms crossed _____
- Proxemics: “Personal space” _____
- Eye gaze: Staring _____
- Haptics: Touch _____
- Appearance: Hair _____
- Artifacts: Stethoscope _____
- Clothing: Uniform _____

3. *Written*. The third form of communication is the act of writing, typing, or printing symbols, letters, and numbers to convey information or a message. “It is helpful because it provides a record of information for reference.”[2] Early in the history of humanity, much communication was verbal. People told other people stories and passed on traditions, and these were passed from generation to generation. But at some point, oral communication and the passing on of traditions were written and became a permanent record that we can still see and read today, hundreds or thousands of years later. “Writing is commonly used to share information through books, pamphlets, blogs, letters, memos,”[3] and other missives. Emails and instant messaging are a common form of written communication in the workplace. Unfortunately, the written word also has flaws and does not always convey the feelings of the person writing. Emails and text messages are often misunderstood by the receiver because they don’t express the emotional content or intent of the sender.

4. *Visual*. Visual communication is done through photographs, art, drawings, sketches, charts, and graphs to convey information. We often use visuals during a presentation to provide helpful context along with whatever written and/or verbal information we provide. Because people have different learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc.), visual communication may be more helpful for some, while verbal messages may be more helpful to others.

The bottom line is that everything we do is communication. Sociologist and author Paul Watzlawick said it in a different way, “You cannot not communicate.”[4] What he was saying is that communication happens all the time, even when you don’t say anything at all. Just try a simple experiment. The next time you’re talking with someone (your spouse or a friend), just stop talking mid-thought. You will see that it is harder than you expect to keep the silence for more than five or ten seconds, but it will also be awkward for the person with whom you are talking. The other person will probably be very confused, concerned, or maybe even angry. Your silence communicated

something. What you communicated is up to speculation because perhaps it was a lack of interest, ignorance, or something completely different.

You may have had a similar experience to this: Someone walks into the office, and you already know that the person is in a bad mood before you have even said a word to him or her. The person's demeanor and facial expression communicated this message to you without his or her uttering one word. So we always communicate, even when we don't say anything. The challenge is that our nonverbal cues do not always communicate the reality of the situation.

Main ingredients of healthy verbal communication

Let's, for a moment, focus on verbal communication. Healthy verbal communication has two ingredients: assertiveness and active listening. We will explore each.

Assertiveness. "Assertiveness is the ability to express your feelings and ask for what you want in the relationship."[5] Being assertive does not mean that you are selfish or aggressive. If you ask people to describe someone who is assertive, they may tell you that an assertive person is forceful, overbearing, aggressive, strong, they speak their mind, or something similar. But these descriptive words for an aggressive individual don't necessarily describe an assertive one. Assertiveness means that you would like to see more clear, open, not defensive, and inoffensive communication in your relationship. "Assertiveness is a valuable communication skill. In successful couples, both individuals tend to be quite assertive. Rather than assuming their partner can read their minds, they share how they feel and ask clearly and directly for what they want."[6] Zoe Reyes describes five characteristics of an assertive person:

1. "They have confidence in themselves. In order to be assertive, you need to know what your boundaries are; what you like and what you don't like.
2. "They respect the opinions of others. Assertive people feel confident about their opinions and beliefs, but don't feel it's necessary to insult or degrade another person's opinions.
3. "Assertive people have the ability to validate other's feelings. … People often want to feel they are understood."[7] An assertive person does not have to agree with the other person's feelings, but they can be aware of them, show respect, and not minimize or disregard the other person's feelings.
4. "Assertive individuals are good listeners. … [Good listening] includes good eye contact, not interrupting when the other person is

talking, and reflecting back what was just said to confirm the information was heard correctly.

5. "[Assertive people are good at] problem solving and compromise. … Compromise shows that the other person's needs have been heard and this is the attempt at providing a solution that all can be content with."[8]

Perhaps one of the best ways to be assertive is to use "I" statements and to avoid using "you" statements. Most of the time, particularly when we are angry or frustrated, we tend to point an accusing finger (literally and figuratively) toward the other person. We also tend to make such generalized statements or global accusations as "you always" or "you never." For instance, your spouse is late coming home or for an appointment you had with them, and out of frustration, you say, "You're always late," or "You make me so mad." Pointing that accusatory finger tends to make the other person defensive and point a finger right back in your direction. So instead of starting with *you*, begin by talking about your feelings. For instance, you may say, "When you didn't call to tell me you'd be late, I was worried that you may have been hurt." These "I" statements simply express your feelings without placing blame or accusing the other person. By talking about your feelings, you don't point the finger at your spouse. And your feelings are your feelings. Your spouse can't argue with your feelings. Hopefully, they will listen to you expressing your feelings, validate them, be able to talk calmly about what happened, and discuss what changes need to happen in the future so that it is not repeated.

When you are assertive, you make a constructive request, and you are positive and respectful in your communication. You also use polite phrases such as "please" and "thank you." Here are some examples of assertive statements:

- "I'm feeling out of balance. While I love spending time with you, I also want to spend time with my friends. I would like us to find some time to talk about this."
- "I want to take a ski vacation next winter, but I know you'd prefer to go to the beach. I'm feeling confused about what choice we should make.[9] Can we discuss this further?"

Active listening. The second ingredient of healthy communication is active listening, which "is the ability to let your partner know you understand them by restating their message."[10] Simply responding "OK" or nodding does not

tell your spouse whether you understood or you were even listening. In order to practice active listening, it is important that you listen attentively without interruption and then restate what you heard. You don't simply repeat words like a parrot. Instead, acknowledge both the content and the feelings of the message from the other person. When you restate what you heard the other person say, you let them know whether you clearly understood. Here are a couple examples of active listening, based on the assertive statements above:

- "I heard you say you are feeling 'out of balance' and enjoy the time we spend together but that you also need more time to be with your friends. You want to plan a time to talk about this. Is that correct?"
- "If I understand what you said, you would prefer to go skiing next winter, but you think I would rather go to the beach. Is that correct?"[11]

As we stated before, active listening is more than simply repeating back what the other person said, much like a parrot or a voice recorder. Active listening means focusing on the other person completely. Remember, you listen with your ears, but the rest of your body sends the message that you are actively listening. You will give lots of nonverbal cues that you are indeed paying attention. Here are some of those nonverbal cues:

- **Smiling—**This is not a wide grin or an open-mouth smile, like after hearing a joke, but a small smile that can show your spouse that you're paying attention to what they're saying or show them you agree or are happy about the message being received. If you combine that small smile with a nod of the head, you are sending a powerful affirmation that you are hearing and understanding.
- **Mirroring—**When you reflect or mirror any facial expressions used by your spouse as they talk to you, it can be a sign of attentive listening. Those reflective expressions can help show them that you sympathize and empathize in more emotional situations. Obviously, these are the natural result of listening attentively, not just consciously trying to mimic their facial expressions.
- **Posture—**When you are listening attentively, you tend to lean slightly forward or sideways while sitting. Other signs of active listening may include turning the head a slight angle to the side or resting the head on one hand.
- **Distraction—**When listening attentively, refrain from fidgeting, looking at a clock or watch, looking at your cell phone, doodling, playing with your hair, or picking at your fingernails.

When each of you "knows what the other person feels and wants (assertiveness) and when each knows they have been heard and understood (active listening), intimacy is increased. These two communication skills, [when used together,] can help you grow closer as a couple."[12]

Are you listening to me?

Listening is not as easy as it sounds because we're often distracted by other things or even by our own thoughts. Often, instead of listening attentively to what our spouse, or somebody else, is telling us, we are already thinking of what we're going to say next. Here are some ways you can show that you are truly listening:

Listen with your eyes. "Listening is something that happens as much with [your] eyes as with [your] ears."[13] You convey you are being attentive to your spouse by listening with both. When your spouse is talking to you, "be sure to look at him or her clearly and directly, eye to eye. Eye contact is the single most powerful way to communicate care and interest."[14] Do not allow your eyes to wander to other things like the dishes on the counter, the television set, your cell phone, your computer, your iPad, anything else, or anyone else. When you focus your gaze on your significant other, you reinforce how important they are.

Is it important that we look at someone when they are talking to us? Try this experiment with a friend, just so you can demonstrate to yourself how important it really is.

Ask a friend to have a conversation with you. As both of you converse, ask your friend to take three different postures:

- Facing you, looking directly at you
- With his or her back to you
- With his or her side to you, not looking at you

Notice your emotional reaction to each of the three body postures.

When your friend faces you, you may find that you … feel that what you say matters. … When your friend turns sideways, you may experience some frustration and find it difficult to continue the conversation. When your friend faces directly away from you, you are likely to feel ignored and will not want to continue the conversation.

Your friend is perfectly capable of carrying on the conversation … without ever looking at you.[15]

However, talking to someone whose back is turned is not optimal, the conversation is awkward, and you may feel as if it was a waste of time. Regardless of the fact that your friend can hear you and respond appropriately, you don't feel that they are really listening.

You can try it the other way, with your friend as the speaker and you as the listener. "After doing this exercise yourself, imagine how it [would feel to your future spouse] to be listened to without the benefit of … eye contact. Remember to always give your [future spouse] the respectful consideration they deserve by supplementing your good listening skills with eye contact."[16]

Listen with your mind. Instead of constantly repeating such words as "very good," "yes," or "for sure" or the like, it may be better to elaborate and explain why you are agreeing with a certain point, and later, you can ask questions for clarification. We say to ask questions later because you must first allow your spouse to tell the story and express his or her feelings. To help you listen with your mind, try the following:

- **Remembering—**Trying to remember some of the details, ideas, and concepts proves that you are paying attention, and it will likely encourage your significant other to continue.
- **Reflection—**"Reflecting is closely repeating or paraphrasing what the speaker has said in order to show comprehension [see active listening, above]. Reflection is a powerful skill that can reinforce the message"[17] your spouse is trying to share, and it demonstrates that you are not simply hearing the sound of their voice but are truly trying to understand their message and their feelings.
- **Clarification—**Sometimes, it is important that you ask questions, not to get more information but to make sure you understand. Clarification usually involves the use of open-ended questions that encourage your significant other to expand on certain points as needed. You could ask something like, "I'm not sure I'm clear on what you meant by … ; could you please elaborate a little bit more?" Or you may say, "Can you tell me a little bit more about … ?"
- **Summarization—**Summarizing what your significant other has said "involves taking the main points of the … message [you heard] and reiterating them in a logical and clear way, giving [your significant other] the chance to correct if necessary."[18]

- **Questioning—**You can demonstrate that you have been paying attention by asking relevant questions or making statements that build or help to clarify what your significant other has said. By asking relevant questions, you also reinforce that you have an interest in what your significant other has been saying.

Two ears, one mouth

Did you ever pause to consider the fact that God gave you two ears and one mouth? What lesson is there in that for us? Some philosophers have surmised that it was because God wanted us to listen twice as much as we talk. Yet, we tend to do the opposite. We talk more than we listen. According to James 1:19, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (NIV).

Successful communicators have learned that we cannot really hear someone without listening to them. Effective listening is unselfish. It focuses on what the speaker feels and needs rather than on what your needs are. The goal is to understand what the person speaking is saying and why he or she is saying it. Look for the meaning behind the words, and ask for clarification if you are finding that difficult to do.

Conclusion

Communication is both a science and an art that will always need practice if we are to get better at it every day. Don't give up if you find it takes intentional effort and practice. The more you use these techniques, the quicker they will become second nature to you. However, even with the best communicators, conflicts are bound to happen. So stay tuned because we will discuss conflict management in the next chapter.

Reflection questions

Sometimes we don't realize how much or how little time we spend in communication with our partner. In the table below, estimate how much time you spend with your potential spouse (on any given day) on each of the communication activities listed:

Activity	Time Spent
Talking face-to-face	
Talking on the phone	
Emailing	

Texting	
Total	

1. A quick glance can tell you how you're spending most of your time in communication with your partner. Do you feel it's adequate? Too much of one, not enough of the other?
2. Has there ever been any misunderstanding between you and your significant other about the meaning behind an email or text message?
3. In a few words, describe a person that is assertive. What is that person like?

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Chapter 5

Preparing to Manage Conflict

A gentle answer will calm a person's anger,
but an unkind answer will cause more anger.
—Proverbs 15:1, NCV

When two ideas, personalities, or actions collide, conflict takes place. Conflict happens to everyone, everywhere, at some point. It's so potent that when we try to avoid it, the conflict only becomes worse. As strange as it may seem, a life void of conflict is not healthy. Just remember this important principle: not all conflict is bad! Conflict is normal, and sooner or later, you will experience it in one form or another. The greatest challenge will be in how you handle it.

Conflict management versus conflict resolution

Did you happen to notice that we wrote this chapter about "conflict management" instead of "conflict resolution"? What is the difference? "Conflict management and conflict resolution are often used synonymously."[1] If your goal is to resolve conflict, you may be frustrated when you discover that you will not be able to solve all the conflicts in your relationship. Managing conflict implies that the conflict exists, but it is controlled in such a way that it is not a major problem. Remember, every couple has conflict, so the goal is not to resolve all conflict because that may not happen, but rather, the goal is to learn to manage it in such a way that it will not affect your relationship negatively.

Psychologist and researcher Dr. John Gottman explains,

> Research proves that 69% of problems in a relationship are unsolvable. These may be things like personality traits your partner has that rub you the wrong way, or long-standing issues around spending and saving money. . . . Research findings emphasize the idea that couples must learn to manage conflict rather than avoid or attempt to eliminate it.
>
> Trying to solve unsolvable problems is counterproductive, and no couple will ever completely eliminate them.[2]
>
> It's no wonder that we get frustrated when we try to resolve, instead of manage, our conflict.

Calm, cool, and collected

It is imperative that we calm down before we attempt to have a discussion. Anger prevents healthy communication from occurring, and many decisions are made and words spoken in the heat of battle that cannot be reversed. So how long does it take to calm down? According to *Psychology Today*,

> The body takes about 20 minutes to return to normal after a full fight/flight response. In other words, angry people need time to calm down before they can think clearly again. Angry people will not completely comprehend any explanations, solutions, or problem solving options until their body returns to normal again. Allowing for this refractory period is a critical part of any anger management strategy. The important thing to remember is that you must remain calm in the face of anger. If you remain calm, your cortex will send a signal to your limbic system to dampen the fight/flight response allowing you to develop well thought out survival strategies. When the fight/flight mechanism is fully engaged, it takes about 20 minutes to regain the ability to fully process information again.[3]

So the first strategy for managing conflict is to take the necessary time—at least twenty minutes—to calm down! Clearly, the takeaway here is that cooling down takes time, and trying to deal with an overheated situation immediately may prove futile.

Steps to managing conflict

Before we talk about steps for dealing with conflict, let's look at the "rules of engagement." First, you need to agree on the ground rules:

- Never threaten divorce
- Never confront in public
- Never nag
- Never verbally attack
- Never resurrect the past

At the same time, agree to:

- Always ask permission to address the conflict
- Always invite God to be part of your discussion
- Always admit when you're wrong
- Always listen
- Always keep your arguments out of the bedroom
- Always stick to the subject
- Always deal with disagreements as soon as possible
- Always decide on a plan

For over three decades, we have been training pastors and counselors in the use of Prepare/Enrich, the premarital preparation and marriage enrichment tool for couples. One of the core exercises in the program is a ten-step process to guide you in managing couple conflict.[4] Read the explanation of each step, and then write how you will use it in dealing with a current conflict:

1. *Decide on a place and time*. To prevent someone from feeling compelled to give an account of themselves on the spot and to avoid an indefinite delay for resolving conflict, setting a time and place for discussion is a must. Feel free to say, "Hey, I need time to process this," or "I am too frustrated to give a good response at the moment," and then settle on a time to resume the discussion. This lets your spouse know you care about them and that you aren't running away from conflict, even if you aren't able to

discuss it at this very moment. So you both need to agree on a specific time and place when you can discuss the issue in private and give it the dedicated time it deserves/needs.

Place: _____ Time: _____

2. *Define the issue*. Define the problem, and don't be vague. What is it that you need to manage? Notice that it is *one* issue. Do not try to deal with multiple problems. If you do, you will accomplish nothing.

Issue:_____

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3. *You're both parts of the problem*. Every issue has two sides, and even when someone is right, they may not express their point in the right way. Take a moment to list the ways you have contributed to the conflict. Your spouse will do the same. Please note, you are not to list ways your spouse is part of the problem, but rather, what your contribution is. You will see why this step is important later. You both must own the issue and accept responsibility for the part you played. On one occasion, a wife said, "But I didn't say anything." We told her that was her part of the problem. As we wrote before, good listening involves responding by paraphrasing what was heard. To not say anything does not help the situation.

I (you complete this statement) contribute to the problem by:

_____

_____

I (your spouse completes this statement) contribute to the problem by:

_____

_____

_____

4. *Historical analysis*. If this is an old conflict, list past attempts that have been made to manage the issue. If something has not worked in the past, it probably won't be successful now. So list these in order to avoid repeating the same mistake because the past has taught you what is ineffective. If you have been trying the same solutions to fix the same old problems and nothing has changed, it is time to try something different.

What have we done in the past to try to resolve this issue, but it has not worked?_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. *Brainstorm new solutions*. In this step, you pool your brainpower to come up with as many potential new solutions as

possible. Don’t stop to evaluate each possibility, because such an evaluation will shut down the brainstorming process. Just list as many potential solutions you can think of as a couple and write them down. Don’t stop and move on until you can think of nothing else. Some solutions you come up with may be good and reasonable; others may be crazy and ridiculous, but the point of this exercise is to continue coming up with as many ideas as possible. Why? Because in the midst of sharing some impractical and ridiculous solutions, you may actually come up with a great one that you’ve never considered before. That’s the value of brainstorming.

We remember working with a couple who was facing marital difficulties. As we talked with them, we found that the main issue they had been dealing with had to do with finances. At this point, we asked them to tell us possible solutions that came to mind, and we would write them down. The husband began, “I could get a second job, a part-time job.” His wife then said, “I could get an additional part-time job too.” We were writing down all the possibilities they were coming up with. He said, “We could sell the house and buy a smaller house.” She then said, “We could sell one of the cars and just have one instead of two.” He then said, “We could sell the kids.” The wife looked at him like he was crazy and was about to say something, but we stopped her and told them to continue. They gave us about fifteen possible solutions until they couldn’t come up with anymore.

Write down as many ideas as you can think of to manage your situation. Don’t stop to analyze each. They don’t have to be rational, logical, or sensible. Simply write down every idea that comes to mind. If needed, use additional paper.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. *Evaluate each solution on your brainstorming list*. Now, look at each possibility that you have come up with and weigh the pros and cons. Discuss each and decide together whether each solution has any chance of success. If not, cross it off the list. On the other hand, if a possibility may offer a resolution, keep it. Continue this until you have gone through each item and are left with a list of possibilities.

As we spoke with the couple, we began to read the items on the list they had brainstormed. The first item was the husband's: "I could get a second job, a part-time job." His wife responded, "I suppose you could, but then we would never see you at home. I don't like that option." So we scratched it off the list. The second item was the wife's, "I could get an additional part-time job too." This time the husband said, "That would create the same issue. We would never see you at home, and we need you at home." So we scratched that off the list too.

We continued with the third item, "We could sell the house and buy a smaller house." The wife responded to that item by saying that while that was a possibility, the family was growing, and going to a smaller house would be very uncomfortable, but they both agreed to leave that one on the list as a possibility.

The next item was, "We could sell one of the cars and just have one instead of two." This time the husband responded that while that would be a possibility, it would mean he would have to drive his wife to her job, which was on the south of the city, then drop the kids off at their school, which was closer to their home on the east side, and then drive to his work on the north side, and then do the reverse route in the evening. "And what happens if one of the kids gets sick and we need to take them to the doctor?" asked the

wife. So they determined that it was not a good solution. “What about selling the kids?” we asked. The husband quickly responded, with a smile on his face, “Nah, who’s going to want to buy those rascals?”

The bottom line is that from the original list of about fifteen ideas, they narrowed it down to just five, the ones with the greatest possibility of success to deal with their financial challenge.

Now it’s the time to look at all the options you wrote, evaluate each, eliminate those that don’t make sense or will not work, and choose up to five that have the greatest potential to work.

7. *Agree on one*. So your brainstorming list has now been narrowed down to a small list of possibilities. In this step, you will decide on one that you both agree has the most potential.

From the five potential solutions you chose in step six, which one are you going to try?_____

_____

_____

_____

8. *You're both parts of the solution*. In step three, you both agreed that you were each part of the problem. This is an important step because now you will each decide how you can each be a part of the solution. After all, if you both own the problem, you are both a part of the solution. Discuss how you will each approach the solution. You identified the problem, you have decided on one potential solution, and now, you must be specific about the steps you will each take to contribute to the solution. The more specific you each are, the better.

I (you complete this) will contribute to the solution by:_____

_____

_____

_____

I (your spouse completes this) will contribute to the solution by:_____

_____

_____

_____

9. *Check-up.* This step is simply setting up another meeting, after the solution has been tried, to check in with each other to see how things are going and to determine whether it has worked or if another solution needs to be tried. Don't be discouraged if you need to keep trying. It's part of the healthy process. Just go back to the brainstorming step and try another solution if either of you feels the issue has not been managed in a satisfactory way.

We will try this solution for (length of time—one week, one month, etc.)_____

_____

We will meet to see how we are managing the problem on
(date) _____ (time) _____

10. *Reward each other*. The successful managing of conflict and saving of a marriage deserves celebration. This step is a way of acknowledging and thanking your spouse for the part they played in moving forward. Plan a date together or something meaningful to reinforce the value of going through the process of conflict management together.

Because my spouse did his/her part, I will reward him or her by:

_____

_____

_____

Because my spouse did his/her part, I will reward him or her by:

_____

This may seem a bit exhaustive, and certainly, not all conflicts warrant this much attention or the need to go through all these steps. One of the main benefits of this process is that it forces us to slow down in the heat of the moment so that we can think about the issue in a calm and careful way instead of aggressively trying to win—which will inevitably make us both lose.

Admit when you need help and seek it

We have been talking about conflict management, but there are times and situations where practicing everything we have shared does not seem to change your marriage for the better. In that case, don't wait until it is too late. Seek professional help immediately. Of course, you are not going to seek help unless you first get to the point where you admit that you need it. Too many people have the mistaken belief that seeking help is a sign of weakness. Listen up! Seeking help, when needed, is not a sign of weakness, but rather, it is a sign of *strength*! Here are some signs that you may need outside intervention:

- *You go over the same issues again and again with no resolution or closure*. The constant cycle of repeating the same arguments about the same problem is a clear sign that you need outside help. Every attempt at reasonable conversation fails and ends with shouting, disregard, or someone walking out of the room with no closure or resolution.
- *Physical and/or emotional abuse.* Abuse—physical, emotional, or verbal—should not be tolerated under any circumstances. The sad reality is that without professional help, the chances that the abuse will end are minimal, and instead, the chances that the abuse will escalate are almost certain. In many cases, it only ends with the death of the victim. This is a clear sign that intervention is needed immediately.
- *Pretending to respect a certain family member*. Feigning respect is an indication of a serious problem. One dysfunctional family member can rule the rest of the family, usually by fear.

- *Fear to say certain things*. When there is fear and you don't feel comfortable sharing your feelings and thoughts because you fear being demeaned, criticized, bullied, or threatened, something is terribly wrong. A professional counselor or mediator can be very helpful in these situations.
- *You deny, excuse, or ignore such serious problems as drug or alcohol abuse*. Substance abuse indicates greater problems than simple emotional distress or fatigue. A key issue is when family members excuse the behavior by saying, "I can stop anytime; I'm not addicted." Such a statement is the height of denial and a key indicator that help is needed.
- *Suicidal thoughts*. You may hear such words as, "You would be better off without me." "I should never have been born." "It would be best if I died." These kinds of negative thoughts reveal a need for professional help. All of us have occasional things we regret or are sorry for; however, when it becomes a daily obsession, there should be deeper consideration as to its reason and impact.
- *No one admits a problem, yet everyone knows it exists*. Some people think that admitting that there's a problem is an admission of failure. This avoidance can be fatal to a marriage or family. Everyone else who is looking in clearly sees there is an issue and may even tell you, but people who have the problem usually meet those words with denial.
- *You ignore or excuse signs of bad behavior in a family member*. Bullying, giving orders, pulling rank, verbal abuse, arrogance, or indifference to the feelings of others are signs that should not be overlooked, excused, or allowed to continue. Intervention is called for.

Two things to keep in mind when seeking outside help:

- *Find a skilled, godly counselor*. Yes, seek biblically based counseling. This is so important. Make certain the individual or agency that is giving counsel is grounded in the Word of God. I (Claudio) have a counseling psychology degree from a state university. I know and understand the strengths of psychology, but I also know its weaknesses and have concerns about some

theories and practices common among secular psychologists. Far too many don't base their practice, counsel, or beliefs on the Word of God and may even expose their clients to dangerous practices. So, as far as possible, seek a counselor that has spiritual beliefs well grounded in the Bible.

- *Do not go to family members, friends, or colleagues.* Why? The individuals who make up those groups are often biased. Family members may be especially biased and do not see things as well as someone who can be more objective in looking at all sides of the issue. You need a neutral party. Also, once the issue has been resolved, it may be harder for your family members to forgive your spouse and restore the relationship that has been broken by the knowledge. Remember the preceding principle: seek outside biblically based counseling.

Conclusion

Managing your conflicts takes dedicated time, effort, and lots of giving and taking. But in the end, you will discover that you have grown closer together through the process. Don't give up easily. Seek outside help if needed. Most important, bathe the process in prayer and ask God to lead as you endeavor to work through the things that may divide you. Learning these techniques now, before you are married, will help ensure a marriage that will last a lifetime!

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Chapter 6

Preparing to Become an In-Law

Wise children make their father happy,
but foolish children make their mother sad.
—Proverbs 10:1, NCV

You're getting ready to get married, to form a new family. The excitement and nervousness of the upcoming wedding and honeymoon keep you up at night. You can hardly wait until you become husband and wife until death do you part. But between "I do" and "rest in peace," you will be joining the family of your beloved. Earlier, we talked about how important it is to get to know your future spouse's family because, in a sense, you will be marrying them too. The reason we wrote this chapter is to remind you that as much as your future spouse's family will play a role in your marriage, you also will play a role in their family. Now, they will be welcoming a totally new person into their family circle. Not an adoptive child they can teach and train through the years, but a full-grown adult with his or her own history and idiosyncrasies. So what can you do to make the transition to becoming a son-in-law or daughter-in-law as smooth as possible and make a positive contribution to your spouse's family?

Learn their history

If you have been spending time with your new family, you probably have already begun to pick up on some of their history. Perhaps you have met their extended family, have learned their names, what they do, and where they live. You may have even begun to like, or dislike, some of them or

what they do. Showing interest in their family is a way to let them see that you care about them. Instead of being an outsider, you really want to belong to the family.

The first time that I (Claudio) went to Virginia to meet Pam's extended family was an eye-opening experience. I remember going to visit Granddaddy and Granny Napier (her paternal grandparents) in the small cabin-like house where they lived. Those two had the ability to make you feel at home from the moment they saw you. When I first met them and ate Granny's apple pies, I adopted them as my own grandparents—and I know they also adopted me as their Hispanic grandson. I looked forward to seeing them and spending time at their house whenever we got to go home to Virginia and was very sad when they passed away. A piece of my life was gone at their death.

When I went to see her maternal grandparents, it was very different. They, too, welcomed me with arms wide open and became my second set of grandparents. My challenge was that there were so many in their family. I tried to learn the names of all the aunts, uncles, and cousins and all of their nicknames until my head was spinning. I'm still not sure I have met them all. Family reunions on that side of the family were like a town gathering.

Attending their family reunions gave me insight into their lives and history and helped me to become part of the family. Of course, as the pastor in the family, I also had the honor of officiating at many of the funerals for those who were now my new family members. With family joys also comes family pain.

The first time I (Pam) went to Colombia to meet Claudio's family was a little scary. I had met his mom, two brothers, and one sister before our wedding, but now I was going to a different country and culture altogether. We first flew into Caracas, Venezuela, where his brother lived, and met him and his family. Now, keep in mind that this was happening during some of the darkest days of the drug cartel wars in Colombia, so I was already a bit apprehensive about traveling there. However, it was the first time Claudio had been back to his homeland since moving to the United States fourteen years earlier, and I was anxious to meet the rest of his family and introduce them to our two young daughters.

From Caracas, we flew to his city of birth, Bucaramanga, Colombia, where I met some of his extended family and friends. While they were

all very warm and friendly toward me and we got to eat some delicious food, the language barrier kept us from interacting as much as I wish we could have. On the final leg of this trip, we went to Bogota, where Claudio grew up, and met the rest of the family and more friends. We also visited various cities and traveled around the beautiful countryside. Learning about his family, his country, and his friends helped me to understand and appreciate him and his culture even more.

Taking an interest in your spouse's family shows them that you want to belong, that you want to be part of it, and that you value and want to contribute to their history. So, ask questions. If they have pictures on the wall, ask about the people in them, and make an effort to attend family functions and events.

Relate to your father-in-law

One of the most special relationships is that between a dad and his daughters. From the moment his girls are born, they have their daddy wrapped around their little fingers. So, naturally, he will be very protective of them. He will be entrusting his most precious treasure to you and will expect that you will treat her accordingly. Anything you can do to reach out and build a strong bond with your father-in-law will go a long way toward strengthening your relationship with his daughter.

Sit down and talk to your future father-in-law about his job, his experience, and his goals in life. My (Claudio) father-in-law was a quiet man, but he was the first one to extend his hand of welcome to me. George was a unique man, a true gentleman, a good husband and father, and a great father-in-law. When he was diagnosed with brain cancer, he wanted to make sure all his affairs would be in order, so he had his will written. I remember one day when we were alone at home, he sat with me in the living room and showed me his will. He wanted my opinion. That he would ask me, a man many years his junior, and his son-in-law, for my opinion on something so personal was an amazing show of respect. George has been gone almost three decades, but I still miss him, his kind, gentle spirit, his generosity, and his love.

Unfortunately, we lived too far away to spend lots of quality time together. If you live close to your future family, try to spend time with your father-in-law. Find things that you have in common and try to experience them together. Invite him to a ball game, join him at a local event, or invite him out to lunch one day—spend some "guy time"

together. And, when the time comes, be sure to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage before you pop the question. It is not just a nice tradition but is also a show of respect that he will appreciate.

Lend a helping hand

Whenever you are visiting the home of your in-laws, see if you can be of help. Offer to wash the dishes or take out the trash. Sitting around, doing nothing, and just waiting to be served does not send a very positive signal, even if that's what some of the others in the family are doing. Perhaps you can offer to run errands; that might be very helpful as they prepare meals or get ready for a special family event, such as a wedding or funeral. The bottom line is, try to play an active role in the life of the family. Otherwise, you may be perceived as a loner or someone who does not care to contribute to the family's life and well-being.

Building bridges

Your future parents-in-law are not the only members of the family with whom you will have a relationship unless the person you are marrying is an only child. If your future spouse has siblings, try to develop a relationship with them and with their families. They grew up together and enjoy a lot of history in common. So having positive interactions with them will make your contribution to that history more positive and meaningful.

Blending the old and the new

Traditions keep families together. Every family has its own set of traditions, whether they recognize it or not. So when the traditions from two different families try to mingle, chances are there may be some fireworks. Your in-laws are used to opening Christmas presents on Christmas morning, whereas you and your family want to maintain your tradition of opening them on Christmas Eve. Should they change their way of doing things, or should you?

Perhaps a general rule of thumb is for you to be tactful and considerate. Before you marry, have a discussion with your significant other about where and with whom you will spend the holidays and how to navigate the waters of tradition. Is it possible you could alternate holidays? We did that for many years until our parents passed away. One year we would spend Christmas at Pam's parents' home and the next at

Claudio's. The same thing was done for Thanksgiving. Now that our kids are grown and have their own homes, we accept that they have to make the same accommodation, so there have been times when we have not had either or both of our daughters and their husbands at our home for one or another of the holidays, or we have gone to one of their homes to celebrate.

Perhaps you can approach the subject by talking about how you celebrated holidays in your home and find a way to blend the two. If you let them know that observing their traditions is just as important as creating your own, that will go a long way to making the in-law connection even stronger.

Draw the line

When you first meet your future in-laws, you will probably do all you can to impress them. After all, if they don't like you, your chances of being welcomed into their family may be diminished. So you may be more accommodating. Once your children are born, there seems to be a clear shift. You are the parents, and therefore your children are to follow your rules, whether their grandparents like them or not. Your children, your rules; my children, my rules. That needs to be made very clear. But it would be better if your spouse, instead of you, made that clear to his/her own parents.

Some parents-in-law ignore these boundaries, which can make it very chaotic for your children (because they don't know who to listen to). Sad to say, some in-laws are overbearing and end up causing a lot of problems for their children and grandchildren. We know of grandparents who are not allowed contact with their grandchildren because they have not maintained proper boundaries. They have confessed that it is their fault, but now they don't know what to do to make it right. So the best thing that everyone can do is to set boundaries early, make sure everyone is on the same page, and help safeguard that your in-laws don't get their feelings hurt down the line. Also, make certain your spouse deals with his or her own family issues and don't try to get involved unless you're asked to. Your advice may not be welcomed otherwise.

At the same time, consult with your spouse on how to handle some of those challenging issues. Your spouse knows his or her family better than you do. If you can tell a situation is a bit delicate, ask your spouse for advice.

Don’t be stingy

We don’t mean that you need to send your future in-laws lots of lavish gifts all the time. Rather, we suggest you invite and try to include them in some of the activities you have as a family. Perhaps your son has a soccer game or your daughter a piano recital; why not invite them to come along? They can choose whether they want to come, but even if they can’t come, you’re being thoughtful, and it will be something they will appreciate.

Perhaps when you’re young, your future in-laws paid for meals when you went out to eat, but now that you work and earn money, it’s nice if you pay for them every so often, or at the very least start paying for your own meal.

If you live near your in-laws, stop by often to check up on them or just to say hello. But if you notice that something needs to be done around the house, offer to do it. Maybe you can shovel snow from their driveway, mow the lawn, or clean the gutters. Perhaps you can arrange with your father-in-law to help him put a fresh coat of paint on the shutters, doors, or entire house one summer. These random acts of kindness can help bring you closer together.

Show gratitude

Most grandparents and in-laws want to express their love through gifts. Perhaps they send your newborn some new outfits. Take lots of pictures of your child wearing those outfits and send the pictures to your in-laws, telling them how nice they look on your child and expressing your appreciation for the gift. No one likes to be taken for granted. Everyone likes to know that their efforts and small gestures are recognized.

Seek their wisdom

Your in-laws have walked this road before and are full of wisdom and great advice. If they are respecting proper boundaries, they may be very cautious in offering any suggestion or guidance unless you ask for it. Asking them for their guidance and advice will open a treasure trove of information, experience, and knowledge. And it will also show them that you value their opinions and thoughts.

Watch your mouth

How you communicated in your family of origin may be very different from how your in-laws communicate. Even if both families have conversation that is very open, always remember that you're the new kid on the block, and your opinion may not always be welcome. This is especially important when dealing with family issues or problems. It is always wiser to let your spouse deal with his or her family, and your spouse should allow you to deal with yours. If you are asked for your input, choose your words wisely—knowing what not to say is as important as what you say. If it's possible to change the subject to a more pleasant, less conflicting one, do so; but again, do so very carefully so that it doesn't seem as if you're trying to control the family's affairs.

The other woman in your marriage

Probably the most commonly known source of challenges and difficulties in marriage is with the mother-in-law. We left this one for last, not because it is the least important but because we need to devote more time to her than to the rest of the family. In many cases we have known, the mothers-in-law deserve every bit of the humor that surrounds them. There are probably thousands, if not millions, of jokes attributed to these special ladies. Here's one we heard some time ago: Finally engaged, David is excited to show off his new bride. "Ma," he said to his mother over the phone, "I'm going to bring home three girls, and I want you to guess which one is my fiancée." Sure enough, twenty minutes later, David walks in the door with three girls following him.

"It's that one," his mother said, without blinking an eye.

"Wow!" exclaimed David. "How in the world did you know it was her?"

"I just don't like her," she replied.

Yes, we could go on and on telling and laughing about mother-in-law jokes. Of course, they're funnier if it is somebody else's mother-in-law, not your own mother. Here are some suggestions on how to have as good a relationship as possible with your mother-in-law.

- *Spend time together*. Sometimes, the more time you spend with someone, the more interesting they become, the more you appreciate where life has taken them, and the more you grow to like them. Instead of avoiding your mother-in-law, spend time with her. She probably has an interesting story to tell, so ask her

questions about her life, her family, her upbringing, her challenges, and her triumphs. They don't have to be long talks, but a few minutes here and there will go a long way toward developing a good relationship.

- *Fake it 'til you make it*. In another book, we wrote about how when we act a certain way toward someone, our thoughts toward them change, and eventually, our feelings change too. If you treat your mother-in-law with kindness, respect, and love, you will develop the same thoughts and, eventually, the same feelings toward her. You're not being hypocritical because we're not telling you to act in a way that's contrary to your feelings. We're advising you to treat her in a manner that would be pleasing to Jesus. Jesus told us to love one another (John 13:34). He wasn't commanding us to feel love toward another person but to act lovingly toward them. In fact, Jesus took it a step further when He told us to love our enemies (Luke 6:27), even when they hate you and despise you. Hopefully, you will have a good relationship with your mother-in-law from the beginning, but even if she turns out to be a terror, be kind and loving toward her.
- *Keep a proper perspective*. We've been asked many times the question, "Why is my mother-in-law so mean to me? I love her son. … Why isn't she happy about that?" As much as dads are protective of their daughters, moms have a hard time accepting that another woman will take as good care of their sons as they did. Perhaps, if you ask her for help and advice on what her son likes, she may be very open with you. From the time we were dating, Pam asked my mother to teach her to cook Colombian food. I thought that was sweet on her part because I was content with anything she cooked for me. However, Pam put in the time and effort to learn and has become as good a cook of my favorite Colombian dishes as my mother was. My mom was happy to share with Pam because by doing so, she was indirectly still taking care of me.
- *Cut her some slack*. This also goes for grandpa. Grandparents tend to be a little overindulgent with their grandkids. They may give them more sweets than we would, give them more to eat than we do, let them stay up later than we do, and in general let

them get away with more than we do at our house. That could drive you up the wall, and you could go to war over them breaking your rules, or you can give them a break, count it as home-field advantage, and let them and your children enjoy a little bit of loving indulgence.

As we said earlier, though, there are some areas where your rules should be respected. For instance, insist that your children are buckled up and in a proper car seat. That is not optional. If your mother-in-law or father-in-law doesn't follow your rules, first let your spouse talk to them. If they persist, you may have to withdraw certain privileges, such as transporting your children.

- *Understand and respect her priorities*. We always think it's wise to follow the principle, "Your house, your rules." So maybe she wants to have Thanksgiving lunch instead of dinner, or she wants the family to go to church together, or to wear certain clothes for the family Christmas meal. It may not be the way you do it at your home or your parents' home, but when you're at your in-laws' house, a little bit of accommodation to their wishes may go a long way toward harmony and good memories.
- *Respect her daughter/son*. You will marry her son or daughter because you love that person and want to make them happy. If going to their family home makes them happy, do it for them, and try to make the time the best you can. Your in-laws will appreciate that you're willing to bring their son or daughter home, and their grandchildren too.
- *Look for the good*. It's easier to focus on the negative and therefore develop a negative attitude. But if you look for the good in your mother-in-law, you may find that you like her. When you do, express those things to her. If you like her cooking, let her know. If she has a good sense of humor, is patient, thoughtful, caring to your children, or whatever, affirm her for those things. Everybody enjoys hearing words of affirmation.

Conclusion

You can choose to have a cordial, loving relationship with your in-laws or a conflictive one. We understand the challenge if they are unkind, mean, or rude to you or your children; it makes it more difficult to be

nice to them. However, Jesus said, “Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Before you say “I do,” do your best to build a positive relationship with your future in-laws by being a good son- or daughter-in-law. It’s a two-way street!

Chapter 7

Preparing for Your Financial Future

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.
—Romans 13:8, NIV

One of the biggest sources of conflict among married couples has to do with finances. Unfortunately, the financial difficulties often begin before they say "I do." Many young people come into their marriage with a load of debt that causes a lot of stress and difficulties from day one. Couples coming to marriage for the second or third time often come into the new relationship with a lot of financial commitments to their previous family or families. That's why it is important that you talk about your finances before planning the wedding so that you can take the steps necessary to be as financially stable as possible and therefore minimize this area of conflict in your marriage.

Full financial disclosure

Dishonesty damages a relationship. We talked to a wife once who told us how devastated she was when, shortly after the wedding, she found out her new husband carried an almost insurmountable load of debt. It was only through her discipline, years of hard work, sacrifices, and strict adherence to a budget that she managed to right that financial ship that was heading toward disaster. Before you get married, both you and your significant other should give full financial disclosure to make sure there are no unpleasant surprises later. Personal finance writer Amy Fontinelle

suggests several areas to explore openly before even making or accepting a marriage proposal:[1]

1. *Are you financially compatible?* Would you seriously consider marrying someone whose values and goals are totally opposite to yours? One way to evaluate your values is to look at how your boyfriend or girlfriend (and for them to look at how you) spends money. For instance, if the other person has never carried a credit card balance and you believe it's cool to go on vacation first and pay it off later, chances are you have a source of conflict here.[2]
2. *Put everything out in the open.* Before you even become engaged, reveal your assets and debts. This full disclosure should include things such as bank accounts (checking, savings, CDs, etc.), investment accounts, and properties, as well as any debt from credit cards, student loans, car loans, or mortgages. For those marrying someone who's been married before or who may have children from previous relationships, you should be aware of any child support payments and any other obligations your fiancé/fiancée and the parent of their children have. For better or for worse, once you're married, you assume your spouse's debts and responsibilities, so be as informed as possible before taking that step.
3. *The proof is in the pudding.* If you are both serious about being honest, then it's not enough to put a few figures down on a piece of paper. At some point in time before you make that final commitment, you both should bring to the table actual bank statements, bills, and even a credit report. It used to be more difficult to get a copy of your credit score, but now you can obtain it free, so that should be no excuse. If you have been paying your bills on time and you don't have an excessive credit liability, your credit score will reflect that. If you have a lot of debt and a bad loan payment history, you will also learn that. There are several free ways to get your credit report and score online, so it's not difficult.
4. *Don't be afraid to ask.* Another way to gather valuable information about your potential spouse's financial condition is to request a report through ChexSystems, a company that tells

banks whether a prospective customer has a history of bounced checks, overdrawn accounts, unpaid fees, or other problems (similar to a credit report). Why is this important to know? If you or your spouse have a problematic financial history, you may not be allowed to open a joint account together. Another question to ask is whether they owe back taxes. If so, you could end up with a tax lien on a joint account. You should also find out whether they have ever filed for bankruptcy. Their credit report should also reveal that. As Fontinelle explains, "Completed Chapter 7 bankruptcies remain on consumer credit reports for 10 years and completed Chapter 13 bankruptcies remain there for 7 years."[3] Trying to get this information does not demonstrate a lack of trust but rather a mutual willingness to be open and transparent.

5. *Once you say "I do."* Before you say "I do," you should also talk about how you will handle the finances. For instance, talk about who will be primarily responsible for the accounting (keeping the budget, paying bills, reconciling accounts, etc.). You should also talk about whether you will have a joint account, whether you will have checking and savings accounts, whether you will have credit or debit cards, and how you will make decisions on major purchases. We believe it is important that you have joint accounts that both of you have access to. Once we're married, we should be one in everything. It is not wise to be one in everything except finances.
6. *Any deal-breakers?* If you are both honest and upfront, almost any financial challenges from the past can be dealt with. It may involve a lot of sacrifices and compromises, it may mean going without some things for a while, and it may include seeking help from financial advisors. Many have gone that route and have managed to correct the mistakes from their past and gone on to have a much brighter future. A deal-breaker should be an unwillingness on the part of one or both to be completely open and honest about their finances. It should make you nervous about secrets they may be hiding that could come back to bite them.

Budgeting

Why is budgeting so important? Well, for one thing, it is a way for you to prioritize financial goals. A household budget is so important in this consumer era because it helps you to identify the areas where you spend and take necessary steps to curtail expenditure on items that are not essential and unnecessary. Are you still not convinced that budgeting is worth the effort? Well, here are some more reasons why budgeting is crucial to the financial wellness of your family:

1. It keeps you focused—A budget helps you work toward your long-term goals.

If you just drift aimlessly through life, tossing your money at every pretty, shiny object that happens to catch your eye, how will you ever save … to buy a car, [take that long awaited vacation, or] put a down payment on a house … ?

A budget [helps] you … map out your goals, save your money, keep track of your progress, and make your dreams a reality.[4]

2. Don't spend money that you don't have—"Far too many [consumers] spend money they don't have—and we owe it all to credit cards."[5]

Before the age of plastic, people tended to know if they were living within their means. At the end of the month, if they had enough money left to pay the bills and sock some away in savings, they were on track. These days, people who overuse and abuse credit cards don't always realize they're overspending until they're drowning in debt.

If you create and stick to a budget, you'll never find yourself in this precarious position. You'll know exactly how much money you earn, how much you can afford to spend each month and how much you need to save.[6]

3. Emergency planning—"Life is filled with unexpected surprises"[7]—you get laid off, become sick or injured, or have a death in the family. Financial surprises can lead to serious turmoil.

This is exactly why everyone needs an emergency fund.

Your budget should include an emergency fund that consists of at least three to six months' worth of living expenses. This extra money will ensure that you don't spiral into the depths of debt after a life crisis. Of course, it will take time to save up three to six months' worth of living expenses.

Don't try to dump the majority of your paycheck into your emergency fund right away. Build it into your budget, set realistic goals and start small.[8]

Little by little, that emergency fund will grow.

4. Rethink spending habits—"Building a budget forces you to take a close look at your spending habits. You may notice that you're spending money on things you don't need. … Budgeting allows you to rethink your spending habits and re-focus your financial goals."[9]

5. Sleep soundly—"Following a budget will also help you catch more shut-eye. How many nights have you tossed and turned worrying about how you were going to pay the bills? People who lose sleep over financial issues are allowing their money to control them. Take back the control. When you budget your money wisely, you'll never lose sleep over financial issues again."[10]

Budgeting is simply the process of creating a plan on how and when to spend and save your money. Creating this plan allows you to determine in advance what your priorities are and how you will use your financial resources. On the other hand, the lack of a plan can lead to financial ruin, family conflict, and even the breakup of your marriage.

Steps to develop your spending plan/budget

Of course, it's one thing to agree that it is important to have a budget and another to actually do one. Here are the simple steps you can take to develop an initial budget for your family:

1. Record your income and spending for thirty to sixty days. This step takes the most time, but it's difficult to move on until you know how much money is coming in and where it is currently going.
2. Complete the first draft of your spending plan. Review what you learned in step 1. Did you find unnecessary spending you can eliminate?
3. Adjust your spending plan to make sure you're not spending more than you are bringing in.
4. Select your system. It could be a simple spreadsheet (we have included one), an electronic one on Excel or a similar program, or one online, or you can just create one yourself.
5. Record and review. As you receive money (income) and spend money (expenditures), record and keep track of everything. Only spend what you have money for in your budget.

We recommend you sit down as a couple to develop your budget. Once you are married, we also recommend that you sit down and pay the bills together. There are several reasons for this:

- Neither must carry the burden of taking care of the finances alone.
- When both are fully aware of their finances, they are more conscientious about how they spend money.
- Because of the feeling that whoever has the money has the power, if you develop the budget together and sit down to pay the bills together, neither has to feel that the other has control over the finances.
- Neither is keeping financial secrets or committing "financial infidelity."

Since you're not yet married, some items may be more of a guessing game. What we recommend is that you estimate your income for next year lower than you think it might actually be and the expenses higher than you hope they will be. If your income ends up being higher and your expenses lower, you will end up with more money to save for the future. Following is a suggested worksheet you can use, but you can

create your own or download one from the internet. You can also use software that helps you track your budget as you enter all the receipts from your expenditures.

BUDGET WORKSHEET

MONTHLY INCOME (gross)			
	Total Spouse 1:		
	Total Spouse 2:		
	Total Couple:		
MONTHLY EXPENSES		**Actual**	**Budget**
DONATIONS	Tithes		
	Offerings		
HOUSING	Mortgage/Rent		
	Municipal Services		
LOAN/DEBTS	Auto		
	Personal		
	Credit cards		
	Student		
AUTO	Gas		
	Repairs/maintenance		
INSURANCE	Medical		
	Auto		
	Home/Health		
CLOTHING			

PERSONAL EXPENSES			
HOME EXPENSES			
UTILITIES	Heat		
	Gas		
	Electricity		
	Cable/satellite		
	Internet		
OTHER EXPENSES	Savings		
	Cell phone		
	Cleaners/laundry		
	Gifts		
	Entertainment		
	Child care		
	Other:		
HIS SPENDING MONEY			
HER SPENDING MONEY			
TOTAL INCOME			
TOTAL EXPENSES			
EXCESS OR DEFICIT			

Identify and decide on your financial goals

Once you have completed your budget and have kept to it for a couple of months, have a conversation with your fiancé/fiancée and decide on the following:

Short-term goals (six months to a year):
1.
2.
3.

Long-term goals (one to five years):
1.
2.
3.

Once you have created a budget and are sticking to it, this step helps you establish future goals, both short-term and long-term. You can revise the list of goals periodically, but it is always good to have some goal in mind, something to aim toward.

Prioritize your wedding expenses

The excitement of the engagement day now gives way to the tension of wedding planning. You have to decide when the wedding will take place, where would be the best location, who will officiate, who will participate, who will be invited, what caterers will do the meal, and other logistics. Of course, you must find the perfect wedding dress, tuxedo, flowers, decorations, cake, rings, and transportation, apply for the marriage license, and take care of so many other details. Sometimes while worrying about all those things, we overlook the all-important fact that everything costs money. That's why we recommend that you prioritize the budget for your wedding expenses. As Jessica English, owner and editor of *Apple Brides*, explains, "Prioritizing your budget—no matter what that amount is—means you'll get what you want without blowing the bank."[11] Here are several tips to help you have the most memorable wedding without becoming shackled with a big bill.

1. What's most important to both of you? "Decide what's most important to you two. … Talk with your soon-to-be-spouse and decide what your top 3 priorities are. That's where you'll allot for more money than average. Then, decide what isn't important to you. That's where you can cut back."[12]

2. Be realistic about your expectations. Unless your parents are extremely wealthy and are paying for everything you want and more, you may have to settle for less than the best wedding in the universe

ever. For instance, maybe you want to rent your favorite football team's stadium for the wedding party. It may sound like a cool idea, but why spend that kind of money that you could use to start your future on a more solid financial footing?

3. You get what you got. The opposite end of the decision is getting the cheapest possible of everything. So instead of a professional caterer, you hire the local fast-food restaurant to bring a few sandwiches, and chances are you won't get the best or healthiest of meals. We find it interesting that many couples spend more on their wedding than the equivalent money they receive in gifts. Perhaps a simple meal, done by a reputable caterer, choosing a nice but not super-fancy venue, and inviting fewer people may be better than going all out to spend lots of money on something that lasts just a few hours.

4. It's your wedding, you make the decisions. There will be people who will ask you, or tell you, about doing this and having that at your wedding. They will tell you that at their wedding, or somebody else's wedding, they had this food or those party favors, and you begin to feel as if you are not having as nice a wedding as theirs. Don't allow yourself or others to feel that way. It's your wedding; make your own decisions. Don't allow others to make decisions for you. It's not a competition!

5. Do your homework. It pays to shop and compare. You don't have to choose the first thing or the first people you find. As Maggie Seaver wrote when she was an assistant editor at The Knot, "The more vendor research you do, the more familiar you'll be with what's out there and what you can get within your budget."[13]

6. Who's paying for what? The traditional idea that the parents of the bride pay for all the wedding expenses went out the window a long time ago. Perhaps they can contribute, as do the parents of the groom, but they should not be expected to foot the entire bill, particularly if you both have full-time jobs. So you should talk about this together, and if you feel you need some help, then you may approach your parents, unless they offer first. Whatever you do, don't go into debt in order to say "I do."

Overcoming debt with a snowball

This is one of the most obvious of Bible maxims: "The poor are ruled by the rich, and those who borrow are slaves of moneylenders" (Proverbs 22:7, CEV). You may think that you are in control of your finances

because the credit card companies continue to increase your credit limit, you get credit card offers, or you pay the minimum amount every month faithfully. But the reality is that as long as we have any debt, we are slaves to the institution to which we owe.

According to recent statistics, more than 189 million Americans have credit cards, and the average credit card holder in the United States has at least four cards. On average, each American household carries $8,398 in credit card debt.[14] Research reveals that "41.2% of all households carry some sort of credit card debt. Households with the lowest net worth (zero or negative) hold an average of $10,308 in credit card debt."[15] How can people or families get out of this sinkhole?

Let's say that you are reading this chapter and thinking it's too late. Perhaps you already have a mountain of debt that seems too big to climb. Don't despair. Have you ever considered that paying off debt is similar to rolling a snowball? Let's think about this. Did you ever roll snowballs in order to build a snowman when you were a child? You probably learned that the fastest way to build that snowman was to make a small tight ball of snow and start rolling it through the yard. As you continued to roll that small snowball, it picked up more snow, and little by little, it grew into a big ball large enough to serve as the base for your snowman. It's a great technique for building a snowman, but it's an even better method for getting yourself out of debt.[16]

"The debt snowball method is a debt reduction strategy where you pay off debt in order of smallest to largest amount, gaining momentum as you knock out each balance. When the smallest debt is paid in full, you roll the money you were paying on that debt into the next smallest balance,"[17] and so on. Here's how it works:

1. List all your debts from smallest to largest, regardless of the interest rate.
2. Make minimum payments on all your debts except the smallest.
3. Pay as much as possible on your smallest debt.
4. As soon as the smallest debt is paid off, add the amount you were paying toward that to the next smallest debt.
5. Repeat the process until each debt is paid in full.[18]

Let’s give you an example using an imaginary couple, although from personal experience we can tell you this is not too far from reality. Joe and Mary listed their debts as follows, from the greatest amount to the least:

Item	Balance	Monthly or minimum payment
1. Mortgage	$356,000	$1,500
2. His car payment	$16,000	$350
3. Her car payment	$7,000	$280
4. His student loan	$6,000	$250
5. Her student loan	$5,000	$250
6. Credit card	$5,000	$65
7. Store credit card	$3,500	$45
8. Gas credit card	$1,500	$25
Total	**$400,000**	**$2,765**

To start their debt snowball, Joe and Mary kept making the minimum monthly payments on debts one through seven, but on number eight, the gas credit card, instead of the minimum $25, they paid $100. The caveat to this plan is that you can’t continue to charge or to add to the balance. So paying $100 instead of $25, instead of taking eight to ten years to pay off that balance, Joe and Mary paid it off in only fifteen to seventeen months. Once the gas credit card was paid off, they looked at their updated balance-owed sheet. The amounts are different now because the minimum payments have made some progress against debts one through seven. Joe and Mary took the $100 they were paying to the gas credit card and applied it to the next lowest balance; in this case, it’s now her student loan, So their new payment schedule looked something like this:

Item	Balance	Monthly or Minimum Payment

1. Mortgage	$354,000	$1,500
2. His car payment	$11,100	$350
3. Her car payment	$2,240	$280
4. His student loan	$2,000	$250
5. Her student loan	$1,000	$250 + $100 = $350
6. Credit card	$4,950	$65
7. Store credit card	$3,000	$45
Total	**$378,290**	**$2,765**

With the higher payment, it will take only about three months to pay it off. Once Mary's student loan was paid off, they added the $350 to the next lowest balance, in this case, his student loan. So they paid $600 toward that balance. That amount will pay off Joe's student loan in about four months.

Next, Joe and Mary added the $600 to the next lowest balance, Mary's car payment, so the total payment was $880. That would pay off that car loan in about three months. Again, they added the $880 to the next lowest balance, in this case, the store credit card, for a total payment of $925. Depending on the interest rate, it would take five to six months to pay off that store credit card. Then they added that $925 payment to the credit card payment, making monthly payments of $990, so it took about four to five months to pay it off. Joe and Mary are almost out of debt!

They added the $990 credit card payment to Joe's car payment for a total of $1,340, and in about eight months, Joe and Mary have only one debt, the mortgage. Finally, they added the $1,340 to the monthly mortgage of $1,500 for a total payment of $2,840, and Joe and Mary were able to pay that mortgage off a lot faster than the thirty-year loan they signed. Every penny above the regular monthly mortgage payment goes toward the principal, which lowers the amount of interest you pay, and therefore, more of the mortgage payment goes toward the principal every month.

We know this snowball method works because we applied it in our own life. Right now, we have no debts, the house and cars are paid for, we carry no balance on any credit card, and we have money in savings for home improvements and for emergencies. We were able to do it even though at one time we had more than $60,000 in debt, not counting a mortgage. We were able to do it, and we know you can do it too. You may have to buy less expensive cars and keep them longer, change your lifestyle, and make some sacrifices, but the ultimate payoff is worth it.

Is a prenuptial agreement a good idea?

We have stated in our presentations that we believe prenuptial agreements are a preparation to fail. When we get married, we make a commitment to live together "in richer or poorer, in sickness or health, until death do us part." Through a prenuptial agreement, we make provision for the other—what if we don't get along? What if we stop loving each other? What if there's infidelity? The what-ifs set you up to fail because the focus is on protecting yourself in the eventuality of the end of your relationship. Instead of fighting for our marriage, the effort is placed on making sure we're safe when it ends.

Once we spoke with a family attorney, a dear friend of ours, and mentioned our views to her. She agreed, in general terms, to what we were saying. But she also stated that the only time she recommends a prenuptial agreement of sorts is when it involves two older people, with children of their own, getting married again. For instance, let's think of a couple contemplating marriage. He is a widower, in his fifties or sixties, with two or three grown children. She is also a widow, in her fifties or sixties, with two grown children of her own. They get married and live happily ever after … for ten more years, but then he dies. Does she get to keep everything they accumulated together? You would think so. But what about what her husband had accumulated with his first wife? Does she get to keep it all as well? Do his children get anything from his marriage to their mother? And at her passing, do her children get everything her second husband had accumulated with his first wife? In a case like this, to prevent hurt or angry feelings and potential legal battles, it's appropriate to sit down with a good lawyer who will help the couple draw up papers to deal with all their assets in the event of one, or both, passing to their rest. Keep in mind, it is only in this situation of a second marriage that involves blended families that we can see such wisdom.

Conclusion

From our own wedding preparations and own marriage, we can tell you lots of stories—some not so good, others wonderful. We have spent little on many things, but we have also spent unwisely on other things. We were able to use many of those lessons when the time came for our daughters to be married. Both their weddings were beautiful and memorable, and yet they both started their marriage with no wedding debt and instead, had money in the bank. We pray that you, too, will work together to make good financial decisions and commit all that you own to God. Be good stewards of all that He has entrusted to you.

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Chapter 8

Preparing for Sex

Now I will discuss the things you wrote me about.
It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.
—1 Corinthians 7:1, NCV

In our overly sexualized society, sex sells. Billboards, magazine ads, and commercials on television or online include sexual messages at every turn. So it's no wonder that we are confronted with sexual messages several times a day, whether we consciously look for them or not. Now, there's nothing wrong with sex. In fact, God created sex to be enjoyed within the confines of marriage. Interestingly enough, the very first command from God to humanity was, "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). In order for Adam and Eve to multiply, they had to have sex.

Sex was a gift given to us by God, our Creator. It is humans who have marred this gift in ways in which it was never intended. The joy of sex within the confines of marriage is God-ordained. We're amazed that even in the twenty-first century, so many people still believe that sex is a sinful act that came into the world after the fall of Adam and Eve. Many others believe that sex was intended only for procreation, and therefore, the moment a woman is no longer able to conceive, she and her husband should cease from having sexual intercourse.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul spoke about sexuality quite extensively, so it was obviously an issue for the church at that time. He begins the seventh chapter with these words:

Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me:
It is good for a man not to touch a woman (1 Corinthians 7:1).

If we just stop reading there, we may think that Paul is encouraging a life of celibacy. But if we continue, he tells husbands and wives, "Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband" (verse 2). So Paul is not advising celibacy but rather abstinence until marriage.

What we would like to do in this chapter is to share information about God's plan for sex so that you will be better prepared for that wonderful experience once you are married and become "one flesh."

Intimacy versus sex

These two terms, *intimacy* and *sex*, are inextricably connected and yet far different. Psychology writer Jonathan Lenbuck explains,

> Intimacy is at the heart of a strong relationship. Intimacy is about knowing someone deeply and being able to be completely free in that person's presence. It is an emotional state that is often reserved for just one person. Ideally, sex in a loving relationship should be the physical embodiment of intimacy. It should come from a place of love and connection. Within a relationship the two are inextricably linked: intimacy builds sex and sex builds intimacy.[1]

In our culture, intimacy and sex have been misused to the point where we confuse them as if they were the same. Psychologist Matthew Rippeyoung writes, "Intimacy is built through a collection of moments, some short, some long. Intimacy can take the form of that look across the table when a child says something unintentionally funny, or a hand on the small of a back as you pass in the kitchen. Intimacy is being really connected to yourself and your partner in a conversation."[2]

In a marriage relationship, sex is the ultimate physical form of intimacy, but sex can also simply be a physical act. Some couples may experience sex without ever enjoying true intimacy. We have known of husbands who require, and even force, their wives to have sex with them, even against their desire or will (by the way, this is legally considered

marital rape). Outside of marriage, a one-night stand is a perfect example of having sex without having an intimate relationship.

There are situations in which a couple is not able to have physical intercourse, yet, they can still be very intimate with one another. Physical, emotional, or medical conditions may prevent sexual intercourse, and although this may take away an important part of the relationship, it does not have to prevent the couple from still being able to enjoy a loving, satisfying, and intimate connection. "Intimacy can be cultivated in many ways, such as spending quality time together, enjoying physical, non-sexual contact, or enjoying shared interests and listening to each other."[3] "Intimacy is more about sharing moments in time, experiences, and even the day-to-day. It is intimate … to decorate a home together, cook a meal together, save for a [special] trip together, or go grocery shopping together. It is these kinds of everyday acts that build or strengthen the connection between partners."[4] Sex is but one way in which people give and receive love, and while it is one of the greatest expressions of love in a relationship, it is not the only way to develop or express intimacy.

Genesis uses the words "and the two of them become like one person" (Genesis 2:24, CEV) to describe the complete physical, emotional, and spiritual intimacy a husband and wife are to enjoy. Develop some simple habits and rituals together in order to have growth in your intimacy. Spending time together, exchanging ideas, laughing (or crying) together, doing projects together, cooking, washing dishes, cleaning, reading in bed, or simply sitting quietly side by side draws us closer and helps us experience God's design for our marriage.

In his book *The Seven Levels of Intimacy*, author Matthew Kelly says that "intimacy is the one thing that a person cannot live happily without. Think about it. Who are the happiest people you know, the people who are truly thriving? Do they just have sex, or do they have intimacy? They have intimacy, don't they? They might have sex, too, but the foundation of their lives is an authentic experience of intimacy."[5] Kelly goes on to describe his model of intimacy in seven levels:

- *First level—clichés.* At the first level, we engage in casual interactions and encounters that tell us very little about the other person but are simply superficial and brief exchanges. "Cold out there, isn't it?" "How was your day?" "See you tomorrow." If a

social encounter doesn't move beyond an exchange of common clichés, is it even worthy of being called a conversation?

- *Second level—facts.* At the second level, we focus our communication on the facts. To the question "How was your day," you may receive a short, simple answer like "Fine" or a more detailed one like, "It was horrible. I got caught in traffic on the way to the office, got there late and my boss was waiting for me in his office. I had a headache all day, and on the way home, I started sneezing. I think I may be getting a cold." That's a statement of facts, things that happened, or experiences the other person went through.
- *Third level—opinions.* Clichés and statements of facts are usually not very controversial because we don't have to make ourselves vulnerable. Where people begin to experience challenges on the way to intimacy is when they state their opinion. Because opinions tend to differ, they can lead to controversy. When people in a relationship can't manage differences of opinion, conflict may develop, or it may even be the end of the relationship.
- *Fourth level—hopes and dreams.* If two people can express their opinion in a safe environment, they may feel more comfortable sharing their hopes and dreams, their goals and aspirations for the future. Expressing these is not only a way to share something personal about ourselves, but it is also a way to "test the waters." Do we share common goals and dreams? Is this relationship such that it will help me achieve those goals and dreams, or will it quench them?
- *Fifth level—feelings.* Feelings are the emotional reactions we have to every situation. We experience hundreds if not thousands of feelings every day. Knowing or understanding our own feelings is critically important, and sharing them with someone else is integral to reaching true and complete intimacy. At this level, we may experience a some fear of rejection. So, sharing our feelings with others can make us very vulnerable.
- *Sixth level—faults, fears, and failures.* On level six, we not only become vulnerable but also expose ourselves. It is at this level when we finally let down our guard and remove our masks enough to share the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of us with

those who are most significant to us. The person may have known about these issues for years, but the fact you are ready to admit to them now may or may not produce any move forward in your relationship. That advance happens at level seven when you turn to the other person and humbly and honestly tell them, "I need help."

- *Seventh level—legitimate needs.* Legitimate collaboration and true intimacy happens at level seven. We thrive when our most important needs are revealed and met. That is also the case for your spouse, your children, your extended family, your friends, and even your colleagues. In intimate relationships, the people in it know and understand each other's needs and are there to help each other fulfill them.[6]

So sex is not the complete picture of intimacy. Sex is a very important part of intimacy, but it is not all there is. That's why we insist that you may have sex, maybe even a very enjoyable sex life, and still not experience true intimacy. Getting to the point where you can be completely—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—at ease with another person, to the place where there are no secrets between you, is what intimacy is all about. Adam and Eve enjoyed such a relationship before the Fall. Moses wrote about the first couple, "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25).

Learn about sex

You would think that with all we see everywhere about sex that we would be very educated about this topic. The sad reality is that many unmarried people who are engaged in sexual activity don't understand the truth about sex. And they definitely don't talk about it with their partner. So how can you learn more about sex before marriage and still maintain proper boundaries? Here are some guidelines[7] we suggest:

- *Pray!* While it is important that you learn about sex, the more you think about it, the more you will desire it. That's normal. Therefore, as you are learning about sex, pray that God will keep your mind pure and help you avoid temptation. Without prayer, you may find it more difficult to keep your thoughts, and your

actions, pure. In your own strength, chances are high that you will fail.

- *Daytime and public places are best!* It is better if you are going to discuss this issue that you do so in the daytime hours and in an open, public place. Darkness and quiet make it easier for our minds to wander into places that may be very slippery and dangerous. Don't put yourselves in a situation that may increase the chances you will give in to temptation before your wedding night.
- *Wait!* While you can start learning more about God's plan for sex anytime, it's best if you wait until you are a little closer to your wedding. Again, when you talk together about it, make sure you discuss it during the day and in a public place. Eric and Heather Viets suggest, "You can talk about your expectations and fears, but again, do so prayerfully. Those last few weeks before the wedding can be some of the most tempting times because you will begin to *feel* married as you make countless decisions together. It's during those times you will want to [pray more] and take extra precautions."[8]
- *Porn is not sex education!* What is portrayed in porn movies and videos is *not* natural or normal. At the end of this book, we have provided a list of books we suggest you read. These Bible-based resources will help engaged couples navigate learning more about sex before their wedding night.
- *Lower your expectations!* Often the message we receive in popular movies is of passionate, enjoyable, wonderful sex, the first and every time. While that is ideal, chances are that it may not be like that the first time or many other times during your lifetime. If you have never had sex, you both will probably be nervous, it may be uncomfortable, perhaps even painful, and you may be a bit disappointed if you expected this ecstatic feeling at the end. Keep in mind that you are just starting to "know" (a good biblical expression referring to sex) each other—your bodies, reactions, and desires. Sex gets better with time.
- *Talk to a professional!* Professional counselors or a properly trained pastor can spend time talking to you and answering any questions you may have. That talk can and, perhaps, should be part of the premarital preparation you receive. Our biggest word

of caution with talking with a counselor is that you make sure he/she is a Christian counselor who can provide you good biblical advice.

- *Talk to a godly mentor!* Perhaps you have learned about the mechanics of human sexuality, but you still have questions you're not completely sure about. If you're a female, have a candid conversation with a godly, older woman you trust. If you're male, have a similar conversation with a godly, older man you trust. Talking frankly about sex does not have to be embarrassing when we remember that God created sex.

Just a few more words about pornography. It's possible that you may already be consuming pornography, at least on occasion.[18] You may have convinced yourself that once you're married, you won't be interested in porn anymore. The sad reality is that what you're already doing before you're married will probably follow you afterward. Some even rationalize that they are learning from pornography what to do once they are married. Here are some reasons why turning to porn for sex education before marriage is not a wise decision:

- *Porn creates dysfunction.*[9] The use of porn prevents true intimacy from taking place in your relationship. The bond God intended sex to create is broken. In addition, the artificial scenarios portrayed in porn gives you unrealistic expectations. As a result, you may lose your confidence that you can satisfy your spouse, or yourself, which will make it more difficult the next time you try.
- *You cannot compete with actors.*[10] Your spouse (or you) will never be able to compete with the actors you see on the screen. Neither of you can be photoshopped to be flawless. And remember, the people on the screen are acting. After a while, you will become bored with your spouse. We were told of a man who, while making love to his wife, had to have a pornographic magazine next to her head. He had to look at the pictures in the magazines in order to reach an orgasm. He could not find satisfaction with his wife.

- *Porn distorts God's purpose for sex.*[11] Because you live in this fantasy world, your spouse is not really present in the act of lovemaking. They will sense that distance and will close up emotionally and physically. You begin to resent each other, which will lead to less sex. Less sex drives you back to porn, which will drive you further away from your spouse. It's an unending, vicious cycle.
- *Porn robs you of true intimacy.*[12] Since a porn user sees his spouse as nothing more than an object for his own pleasure, you won't be able to connect emotionally or spiritually. God's ideal for your marriage is no longer there for you to enjoy. You are missing out on true intimacy as your sex life is only a shadow and a mockery of what He intended.

Premarital sex

We know well that scare tactics do not work with young people or most people, for that matter. At the same time, we think it's important that you become aware of the negative effects of premarital sex in your future relationship. For instance, Nicholas Wolfinger's research "found that having multiple sex partners prior to marriage could lead to less happy marriages, and often increased the odds of divorce."[13]

We could spend a lot of time looking at many more studies until we bored you to death. The main point we want to emphasize is that it is not in your best interest to have premarital sex, not with your future spouse, not with anybody else. A less happy marriage? Increased chance of divorce? It's too risky, so why take the chance!

Cohabiting

People have often heard that the rate of divorce in America is 50 percent. What some people interpret that to mean is that 50 percent of the couples that marry end up divorced or that one out of every two couples divorce. No matter how you look at it, that is bad news. The result of such a belief is that many people have chosen to cohabit instead of getting married. Why take the chance of getting married if all you have is a 50 percent chance of staying happily married?[19]

The sad reality is many couples are choosing to cohabit because of the widespread belief that 50 percent of marriages end in divorce. The

problem is that instead of helping, cohabiting works against them. Psychologist and researcher Scott Stanley believes that cohabiting negatively impacts those who may eventually get married in three principal ways:

1. First, cohabitation changes the way people think about marriage. As Stanley states, "We believe that the increase in cohabitation, serial cohabitation, and premarital cohabitation has led to consistent downward trends in belief that marriage is special."[14]
2. Second, cohabiting makes it harder to break up, even when the relationship is toxic. Again, Stanley explains, "Because of the inertia of living together, some people get stuck longer than they otherwise would in relationships they might have left or left sooner. In fact, we believe some people marry someone they would otherwise have left, because cohabitation made it too hard to move on."[15]
3. And finally, there's a greater chance of changing the family context for children. As Stanley expounds, "Since cohabiting parental unions are relatively unstable, the increasing number of couples who break up in such unions will mean more people entering future relationships with the challenge of children in tow."[16]

In another article, Scott Stanley states that cohabitation increases the odds of divorce. He writes, "Living together before marriage is associated with lower odds of divorce in the first year of marriage, but increases the odds of divorce in all other years tested, and this finding holds across decades of data."[17]

Again, we don't want to try to scare you if you are currently living together out of marriage; however, there's plenty of research showing the problems and dangers of cohabitation. We would rather you consider your relationship with God and with your future spouse and make the decision to separate and wait until after your wedding to live under the same roof. Commit together "not to awaken love until the time is right" (Song of Solomon 2:7; 3:5; 8:4, NLT).

Conclusion

You noticed we left the conversation about sex almost to the end of this book. It is not because it is not important, quite the contrary. We left it toward the end because we didn't want it to become more of a distraction than it may already be. Treat the subject respectfully and carefully but look forward to it with joy and anticipation. Within the context of marriage, sex is a beautiful God-given gift. After all, if God created it, it must be very good (Genesis 1:31).

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18. If you are already consuming pornography, we urge you to stop right away and seek help. We created a resource that you may watch free at newfreedomtolove.com. Let today be the beginning of your journey to freedom from addiction to pornography and freedom to enjoy sex with your spouse the way God intended it for both of you.

19. Well, the good news is that it is not true that the divorce rate in America is 50 percent. It is not now nor has ever been close to that percentage. The best information collected by the census bureau shows that the divorce rate in America is closer to 27 percent. Instead of spending a lot of time showing you the evidence, we encourage you to read Shaunti Feldhahn's book, *The Good News About Marriage* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2014). She has spent decades researching this subject and shares fascinating and eye-opening information.

Chapter 9

Preparing for the Wedding

"Let us rejoice and be happy
and give God glory,
because the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and the Lamb's bride has made herself ready."
—Revelation 19:7, NCV

Weddings are such a nice, memorable, happy event, but we can also make them so terribly complicated. Most grooms would be happy to go to the justice of the peace or enjoy a small, intimate ceremony. Most brides, however, dream of a beautiful setting, a gorgeous wedding gown, lovely flowers, unforgettable music, magazine-like photo shoots, and a reception fit for a king. Few couples are happy simply to elope and get it over with. For those couples who want to have a formal ceremony, we thought we would share a few things we have learned along the way.

There are some things you need to be aware of and for which you need to make preparation so that the wedding ceremony and the marriage go without a hitch—although we do hope you get hitched.

Marriage certificate

In every state, province, and country, you will need a marriage certificate. In some countries, the custom is that you get married by the court first, a civil union, so you can get your wedding certificate there. Later, those couples who wish to have a religious ceremony may do so. In the United States, a religious ceremony in the church also constitutes a

legal civil wedding, provided the officiant (pastor, priest, rabbi) signs the marriage certificate and it is filed with the court in the county or city in which the wedding took place.

Different places have different requirements before they issue a marriage certificate. You may have to provide proof of your identity; usually, your birth certificate is required. In most, if not all, states and provinces, you will have to pay for the marriage certificate. Some states will give you a discounted rate for the marriage certificate if you can prove that you have gone through some premarital preparation or counseling, so check with the courthouse to see whether they offer any incentives.

Once you have the certificate in hand, make sure you give it to the person officiating the wedding. They will need to sign it and mail it back to the courthouse (usually in a self-addressed envelope provided by the court) in a day or two following the wedding ceremony. Once it is filed in court, you may then get copies of the official wedding certificate, which you will need in order to change any other official documents (Social Security card, passport, bank accounts, etc.).

Photographer

Photographers vary in price, experience, talent, and quality. Shop around, get recommendations from others, and make sure that you get what you paid for. This is one event in your life of which you want to have good pictures. Some couples spend a lot of money hiring a company that brings in several photographers and videographers. (This is up to you, but please review chapter seven and remember to prioritize your wedding expenses.)

Wedding gown and tuxedo

We'll deal with the easier one first—the tuxedo. Most men will be happy with a nice suit or whatever tuxedo their future wife chooses. More than likely, she will want one that will complement her wedding dress. Our advice is to let her make those decisions. It will be less of a headache for you and will give her more joy to know that everything matches according to her dreams and wishes.

Now, one of the most important expenditures is the wedding dress. She wants to be, and should be, the center of attention. Perhaps the joy of the day makes her even more radiant, but her choice of a wedding dress

will also help her shine even brighter. You can find a nice wedding dress at a reasonable price, or you could spend a lot of money on a dress you will only wear once (perhaps one more time for a special occasion such as a renewal of your wedding vows, or an anniversary celebration).

Pam and I have two daughters. They each found very nice wedding gowns at very reasonable prices. No bank was broken to make their dream of a nice dress come true. You may have to shop around, pick a dress from last year's selection, or find a seamstress who can make the one you want at a reduced cost. Whatever you do, make sure the dress is ready at least a couple of weeks before the wedding so that you don't have to be worried up until the last minute waiting for your dress to arrive or be ready. We have heard horror stories about people who bought cheaper dresses online only to be greatly disappointed when what they ordered is not what they received, or the dress was too big or too small, or the wrong color, or other problems. And then, they had a very difficult, nearly impossible, time trying to return it and get their money back and on top of having to find another dress at the last minute. You can take your chances if you want, but for this special event, we recommend you get it from a reputable store.

Wedding participants

Who will be part of the wedding ceremony? That's a decision that you must consider carefully, thoughtfully, and prayerfully. Here are a few things to consider:

- *Family members.* This list could include just a few of your closest relatives if it is a small, intimate wedding or a very large group that includes grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and other extended family members and friends. It's all a matter of personal preference. The one area where you must pay close attention is if stepfamilies or ex-spouses are involved. For instance, if your parents are divorced and remarried, think about how their new families will be involved, if at all.
- *Best man and groomsmen.* While the best man is somewhat of a symbolic thing in many cases, we think it is important whom you choose. You can choose one of your brothers, as many do, or someone you have been friends with for many years. We think you should pray about that decision and choose someone

who will help you through your most difficult days and rejoice with you on your happiest of occasions. Think of the friendship between Jonathan and David, of whom we read, "Jonathan made a solemn pact with David, because he loved him as he loved himself" (1 Samuel 18:3, NLT).

- *Maid of honor and bridesmaids.* The choice of a maid of honor is similar to choosing a best man. Think of someone special, who is a faithful friend and companion, a confidant during difficult days, and a shoulder to cry on during the sad times. But also, a good, wise, mature counselor, someone who will rejoice with you in your triumphs. You may have to decide between a family member or a close friend, or you may choose more than one maid of honor. The role of the maid of honor is important because she should help you during the wedding. Her role is to make sure you are at your best on your special day. The bridesmaids can be as few or as many as you'd like. Just keep in mind that a bigger wedding party usually means more expense, and lots of people don't necessarily add to the day.
- *Bible boy and flower girl.* Some couples want a little girl, or a couple of them, to spread flower petals on the runner just before the bride walks down the aisle. You may also choose whether to have a little boy carry the Bible for the officiant or your wedding rings. All of that is your personal choice. If you choose to include children, you may consider some from your family or your friends' children. Our recommendation is that you choose children who are normally well-behaved and a little older and more mature. Very young children may become intimidated or afraid of the crowd and may either make a scene or refuse to participate at the last minute, no matter how much coaxing there may be.
- *Officiant.* Another big decision you will have to make is who will officiate your wedding ceremony. If you have been attending a church together regularly and you spent time with your pastor, priest, or rabbi during the premarital preparation, you may want them to be the one to join you as husband and wife. In some cases, however, if you have a parent or close relative who is clergy, you may want that person to be the one. At the same time, the father of the bride may be a pastor, but on

your wedding day, he may just want to be the father of the bride. Talk about the possibilities and together decide who to invite to officiate.

Venue

Where you get married is one of the most important decisions you will make. A lot of people choose to be married in the church where they attend regularly. Others choose another church because it's closer to the family, because of its beautiful architecture, or for other reasons. Others may choose a neutral location, such as a building that evokes special memories for them or an outdoor setting. In choosing a location and in planning the ceremony, please remember who the guest of honor is. God created marriage and rejoices at these special events, so keep God at the center of all the decisions you make.

Now, while the choice is yours, the cost of the wedding may depend on where you have it. Oftentimes, if you do not shop around, the venue is one of the biggest expenditures. If you are members of a church, the cost, if any, may be minimal. If you get married elsewhere, plan to spend a lot more money. Our oldest daughter chose to get married at the War Memorial in Washington, DC. While that sounds like it was extravagant, it was not. To begin with, it is one of the most photographed sites in the nation's capital. The cost to receive a permit from the National Park Service to use the place for a wedding at that time (2016) was less than one hundred dollars. However, other venues in Washington, DC, cost more than all the money we have in the bank. So do your homework. It's possible to have a wedding in the city you want if you shop around.

A couple of words about outdoor weddings: when planning an outdoor wedding, always have a plan B—if it is raining, windy, too hot, or too cold, where would you be able to switch to at the last minute? You don't want a sudden change in the weather to dampen your special day.

When looking for a place for the wedding, whether it is indoors or outdoors, keep in mind the need for a sound system, lighting, or even projection equipment. Don't leave any of these things for the last minute or plan to have beautiful music played only to have those present not able to see the performers or hear the music.

Food and decorations

Your choice of food may be determined by your budget, time of day, and people's dietary restrictions. A wedding planner may be able to help you with some of these, as well as a good caterer, but each may cost you additional funds.

As for the cake, the size and look may depend on the number of people you have invited to the wedding reception. Some people have opted for a very small wedding cake for the couple and cupcakes for the guests. You can discuss the options that still allow you to stay within budget.

The decorations for the wedding venue and reception will also be determined by your budget and taste. The more invitees you have, the more you will have to spend. Some people have made their own decorations, and they have been very nicely done. In some cases, someone in the family is very artistically talented and can make beautiful decorations at a fraction of the cost.

Wedding coordinator

We think it is a good idea to find someone to serve as the wedding coordinator. This person organizes all the details and participants before the wedding begins and ensures everyone and everything is ready at the right time. We suggest that you choose someone who is not related to either of you so the family can fully enjoy the event. You should also have someone who understands what you want, follows your directions, and is not afraid to tell others what to do.

Suggested participants and order of service

Please keep in mind that the elements included in this order of service are only suggestions. You don't have to have everything that's listed; in fact, you may eliminate a lot of these things and still have a very simple but elegant wedding ceremony. The only things that you must have are those marked with an asterisk (*).

✓	**Suggestions**	**Explanation**
	Guest book	The guestbook is usually signed in the foyer as guests enter. If attendance is large, have several pages being signed at the same time so people need not wait in line.

	Ushers and seating	Ushers traditionally seat the bride's family and friends on the left side of the church and the groom's family and friends on the right. Ushers offer their right arm to the lady entering and lead her down the aisle, followed by her escort. The bride's family is ushered to a reserved front section on the left, the groom's family on the right. A special place may be reserved in the parents' pew for the grandparents.
	Mothers entrance	The groom's mother enters just before the wedding begins. The bride's mother enters afterward, beginning the ceremony.
	Candles lighted	The candles may be lit by the mothers, by a groomsman and bridesmaid, or by anyone else the bride and groom choose.
	Special music	Music may be a major part of the service or just happen before and after, as desired.
	Minister, groom, and wedding party enter	The minister enters, usually from a side room, goes to the center of the platform, and faces the audience. The groom follows and stands on the minister's left. Wedding party enters: Groomsmen enter with bridesmaids and take their places.
	Bible boy/ ring bearer enters	If you choose to exchange wedding rings during the ceremony, you may have a ring bearer bring the rings on

		a pillow, or you can have the best man hold the bride's ring and the maid of honor hold the groom's ring until the minister calls for them. If you will not exchange wedding rings during the ceremony, you may have a Bible boy bring the Bible to the minister officiating.
	Flower girl enters	One or more little girls can enter and spread flower petals on the aisle runner.
	' Bride enters	The bride enters on the right arm of her father or guardian. If her mother stands, the audience stands. People see better, however, if allowed to remain seated.
	Groom meets his bride	The groom steps down to meet his bride as she and her father/guardian stand beside the family pew. The minister asks, "Who gives this woman to be wed?" The father answers, "Her mother and I." The groom takes her hand.
	Bride and groom proceed to platform*	Bride and groom proceed to the platform as musicians continue the processional. They may face each other, or they may face the minister.
	Sermonette*	A short sermonette is shared by the minister.
	Vows*	Couples may choose one of several options: 1. Minister reads vows, and the couple repeats them.

		2. Minister reads the vows, and the couple simply answers, “I do.” 3. Couple reads/recites vows.
	Prayer*	The minister prays. The couple may choose to remain standing or kneel.
	Special music	Special music may follow while the couple is on their knees. “The Lord’s Prayer” is one popular choice for this section. This may be a good time during the ceremony to exchange wedding rings, if you choose to include rings during your ceremony.
	Embrace/kiss*	The couple seals their vows with a kiss when the minister directs them to do so.
	Introduction*	The minister asks the couple to face the congregation and then introduces them as Mr. and Mrs.
	Recessional	The recessional music begins. 1. The bride and groom exit down the center aisle 2. Other wedding party couples follow in reverse order of their entrance. 3. The minister goes last.
	Parents	Parents of the bride and groom are ushered out, in reverse order of their entrance.
	Audience dismissed	The audience is dismissed by rows.

Sample vows: First traditional vows

TO GROOM: And now, solemnly promising before God, and in the presence of these witnesses, will you, [groom's full name], have this woman, [bride's full name], to be your wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the sacred estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor her, cherish her, in sickness and in health, in prosperity or in adversity; and, forsaking all other, keep yourself only unto her so long as you both shall live? Do you so declare?

Groom answers: "I do."

TO BRIDE: Will you, [bride's full name], have this man, [groom's full name], to be your wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the sacred estate of matrimony? Will you love, honor, and cherish him, in sickness and in health, in prosperity or in adversity; and, forsaking all other, keep yourself only unto him, so long as you both shall live? Do you so declare?

Bride answers: "I do."

Forasmuch, then, as [groom's full name] and [bride's full name] have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth, each to the other, and have declared the same by joining hands, I, as a minister of the gospel and by authority of the law of the state of [name of the state], do pronounce that they are husband and wife. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. Amen.[1]

Sample vows: Second traditional vows

TO CONGREGATION: If any of you can show just cause why they may not lawfully be married, speak now, or else forever hold your peace.

TO COUPLE: I require and charge you both, here in the presence of God, that if either of you knows any reason why you may not be united in marriage lawfully, and in accordance with God's Word, you do now confess it.

TO GROOM: Will you have this woman to be your wife; to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?

Groom answers: "I will."

TO BRIDE: Will you have this man to be your husband; to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?

Bride answers: "I will."

Groom takes bride's hand in his.

GROOM: I call upon these persons here present to witness that I, [Groom's full name], do take you, [bride's full name], to be my lawful wedded wife; to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge you my love.

BRIDE: I call upon these persons here present to witness that I, [bride's full name], do take you, [groom's full name], to be my lawful wedded husband; to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge you my love.

MINISTER: Now that [groom's name] and [bride's name] have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands and the giving and receiving of a ring, I pronounce that they are husband and wife, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder. Amen.[2]

Sample vows: Alternate vows no. 1

TO GROOM**:** [groom's full name], do you take this woman you clasp by the hand to be your lawfully wedded wife?

Groom answers: "I do."

TO GROOM: Do you solemnly promise before God and these witnesses to be to her a faithful, loving husband in sunshine or in shadow, in gain or in loss, in trial or in triumph, and keep yourself only unto her so long as you both shall live, according to God's holy ordinance? Do you so declare?

Groom answers: "I do."

TO BRIDE: [bride's full name], do you take this man you clasp by the hand to be your lawfully wedded husband?

Bride answers: "I do."

TO BRIDE: Do you solemnly promise before God and these witnesses to be to him a faithful, loving wife in sunshine or in shadow, in gain or in loss, in trial or in triumph, and keep yourself only unto him so long as you both shall live, according to God's holy ordinance? Do you so declare?

Bride answers: "I do."

Inasmuch as you, [groom's full name], and you, [bride's full name], have taken these pledges of affection and vows of fidelity, I, a minister of the gospel, being authorized by the Word of God and by the laws of this state, do hereby pronounce you husband and wife.

Sample vows: Alternate vows no. 2

TO GROOM: Before God and these relatives and friends, will you, [groom's full name], take [bride's full name] to be your wife? Will you love and respect her? Will you be honest with her always? Will you be to

her the kind of husband you know you ought to be—kind, strong, and loving at all times—whether you have much or little, whether you can live in a mansion or in a tiny apartment? Will you recognize that you have found a real jewel in [Bride's name], realizing that she is a very delicate individual with a tender nature? Will you understand that she, like a dainty flower, in the right atmosphere, will exude loveliness and grace, and so needs to be treated with respect and tenderness? Will you make whatever adjustments are necessary so that you can genuinely share your life with her? Will you give her courage and support, whether it be in times of sickness or in times of health? And will you promise to continue this kind of relationship until your heart stops beating?

Groom answers: "I will."

TO BRIDE: [bride's full name], before God and these dear relatives and friends, will you take [groom's full name] to be your husband? Will you love and respect him? Will you be honest with him always? Will you, with love, kindness, tenderness, and sweetness, be a true helpmeet for him? Will you provide a refuge and a haven of love which will give him courage and strength? Will you, by God's grace, maintain that sweet personality and keep that smile on your face as a consistent greeting card for him—regardless of your circumstances, whether times are prosperous or difficult, whether in times of laughter or weeping, whether in times of hearty health or of physical adversity? And will you promise to continue this kind of relationship until you breathe your last breath?

Bride answers: "I will."

Since you have, before God and these witnesses, solemnly made mutual pledges
of affection and vows of fidelity, I, as a minister of the gospel, and by the authority of the laws of the state of _____, do pronounce that you are husband and wife. What God hath joined together, let no one put asunder.

Sample vows: Vows spoken by the couple

GROOM TO BRIDE: In the name of God, I, [groom's full name], take you, [bride's full name], to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

BRIDE TO GROOM: In the name of God, I, [bride's full name], take you, [groom's full name], to be my husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.[3]

Together, decide on the specific vows you wish to repeat. Take your time and review the words carefully. Remember, these words represent a holy covenant relationship. Choose vows that are already written or write your own. These words will become an important part of your history together. Frame them so you may refer to them often after you are married and recommit yourself to each other.

Conclusion

God was present at the union of Adam and Eve. That must have been a very joyous experience for the newly created couple and their Creator. Jesus was present at the wedding in Cana, where He performed His first public miracle. Marriage is very special to God! Our prayer is that you will invite Him to your wedding, that He be the center of this special day, and that He will bless your union until death you part.

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1. Adapted from A. W. Spalding, "Performing the Marriage Ceremony: Form of Ceremony No. 1," *Ministry*, September 1933, https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1933/09/performing-the-marriage-ceremony.

2. Based on "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage," *The (Online) Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, n.d.), 423–427, accessed December 14, 2020, https://www.bcponline.org/.

3. Christina, "Ceremony Script :: Christian Wedding Ceremony," *Snippet & Ink*, August 22, 2016, https://snippetandink.com/ceremony-script-christian-wedding-ceremony/.

Chapter 10

Preparing for the Honeymoon

Awake, north wind!
Rise up, south wind!
Blow on my garden
and spread its fragrance all around.
Come into your garden, my love;
taste its finest fruits.
I have entered my garden, my treasure, my bride!
I gather myrrh with my spices
and eat honeycomb with my honey.
—Song of Solomon 4:16–5:1, NLT

Besides the wedding ceremony, the honeymoon takes time and preparation for most couples. While we don't have the space to cover everything there is to consider about this special time, the beginning of your lives together, we do want to give you a few ideas to consider in your planning process.

Location

Where you go will depend on how much time and money you have. Some couples can afford a weeklong honeymoon, or longer, in some exotic location, while other couples may have just a few days at a nearby hotel. In fact, some couples may not even go on a honeymoon because they can't afford it, because their work or school schedule doesn't allow it, or simply because the timing is not the best. You don't have to feel

bad if a short, inexpensive honeymoon is all you can afford. It is far better to live within your budget than spend thousands and go into debt.

Obviously, if you are able to travel someplace for your honeymoon, you will want to make sure all the plans are settled before you start your trip. While you can probably do much of your own planning online, this may be one of those times when working with a reputable travel agency could save you a lot of money, headaches, and problems. You don't want to arrange for an exotic location and arrive to find out it is just a popup tent in a city park or something like that.

Travel preparations

Make sure you have all the following things taken care of several weeks before your wedding; they can save you a lot of headaches, and in some cases, even your life.

- *Passport.* Make sure your passports are current. Some countries require that the passport cannot expire less than six months before your visit. So make sure your passports meet the requirements for the country you plan to travel to.
- *Visa.* Make sure you know what the visa requirements are. Some countries require a visa, and you may need to leave the passport at the embassy or consulate for several days while they process it. That's why it's good to do all these things several weeks in advance.
- *Medicine*. Make sure you have all the prescription medicine you normally take, and perhaps even a prescription from your doctor in case you misplace your medicine during the trip and need to get more at a local pharmacy.
- *Vaccinations*. Make sure all your vaccines are up to date. But also consult with your physician about any vaccinations you may need for the country or countries you will be visiting. For instance, some countries have yellow fever cases, so it would be good to get a vaccination for that. Some countries have malaria, and therefore you would be wise to get medicine for that as well. Do your homework before you go.
- *Maps and books*. Your travel agent may be able to furnish you with some of this information.

- *Insurance*. If you will be traveling outside your home country, you may want to check into international medical insurance. If something happens and you need to see a doctor or go to the hospital, they may require full payment before they treat you unless you have proof of insurance coverage. Sometimes your health insurance can provide you with temporary international health insurance.
- *Cell phone and/or Wi-Fi*. You may be able to get an international calling and/or data plan so you can make phone calls in case of emergency
  or so you can use your phone as a GPS. We have found that with an international data plan, you can use such apps as WhatsApp or services such as MagicJack to make phone calls back to the US and Canada. Some mobile phone carriers provide a short-term international calling or data plan, so check with your carrier. If you are abroad and don't have a data plan and make a phone call, it could cost you lots of money. Sometimes the rates are ten or more dollars per minute. When it comes to Wi-Fi, a lot of hotels have free Wi-Fi in the rooms or at least in the lobby. Some hotels have good signals, and others, not so good. Most airports also offer free Wi-Fi, and some restaurants also offer it. You may just have to ask for the password.

Expenses

As we have said several times, prioritize your expenses. Some people choose to have what is called a "destination wedding." It sounds great, romantic, and memorable, but it also could be expensive and logistically complicated. If you have responsible, dependable, and reputable local assistance, you may do better than trying to arrange something long distance.

Another consideration with destination weddings is the fact that everybody will have to travel, and, well, someone will have to pay for all those expenses. If each guest, including the family, pays, the couple getting married may not have to worry about the travel expenses. The cost of travel may prevent some people from being able to attend the wedding.

Pictures

As with the wedding, pictures of the honeymoon are treasures that will remind you for the rest of your life about this special time. So take lots of pictures. The age of digital photography has made this much easier. Some couples buy waterproof cameras they can use while snorkeling, they may take a nice SLR camera, or they may simply choose to take pictures with their cell phone. That is up to you. Just keep in mind that expensive equipment often makes you more of a target to those who love to have what they have not paid for. So make decisions that won't dampen the fun memories of your honeymoon.

Scrapbook or photo album

The downside of digital photography is that you may not have an old-fashioned album you can display or share with guests when they come to your house. But you can still choose some of the best pictures you take during your honeymoon and have an album made. You could also make a scrapbook that would include such memorable items as plane tickets, entrance tickets to places you visited, postcards, or small souvenirs.

Prepare for your first sexual encounter

Besides being concerned with the logistics of the trip, hotel, transportation, finances, and other concerns, premarital counselors Eric and Heather Viets share two very important pieces of advice:

First, for you ladies: "Prepare for your wedding night by packing something to wear that makes you feel beautiful. For your first time, it is wise to use lubricants while your body adjusts to having sex. Also, think about how you will feel most comfortable undressing in front of your husband for the first time."[1] Women tend to be more self-conscious about their bodies. One way to take things slower is to begin with a bubble bath. Slowing down the process is better than rushing it and ending up frustrated and let down.

For you guys, to help you both prepare for this highly physical and spiritual moment, plan something special. For instance, "I've heard of a man washing his new wife's feet as a symbol of his commitment to love and serve her (John 13). Some men bring a gift and a thoughtful card."[2] The point is that you help your newlywed bride, who is probably tired and nervous, to transition into a calm time of closeness with you. "So, plan to move into your first sexual experience slowly and lovingly."[3]

You have a lifetime together, so you can take your time and help her feel loved and comfortable with her first lovemaking experience with you.

Here's a list of some additional things to keep in mind as you prepare for your first sexual encounter. Most of these are things that you would do well to talk about sometime before the wedding so you can make good preparations and have realistic expectations:[4]

1. *Take time to talk to God.* Make your first night together as husband and wife a spiritual, not just sexual experience. Perhaps you can have a short devotional and prayer time, asking God to bless and guide you as you begin your marriage together. You could also take time afterward to thank God for allowing you to enjoy one another for the first time and ask Him to bless your sex life, to protect your marriage bed, and help you both make sex a spiritually, emotionally, and physically enjoyable and fulfilling part of your marriage.
2. *Ask for help, if needed.* Don't be embarrassed to reach out and call someone in case you have problems. "For example, a bride can get what was once commonly termed 'honeymoon cystitis.' It's just a discomfort from your body being introduced to the bacteria in his… . Take the phone number of your OB/GYN [with you] and maybe a trusted mentor you can talk to if you run into any medical or emotional challenges."[5]
3. *How much sex?* You have been waiting for this moment to finally be one flesh, but how much is too much? "The female body often has to get used to sex. The hymen must stretch or be torn in most cases, and this causes some soreness."[6] At the same time, while most healthy young men may be able to "have sex many times a day, their sperm only replenishes every 72 hours,"[7] so you don't need to have sex several times a day. Both of you can take it slowly, get gradually used to your sex life, and get adequate rest in between.
4. *Humor is good medicine*. You may be a little nervous and clumsy at first, but don't worry; you have a lifetime ahead of you to practice and get it right. Dannah Gresh tells about a young couple who "fell down in the shower, taking the shower curtain with them! They erupted into laughter as they enjoyed

the newness of learning. (Note from them: Do not lean on the shower curtain in the throes of great passion!)"[8]

5. *No need to rush*. You don't have to rush to complete the act as if there is only so much time you have to complete a task. As a matter of fact, "you don't have to consummate your marriage on the first night at all. The goal … [is to enjoy] intimacy."[9] Take the time to explore each other's bodies. In fact, a woman's body will probably be more ready for intercourse if you slow down a bit and help her be ready.
6. *What to wear*. The truth is that most men like you just the way you are. At the same time, if you choose to wear something nice and sexy, he will probably not object either. This is one of those areas where you could have a conversation about what he would like for you to wear. Some men like to see their wives wear something as simple as a t-shirt, while others may want a sexy nightgown.
7. *Cleanliness is next to … comfort*. You've probably had a long, hectic wedding day, and perhaps a long trip to your honeymoon destination. Taking a shower first will refresh you and help you feel more confident. As in other cases, talk about your expectations ahead of time.
8. *Prepare for the moment*. Hollywood loves to show what a romantic sexual moment looks and sounds like. Why not bring along some nice, romantic music to set the mood? If allowed, perhaps you can bring a few candles. It would also be a good idea to pack some massage lotion, a lubricant (K-Y jelly), pain relievers, and feminine hygiene products. Oh, and guys, don't forget the chocolate!
9. *Continue the conversation*. As we have stated before, it is good to talk about some of the details of the honeymoon, including the first night, before the wedding. For instance, if your wedding is in the evening, followed by the reception and then the trip to your destination, it could be way past midnight before you arrive in your hotel room, exhausted. One or both of you may be so exhausted that it may put a damper on the experience. So you may want to consider waiting until the morning. Again, talk about expectations.

10. *Not a regular vacation*. While traveling and sightseeing may be part of your plans for your honeymoon, don't overbook it. The main purpose is for you two to become one, not just to be tourists. Plan to spend a quantity of quality time together alone.

Conclusion

Getting married is one of the most important steps you will ever make in your life. You have prayed about being the right person and finding the right person. You have had a special wedding ceremony and a most enjoyable reception. And now, at last, you have become one flesh. Our hope is that the entire journey, from the first time you met until you consummated your marriage, has been led by God and has provided you with a treasure trove of good memories.

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1. Eric Viets and Heather Viets, "How Much Should You Learn About Sex before the Wedding Night?" *Hot, Holy & Humorous,* October 28, 2013, https://hotholyhumorous.com/2013/10/28/how-much-should-you-learn/.
2. Viets and Viets.
3. Viets and Viets.
4. Dannah Gresh, "Sex Series: Bridal Preparation for the Honeymoon," Boundless, August 13, 2012, https://www.boundless.org/relationships/sex-series-bridal-preparation-for-the-honeymoon/.
5. Gresh.
6. Gresh.
7. Gresh.
8. Gresh.
9. Gresh.

Chapter 11

Preparing for Your Second (or Third) Time Around

This I recall to my mind,
Therefore I have hope.

Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed,
Because His compassions fail not.
They are new every morning;
Great is Your faithfulness.

—Lamentations 3:21–23

There are many reasons why you may find yourself in a situation where it is the second (or even third) time in a marriage. Some of the reasons may have been out of your control and due to no conscious choice on your part, such as the death of your former spouse, adultery, or abandonment on his or her part. Perhaps you walked away from your marriage because you were in an abusive situation or for a plethora of other reasons. In some cases, only you, your spouse, and God know the reasons. But whatever the reason, here you are!

Now you're contemplating getting married again. Considering all the possible challenges and pitfalls that second or third marriages have, would you do it? What should you consider before taking this important step?

Stumbling blocks to avoid in second (or third) marriages

So it is indeed very possible to marry for a second time and enjoy a very good, happy marriage for the rest of your life. Perhaps the first marriage ended for very good reasons. Maybe you were in an abusive relationship, or your spouse left you for someone else. But now you find yourself looking at the prospect of marriage to another person. Nicole Crowley writes about nine stumbling blocks that trip up a lot of couples seeking marital happiness for the second, or third, time:[1]

1. *Been there, done that!* Someone who has gone through a divorce, as painful as it might have been, knows that eventually you will make it through, so they may be more open to looking at divorce as a viable option when things get bad in their relationship. Their thinking, when faced with what seems like irreconcilable differences, may go like this: "I've divorced once already, lived to the tell the tale, and can survive it … again." What that means is that they may be more inclined to run at the first sign of trouble than to stay and fight for their marriage. In many cases, people don't get better at marriage with every marriage but, rather, get better at divorce with every marriage.
2. *Still carrying divorce baggage.* The battle scars of a divorce, particularly the more belligerent ones, can remain way past the signing of the final court document. You may think that you are over your divorce, but deep down, at the subconscious level, the wounds are still raw. As a result, you may be experiencing a fear of intimacy, of getting too close, which makes you scared of giving it your all. Becoming vulnerable once again reminds you of the pain from your divorce, and you tend to expect the worst instead of the best in this new relationship. When you carry this residual emotional weight, or baggage, and its accompanying pain, it will poison any future relationship you may have. Make sure you are emotionally healed, healthy, and ready for a fresh start at a new relationship.
3. *Rebounding.* After so many years of living with the same person, and perhaps with their children, you suddenly find yourself alone, at least for portions of time. Feeling lonely may lead you to make a hasty and wrong decision.

Rebounding is quite common, as the attention from another suitor can be very intoxicating, like an addictive drug. Running from one relationship to another, without giving it proper time and assessment is dangerous.

Once the infatuation wanes, the reality of the relationship may not be as rosy without those rose-colored glasses.[2]

4. *It's too soon!* If it is important to know the person you are marrying for the first time, it is even more so when you are marrying someone who, like yourself, comes with a previous marriage in tow. Nicole Smith reminds us, "No one is always the best version of themselves, and it's important to see someone when they aren't—see how they handle stress, criticism, bad luck, tough times, rejection, and failure. How are problems dealt with as a couple?"[3] So do not rush it. Take the time it deserves.

5. *Kids act like glue.* From the days of Creation, marriage was a structure for raising children. When couples don't have children in common, that binding glue of sorts may be missing from a second, or third, marriage. Couples may not work as hard to stay together for the sake of the children. Many people in first marriages sacrifice their happiness and stick to their relationship just so they can provide their children with stability and as good a home as possible. But when there are no children in common, few people may be willing to make such sacrifices.

   As hard as kids are to raise, and as tough as they can be on their parents, they act as a stabilizing influence in marriage.

   Furthermore, without children in common, the element of family is not as fundamental. So the desire to keep the family together is not as strong.

   Simply put, there is less at stake in allowing a marriage to dissolve when little children hearts aren't a factor.[4]

6. *Second marriages come with stepchildren.* The seeming contradiction is that while children act as binding agents in first marriages, stepchildren are often the dissolving agents in

subsequent ones. As we will discuss later in this chapter, stepfamilies face a number of challenges in the area of parenting that first marriages don't. Life with our own children is not always easy or comfortable; imagine living with someone else's children. And if they live with their own biological parent part of the time, you may find yourself dealing with discipline issues, habits (good or bad), competing loyalties, and other relationship issues; it can be the straw that breaks the camel's back of your relationship.

7. *The ex factor.* If dealing with someone else's children were not enough, you will also have to deal with their ex-spouse. Even if they are nice and decent, it's another adult that indirectly, and sometimes directly, will affect your family. "So basically, as more and more characters join the blended family, the crazier the circus gets."[5]
8. *Money matters.* In a previous chapter, we spoke about finances and how they may negatively affect your marriage. If that is the case in first marriages, imagine what it's like in second or third marriages, where you have two households to take care of because of child support and, in some cases, alimony payments. As money is doled out, so may be resentment. You may resent the fact that you're having to give money to your ex-wife, whom you consider responsible for the divorce. In addition, if she remarries, you may resent giving her money to spend with him (even if that is not exactly true). Your ex-wife, on the other hand, resents that you don't give her enough money to take care of your children's needs while you keep it all to yourself and your new wife, or that instead of giving money to your kids, you're spending it for your new wife's kids (whether it's true or not).

   If that were not complicated enough, your new wife might resent you for sending so much money to your ex-wife, and your new wife's ex-husband resents your wife and makes it hard for her to get any money for her kids. Do you think this all sounds messy and complicated? Welcome to the financial world of stepfamilies.
9. *Complicated family matters and in-law situations.* The branches of a stepfamily reach out in many directions and get

> twisted and tangled in the branches of other trees. It's like a tightly packed forest, all competing for soil, water, and sunshine. Your family and your ex-spouse's side of the family will always be part of your and your children's life. Your lives will intersect at graduations, weddings, births, and deaths. But now you have other trees in this forest—your new wife's family and her ex-husband's family. Somehow you will have to sort through that tangled web of birthdays, holidays, graduations, vacations, and special occasions. Sometimes you will feel like you're navigating fast and furious whitewater rapids without a paddle to help you steer the family canoe to safe shores.

We're not trying to discourage you from marrying again. We just want to help you realistically view these possibilities, consider them seriously and carefully, open your eyes wide, keep your ear to the ground, and step softly and carefully into making this decision. As we mentioned above, many couples make it safely and happily. You, too, can be one of the many success stories. You can be one of those couples that help skew the statistics. Just be realistic, address any issues, and clear the minefields before you step out.

When should I take the plunge again?

Perhaps you have just lost a spouse through death, your husband has just announced he's filed for divorce, or your wife recently walked out the door. It doesn't take long to feel the loneliness set in and for you to wonder whether perhaps you should remarry. *Stop! Not so fast!* While all couples are different, most marriage experts and counselors recommend that you wait at least two years from the time of the spouse's death or the divorce becoming final before you consider starting a new relationship. You need to give yourself time to grieve your loss and get adjusted to your new normal. Rushing into a new relationship before you have had time to journey through your grief may complicate the new relationship as well as your relationship with other members of your family.

If you are at the point where you have found someone with whom you want to form a family, take some time to think of all the implications this decision will have for both of you and for both of your families.

Here are some things to think about when considering getting married again:

1. *Give God first place.* Make God the first person in your life. Seek His wisdom before you enter into a new relationship. Bathe the decision in prayer. If He is not already the most important person in your life, let Him have that place. Remember, "Our God, from your sacred home you take care of orphans and protect widows" (Psalm 68:5, CEV).
2. *Carry no baggage from the previous relationship.* Take an honest look back over your "first marriage to discover what issues you still need to resolve from that experience. Whether the marriage ended because of divorce or death, you need to bring closure to that chapter in your life. You can do so by understanding what caused whatever problems existed between you and your former spouse."[6] If you lost your spouse through death, you need time to work through the grief of that loss. "Take significant time to think and pray about your first marriage, asking God to show you specific ways in which He wants you to grow before you begin a new marriage. … If you still have contact with your former spouse, be civil when communicating with him or her.[7] After all, you may still need to work together often, particularly if you share custody of the children. Ask for God's help to forgive your ex-spouse if you feel wronged in any way. Carrying anger or unresolved issues over a previous relationship may doom your new one from the start.
3. *Consider your motives.* Consider your true motivation for wanting to get married again. "The only valid motivation is for companionship based on a genuine love for your potential new spouse and desire to be his or her partner through life"[8] as you help each other prepare for the second coming of Jesus. "Understand that if you're motivated by financial needs, a desire to have children, loneliness, a desire to escape past pain, pressure from others, a desire for sex,"[9] a desire for your children to have a father or mother figure in their life, or any

other reason besides genuine love, your marriage likely won't succeed.

4. *Have realistic expectations.* "Understand that no marriage is perfect, and that you will encounter challenges in your new marriage just as you did in your first. In fact, you will likely be confronted with even more challenges than before, such as communicating with a former spouse and trying to blend a family."[10]
5. *Be happy being single.* You must find fulfillment and happiness as a single person before you can be happy with another. "Strive to be content no matter what your current circumstances, looking to God to provide your ultimate fulfillment. Decide to approach every situation with a positive attitude, and avoid blame, resentment, and self-pity."[11]
6. *Discuss all issues surrounding your children.* This is critical. Don't assume that issues over the children from a previous marriage will automatically fall into place. This is one of the biggest areas of conflict, so be sure to give it the time it deserves. Discuss such things as child support, shared custody, visitation rights, discipline, and education.
7. *Don't compare.* It is very important that husbands and wives in second marriages do not compare their new spouses with their prior spouses. "A new spouse is not the same person as the prior spouse and should not be expected to be. Whether the prior marriage was amazing or terrible, the emotions and pains should not be transferred to the second marriage."[12]
8. *Give it time.* Date a potential spouse long enough to get to know each other well. "Practice good communication skills in your relationship, such as active listening and negotiation. Make sure that you share similar values about issues such as faith, husband and wife roles, money, children, interests, goals, energy levels, and senses of humor."[13] One of the biggest mistakes you can make now is to rush into another relationship too soon.

Money and control

There is an entire chapter in this book dedicated to finances; however, marrying the second (or third) time around brings with it a whole new set of financial issues that must be addressed. You are older now and most likely have more assets than you did when you married the first time. Or perhaps you have more debts. Either way, this makes it even more important that you discuss these financial issues before saying "I do" once again.

- *Financial obligations such as child support*. Your new spouse should not be surprised nor upset when they discover a chunk of your check goes to child support payments. If you're marrying a person who is not willing to assume responsibility for his or her own children, who is to say they will help you and be responsible for your own? Would you really want to marry such a person? At the same time, you have to accept the fact that your stepchildren's other parent may be needing, and asking for, financial support. The reality is, and you need to accept it, part of your income indirectly goes to help support your stepchildren. At the very least, you should be fully informed and aware of what your future spouse's financial obligation to their children is before you commit to marriage.
- *Updated will*. Each of you will need to update your will to make sure your children receive what you want them to. At the same time, you will most likely want to add your new spouse to it to be certain they are taken care of should anything happen to you.
- *Prenuptial agreement/inheritance issues*. If no children are involved or you are getting married for the first time, we are generally opposed to prenuptial agreements. Why? Because it almost sounds like a plan to fail. But when it comes to second or third (or more) marriages, a prenuptial agreement is very important. You need to be very specific regarding inheritance issues as it relates to biological children, and the only way to do so is to make sure you have the proper legal documents to guarantee this.

  For example, perhaps you desire your biological son to inherit his biological father's collection of memorabilia. Or perhaps you have family property from your first marriage that should ultimately go to your biological children because they

have fond memories of growing up in that house. Don't assume that will happen without proper planning. These types of things need to be discussed as well as taken care of legally so that all those involved understand the issues around the inheritance of certain items, properties, mementos, money, and other possessions.

In the case of second marriages that involve children, "prenuptial agreements also can be useful if you have children from a prior marriage and want to ensure that your assets pass to them when you die. Generally, unless your spouse specifically waives his or her right to the assets in a valid agreement, he or she may claim a portion of your estate when you die."[14]

- *The debt of each partner.* You both need to discuss any debt that you will bring to the marriage. There should be no hidden surprises here. It would be wise to exchange information on each other's bank statements, court-required child support payments, and other financial statements. His or her debt may now become your debt as well.
- *Credit history.* You each also need to disclose your credit history; otherwise, one may be in for a rude awakening when you try to buy a vehicle or purchase a home together. Have you ever been late on payments, or do you have any liens or have any judgments against you? Have you ever declared bankruptcy?
- *Budget*. You now need a budget that reflects your new marital situation. This budget will need to include some items that a first marriage may not, such as child support payments, extra budget for food, clothes, education, or any extra property upkeep.

Conclusion

If you prayed the first time you got married, now that you're contemplating getting married again, you need to redouble your prayers and perhaps add some time of fasting as well. If you or your future spouse have children, it is even more important that you spend serious time learning, getting counseling, and preparing before you take this life-changing step. We pray that if you decide to move forward, it is only because you have bathed it in prayer and God is guiding you to do so.

1. Adapted from Nicole Smith, "9 Reasons Why Second (and Third) Marriages Are More Prone to Divorce," *Survive Divorce*, October 16, 2020, https://www.survivedivorce.com/second-marriage-divorce.

2. Smith.

3. Smith.

4. Smith.

5. Smith.

6. Whitney Hopler, "Resolve Issues Before You Remarry," Crosswalk.com, March 18, 2004, https://www.crosswalk.com/family/marriage/divorce-and-remarriage/resolve-issues-before-you-remarry-1128962.html.

7. Hopler.

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12. "Does the Bible Say Anything About Making a Second Marriage a Success?" Got Questions, accessed December 14, 2020, https://www.gotquestions.org/second-marriage.html.

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14. "Second Marriages: A Financial To-Do List," Edelman Financial Engines, accessed December 14, 2020, https://www.edelmanfinancialengines.com/education/life-events/financial-todo-list-for-second-marriages/.

Recommended Resources

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Keller, Timothy. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment With the Wisdom of God.* New York: Penguin Books, 2011.

Leman, Kevin. *Sheet Music: Uncovering the Secrets of Sexual Intimacy in Marriage.* Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2008. (We recommend reading only the first four chapters before getting married.)

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