

WHEN MARRIAGE MEETS GRACE



GARY & BETSY RICUCCI

FOREWORD BY C. J. & CAROLYN MAHANEY

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Love That Lasts

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Foreword

By C.J. and Carolyn Mahaney

This is a difficult task. Please don't misunderstand. Writing the foreword to this book is quite the honor for us. But the task is very difficult for many reasons. Here is one such reason.

How can we introduce our dear friends Gary and Betsy to you in just a few words? How can we briefly communicate the depth and breadth of our respect for this couple whom we have known for over twenty-eight years? We could write a book about Gary and Betsy, but we've only been asked to write a foreword!

You might have already picked up on how excited we are about this book. We feel like we know a big secret that many others are about to discover. You see, we know the difference this book can make in your life because of the difference this couple has made in our lives and in the lives of so many others. And take it from us, this is the couple you want writing a book about marriage. Because Gary and Betsy are humble they didn't want to write this book, but we (and many others) felt they simply had to. In the end we persuaded them to do whatever was necessary to make this book happen. The compelling example, biblical instruction, and personal care they have provided for so long and for so many in Covenant Life Church simply had to be offered outside that local church. And here it is!

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In *Love That Lasts* you will experience the effect of Gary and Betsy's example, instruction, and care. To read this book is to be personally cared for by this exceptional pastor and his godly bride. On each page you will find counsel that is biblical and wise. And you will be repeatedly encouraged by their humble example as they reveal their struggles with indwelling sin. This book you hold in your hands will transfer hope to your heart regardless of your past, regardless of your present struggle with sin, regardless of any fears you might have about the future. For throughout this book you will be reminded of the truth of the gospel, the power of the gospel to transform your marriage, and the relevance of the gospel to every area of marriage. Your marriage is about to meet grace!

So let the reading begin, and let the transformation of many marriages commence. Let couples grow and change. Let there be husbands who joyfully serve and lead, and wives who joyfully help and support. Let there be substantive communication and conflict resolution and romance and great sex, and all by the grace of God, for the glory of God!

Preface

This book was first published by PDI Ministries (now Sovereign Grace Ministries) in 1992 as a very different volume, though with the same authors, nearly the same title, the same general subject matter, and the same sincere intentions.

It certainly doesn't seem like thirteen years ago that we wrote:

With every page of this book we've had to humbly and gratefully ask ourselves, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). We didn't write this book as marriage experts, but as a couple to whom God has been very gracious. He has set us in a church where Jesus Christ and his Word are preeminent, and marriages and families are a top priority. And within Covenant Life Church he has surrounded us with friends, examples, instruction, care, accountability, and encouragement.

At that time we had been married fifteen years. In these additional thirteen years this testimony has only become deeper, richer, more of a reality, and more precious to us . . . every word of it! We say this first of all to give glory to our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who has been so faithful to meet us time and again through his Word, his Spirit, and his church. We also share this to bring encouragement to past, present, and future readers. For every marriage, there really is hope and provision for a love that lasts!

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And something else has happened in the intervening years. Many wise pastors, teachers, authors, and friends have continued to open up the Scriptures to us as they pertain to the vital topic of marriage. Then one day we realized that the set of outlines we now use when teaching on marriage has, over time, changed significantly from the set that formed the first book. So while this book covers essentially the same topics, we believe it does so in a way that sets forth more fully and faithfully the biblical view of marriage.

Anyone familiar with the original book will notice the changes, beginning with the cover. Both books share the same title, but the original subtitle, “Making a Magnificent Marriage,” while certainly a worthwhile goal, seemed to put the emphasis on human effort, for human ends. The new subtitle, “When Marriage Meets Grace,” reminds us that it is God and his glorious power revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ that are the beginning, the means, and the goal of marriage. What infinite help and hope that can bring to any and every marriage!

But let’s be clear, marriage is not an end in itself. God’s best is a marriage that reflects the marvelous union between Christ and the church, a marriage that contributes to the Lord’s purpose of building his church and preparing the next generation, and a marriage that offers hope and help to couples and families desperate for answers. We trust this book will inspire faith, provide biblical guidance, and instill in you a determination to cooperate with the ever-abundant grace of God in your marriage.

For some couples, reading this book is part of a painful search for a glimmer of hope. Others are still immersed in the rich afterglow of a recent honeymoon. But most simply want to take a next step toward a truly God-glorifying marriage. Though each situation is different, God will always honor faith, humility, and obedience—because he is faithful and his Word is true.

To those who have given so generously to make this revision a reality we want to express specific thanks. The new drafts began with Andy Farmer, a pastor in our sister church in Philadelphia, who unwittingly offered, “If there’s anything I can do to get the book back in print . . .” So he took the transcripts of our updated messages and started an initial manuscript. Bo Lotinsky, with great perseverance, rode herd as manager

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of this project for so long, he wanted to rename the book *Love AT Last!* And the actual writing and editing process was meticulously, excellently, and graciously overseen throughout by Kevin Meath, whose many talents as a writer and advisor have made this material so creatively accessible and applicable. Your skills and encouragement were like a fine writing instrument. The ink just flowed!

To Jeff Purswell we offer our deepest gratitude for jumping in at the eleventh hour with his considerable gifts, bringing biblical, theological, and linguistic precision.

Just when we thought we might be close to finishing, my dear friend C.J. Mahaney helped us see how the book could be substantially improved. Thanks to him and his considerable discernment and editorial eye, it is now shorter, clearer, more biblical, more enjoyable, and just plain better. Thank you, C.J.—the extra effort was well worth it!

To those fellow leaders and many authors (both dead and alive) who allowed us to present or adapt their material, we say thank you, not only for your kindness and generosity but for the fruit we've seen in our own marriage as a result of your instruction.

Being aware and most appreciative of the high biblical values and publishing standards held by Crossway Books, we are more than humbled and honored by the willingness of Lane Dennis and his team to add *Love That Lasts* to their list of titles. And our thanks to Ted Griffin, Senior Editor at Crossway Books, for bringing his significant gifts and experience to this process.

Many thanks to our fellow pastors and their wives in Sovereign Grace Ministries for their constant encouragement, example, and support in this process.

And how do we thank our wonderful friends, the pastors of Covenant Life Church and their wives, and our church family at Covenant Life? Your names and faces flood our hearts with joy. You are the folks with whom we share life and family and ministry and mission. In so many ways this book happened because of you, the church home in which all of it has been shaped, developed, and shared. And in many ways this book is dedicated to you.

A specific word of gratitude, respect, and affection must go to Kenneth and Valori Maresco and Bob and Julie Kauflin, who for years

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have been our friends and served as leaders of our particular pastors' small group (first the Marescos and now the Kauflins). You have brought us counsel with God's wisdom, correction with God's grace, care with God's compassion, and friendship with God's love. We wouldn't be where we are today without you!

And we again want to uniquely honor our very dear longtime friends and personal heroes C.J. Mahaney—who leads Sovereign Grace Ministries and until recently served as Senior Pastor of Covenant Life Church—and his wife, Carolyn. Your wisdom, friendship, encouragement, trust, instruction, and compelling example have so informed this book and continue to profoundly influence our lives—now for more than three decades (and counting!). No one has touched our lives more than you! We can't tell you what a joy and privilege it is to continue this wonderful journey of friendship and ministry together!

Dad and Mom R., thank you for your faithful, covenant love that has lasted these fifty-nine years. And Mom M., thank you for your faithful love to Dad throughout the fifty-three years you shared together.


We would like to conclude by thanking our four children: Kelley, Courtney, Garrett, and Evan. We have held you in our arms, walked holding your hands, and enjoyed biblical fellowship with you as you have grown and matured in Christ. By God's grace you have supported us in ministry and have been forbearing with our many sins and shortcomings, while you have continued to cultivate humility, wisdom, and fruitfulness. You have filled our hearts and home with joy as precious gifts of God's grace, and we couldn't be more pleased to see each of you (and now Kelley with your husband, Josh!) taking your place in Covenant Life, our local church, where we continue to have the joy of serving the Savior together.

To each of you, and to the countless others who have touched our lives as means of God's marvelous grace, we present this book as an attempt to faithfully steward your love and kindness—all to the glory of God.

Gary and Betsy Ricucci

The Journey of a Lifetime

WHERE IT ALL BEGINS



Betsy and I sat quietly as the waiter cleared our table with polite, crisp efficiency. From our candlelit corner on the top floor of an elegant hotel, we had a beautiful view of Washington, D.C. in the summer twilight. The muffled hum of restaurant conversation was punctuated by the tinkling of silverware against china and crystal. But another sound had come to my attention. I could actually hear my heart pounding.

The date was July 24, 1977. Sixteen months earlier, I had asked Betsy out for the first time. Sixteen months of praying and desperately straining to discern if God would be so kind as to tell me, “Yes, she’s the one.” A few weeks earlier, Betsy’s brother C.J. had noticed my mounting anxiety. Erupting into one of his inimitable fits of laughter, he chided me, “Gary, if anyone was concerned that you or Betsy might be making a mistake, don’t you think somebody would have told you? What are you waiting for, bro?”

Now here we were, Betsy and I, and what a study in contrasts! She was a lovely picture of delicate serenity. And I . . . I was a mess. My heart was throbbing, my throat was dry, and the air-conditioning felt worthless. *Lord, I cried silently, please help me do this!*

I can’t remember exactly what I said leading up to “The Moment,”

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and that's probably just as well. I only recall that I asked Betsy if she would do me the great honor of becoming my wife. After what seemed like an eternity of silence, she said yes! That moment, and her answer, remain a matter of profound wonder to me. And for the past twenty-eight years I've lived in the joy and fulfillment of Proverbs 18:22, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD."

Perhaps you have a similar memory. If so, we hope the joy of that moment still sings in your soul and that new verses to the love song of your marriage will be written every year. Many of you are probably enjoying a reasonably good marriage and anticipate finding in this book a refresher and some helpful reminders to improve your relationship. We trust the Lord to fulfill those expectations, and indeed do much more.

But perhaps the history of your marriage is tinged with sadness, or even regret. Maybe your joyful memories have simply faded with the calendar pages of years gone by. If so, please know that God can make all things new.

Yes, all things.

Most marriages begin with a sense of wonder and promise, with dreams and passion, with love and affection. Shouldn't marriage continue this way? Shouldn't passion deepen? Shouldn't love last?

We've written this book to affirm with full confidence that the answer to these questions is a resounding YES! But our confidence is not because we're experts (there is no such thing as a "marriage expert"). We're just an ordinary couple who have received rich instruction, example, counsel, and care in the same excellent local church for over twenty-eight years. And we're eager to share what we've learned.

As you read on, regardless of where you are right now, we want your flickering memories to be fanned into flames of anticipation and hope. We want your heart to be full of the fresh sense of adventure that led to your getting married in the first place. We want the rest of your marriage journey to be free from any baggage of passivity, resignation, unbelief, bitterness, or regret. And we want you to throw away any and all guidebooks and directions about marriage that the popular culture has provided. Because these are not based on the Word of God, they are completely unreliable: They are always changing; the dangers of the lat-

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est theory are never noted; the joy of sacrifice is excluded; and guidance to the correct and ultimate destination is nowhere to be found.

We offer this book as an alternative. We've worked hard to base what we say on the Scriptures. And we believe, because of the permanence, promises, and power of God's Word, that he will provide hope and help for every aspect of your marriage (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

This first chapter is vital because it charts the course for the entire journey, not only through the book, but through a lasting and vibrant marriage. We'll talk about a definition, purpose, and plan for marriage. We'll discuss motive, context, and assurance. And we'll spend time focusing on hope—the wonderful hope to be found in the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. God wants you to complete this lifelong journey of marriage, and he wants you to finish well. But first you have to know where you're going, what to bring with you, and why you're making the trip.

A few years ago we took the family vacation of a lifetime, which we affectionately called “The Ricuccis' Great Wild West Adventure.” It was unlike anything we could have imagined! You'll find some of the details later in the book (and someday you really ought to try it). But for the time being, here's a tip: how you plan, prepare, and participate are all critical to a successful journey—whether it's a marriage or a vacation.

Engaged couples, this book is for you too. Even if we don't address you directly, all that you read here still applies . . . or will soon. How exciting as you prepare to discover the many ways God will reveal his goodness in your marriage!

One more thing before we start . . . what a joy and privilege it is for us to join you for this portion of your marriage journey! We know you could be reading a lot of other books and spending your time in a thousand other ways, so we are quite humbled that you chose to sit down with this book. Thanks for bringing us along for the ride.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

I (Gary) majored in art in college. And while my grades didn't always reflect it, I really did enjoy experimenting with the wonderful variety of composition and color, texture and tint, harmony and hue. While there are many ways art can be captured and expressed, in recent decades art

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has become pretty much whatever you want it to be. In 2001, for example, one of the most prestigious art awards in Europe, the Turner Prize, went to a man whose “work” was an empty exhibit hall where once in a while the lights would turn off and on! If this is art, then art can be anything, and it is therefore meaningless.

Tragically, the cultural view of marriage and family has also gradually disintegrated. No-fault divorce, prenuptial agreements, multiple pairs of parents, homosexual “marriage” . . . the definition of normal marriage and family has become distorted and confused, and the overall Western consensus that once existed on the subject is endangered.

We learn in the Scriptures that God has entrusted to the church, “a pillar and buttress of truth” (1 Timothy 3:15), the care and protection of his timeless, unchanging design for marriage. But even if many in the church at times drift into cultural confusion, we can always find the accurate definition and description of marriage in the Bible, the Word of God. In fact, the Bible is the *only* place where we can find a reliable definition and description of marriage. (If you’re not a Christian, you may find that statement intolerant and narrow-minded. But please don’t close this book just yet. Give us at least a chapter or two to show you the wisdom of doing marriage God’s way. We think it will have been time well spent.)

What exactly, then, makes for a biblical marriage—that is, one in keeping with the Bible’s teachings? Is a marriage biblical because it started in a house of worship instead of a court of law? Or because husband and wife attend church together? Or because a couple has ruled out divorce as a way to deal with problems? Or because each spouse lives a faithful and morally upstanding life? Or because it features 2.1 kids and a stay-at-home mom?

The correct answer is, “None of the above.”

Those aren’t even the right questions.

THE DEFINING QUESTIONS OF BIBLICAL MARRIAGE

For the rest of this chapter we’ll focus on some very different questions. Questions grounded in God’s infallible Word. Questions that shed clear,

biblical light on your marriage. These questions will establish the foundational perspectives we'll revisit and apply throughout this book. Every subject we discuss—roles in marriage, communication, conflict, romance, and more—will trace right back here. Most importantly, these questions can help you build a marriage that authentically honors and glorifies God by reflecting his love, his goodness, his holiness, his wisdom, his power, his peace, and his joy. From a biblical perspective, here are the defining questions of marriage.

Does Your Marriage Find Its Purpose Primarily in God?

Many people, if they were totally honest, would admit that the central focus of their marriage is their personal satisfaction. In this view, marriage is a means of self-fulfillment, a path to personal happiness. I find someone who seems to complete me, who feels like my “soul-mate.” My heart melts, I open myself up to her, and she to me. This view says, *I know my marriage is good because I'm happy. You complete me, and I'm so satisfied with you. Therefore, our marriage is good.*

Others say that's just selfish. *Marriage is not about me—it's about you, my spouse, they declare. I commit my life to making you happy. If you're happy, I'm happy. My needs aren't important. I am your noble servant, the wind beneath your wings. I exist to serve you. I must serve you!*

Still others say, *No, marriage is not about you or me. It's about us. We check our Me at the door of We. What you might need and what I might want are all consumed in the greater vision of Marriage. We live as one. We think as one. We feel as one. We are Marriage!*

The truth is, all these views have the same fatal limitation: They are centered in man rather than in God. A truly Christian marriage starts with the reality that the institution of marriage does not belong to us. It belongs to God. He designed marriage, and his purposes for it are paramount.

So then, what *are* God's purposes for marriage?

Whenever we speak of God's purposes, we must begin and end with Scripture. It is so easy to look elsewhere for guidance. We are quick to depend on our feelings, our habits, the opinions of others, secular culture, false religion, expediency, or self-will as a basis for our perspective,

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behavior, and decisions regarding marriage. Yet Scripture, and Scripture alone, is God's means for revealing who he is, who we are, and what marriage is intended to be.

Briefly stated, Scripture teaches that marriage is a profound and marvelous relationship—a mystery, established by God for his glory. When we speak of bringing glory to God (as we will throughout this book), we mean doing that which, to some degree, accurately reveals and represents him and appropriately honors and responds to him for who he is in his perfection and power. Thus, marriage brings glory to God by displaying as fully as possible how he relates to his people through Jesus Christ.

What is this mystery of marriage? It began in the Garden of Eden when God himself fashioned a woman perfectly suited to Adam and “brought her to the man” (Genesis 2:22). From Genesis 2:24 we glean this divine description of marriage: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” So from the earliest pages of Scripture, we see that marriage—an exclusive, passionate, and permanent relationship between a man and a woman—owes its very existence to God.

As significant as marriage was in Eden, the full meaning of marriage was not disclosed until the coming of Christ. When the apostle Paul teaches about marriage in Ephesians 5, he quotes Genesis 2:24 and then draws back the curtain on this amazing truth: “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” This revelation explodes all human-centered explanations for marriage. The relationship between a husband and a wife is meant to be a reflection of Christ's relationship with his church—a living parable of the supernatural union between Jesus and his Bride.

To grasp this staggering truth is both inspiring and sobering. What a privilege! What a responsibility!

For many of us, this truth reminds us not so much of God's grand design, but of how far short we fall of the divine ideal. Yet God wouldn't have made the analogy unless he intended to draw us to himself and his faithfulness for its fulfillment. It's overwhelming to realize that God intends to create and cultivate the same abundant, gracious love between a husband and wife that he has for us. In light of this glorious gift it is

no wonder that Scripture reminds us that marriage is to be held in honor among all (Hebrews 13:4).

So marriage, far from being an end in itself, is a key part of God's plan to fill the earth with a demonstration of who he is. Marriage belongs to God and exists for his glory. And *that* is for our good.

Does Your Marriage Find Its Hope in the Gospel of Grace?

Perhaps you noticed the subtitle to this book, “When Marriage Meets Grace.” *Grace* is one of those words we hear often because it's so important . . . but then we lose all sense of how important it is because we hear it so often! Most of us could use a quick refresher course on what grace really is. Author and speaker Jerry Bridges defines grace as God's “undeserved favor to those who deserve his wrath.”¹ God's grace comes to us through the gospel, and the gospel is the means by which we experience that grace. Grace redirects our focus from our guilt to God's forgiveness, from our failures to Christ's perfect righteousness, from our total inability to God's complete sufficiency, from all we feel burdened to do to all Christ has already done on our behalf.

Right now you may be thinking, *Uh, Gary, could we push the Pause button? We've talked about God, about reflections of divine reality, and now the gospel and grace. When exactly are we going to talk about marriage? You know, husband-and-wife stuff—communication, sex, children, paying the bills? So far, this just sounds like a lot of theology!*

If that, my friend, is your view, I have to tell you: Nothing is more important to your marriage than your theology (what you believe about God), and nothing is more important to your theology (and hence your marriage) than the gospel. So hang in here with me, OK?

The gospel, in brief, is the good news about the person and finished work of Jesus Christ. Consider for a moment that the eternal Son of God relinquished the glories of heaven to become a man, a human being like you and me. He lived a perfect and sinless life (unlike you and me), fulfilling every requirement of God's holy law in a way we could never hope to accomplish. And then in a glorious display of God's love for sinners like us, he willingly received the full fury of God's righteous wrath against sin by dying for our sins on a cruel Roman cross.

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Because God's absolute and perfect holiness demands an equivalent holiness from all who come before him, in ourselves we are all hopelessly lost and condemned. But Jesus, who had no sin of his own to pay for, took our place, paid our penalty, and suffered our punishment. Because his death as our substitute was perfectly sufficient to pay for our sin, God vindicated him by raising him from the dead. So now all who place their trust in Jesus' work on their behalf and turn from their sin will be forgiven, counted righteous in him, and saved from judgment for all eternity . . . all by God's marvelous grace. This is the gospel. This is the good news. Better news simply does not exist!

Tragically, this most precious of all news is too often assumed ("OK, I know Jesus died for my sins"), misunderstood ("I thought the gospel was for unbelievers—I'm already a Christian"), or even ignored or dismissed ("Don't give me theology—I need help for my marriage right now"). But consider these marvelous truths.

- *Because of the gospel, Christians have become new creations* (2 Corinthians 5:17). Therefore, in our marriage, our past does not define us, confine us, or determine our future.

- *Because of the gospel, we are forgiven* (Ephesians 1:7). Therefore we can live free of all guilt and condemnation for every sin, and we can trust that God, in his mercy, will be gracious to us.

- *Because of the gospel we can forgive, just as Christ forgave us* (Ephesians 4:32). Nothing done against us compares to our sin against God. Therefore all offenses, hostility, and bitterness between Christians can be completely forgiven and removed.

- *Because of the gospel, we are accepted by God* (Romans 15:7). Therefore we are not dependent on a spouse for who we are or what we need.

- *Because of the gospel, sin's ruling power over us is broken* (Romans 6:6, 14). Therefore we can truly obey all that God calls us to do in our marriage, regardless of any circumstance or situation.

- *Because of the gospel, we have access to God through Christ* (Hebrews 4:14-16). Therefore we can at any time take any need in our marriage to the One who can do all things.

- *Because of the gospel, we have hope* (Romans 5:1-4). Therefore we

can endure any marital difficulty, hardship, or suffering, with the assurance that God is working all to our greatest good (Romans 8:28).

- *Because of the gospel, Christ dwells in us by his Holy Spirit* (Galatians 3:13-14). Therefore we are confident that God is always with us and is always at work in our marriage, even when progress is imperceptible (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

- *Because of the gospel, we have power to fight and overcome remaining sin*, which continues to dwell and war within us (Romans 7:19-21, 24-25; Galatians 5:16-17). This indwelling enemy represents the essence of what is called *the doctrine of sin*.

These are just a few of the ways the gospel can transform a marriage. Sometimes it's not easy to live in the reality of these truths. But it is always possible—and not because of our strength or determination, but because of God's empowering and enabling grace.

If you haven't noticed, we are intent (because God is intent) on having your heart and marriage filled with the hope and grace of God's love, faithfulness, and power displayed in the gospel—the person and finished work of Jesus Christ. And God's grace is every bit as present and effective on our best days as it is on our worst. God is constant in his commitment to love, bless, and transform, not because of our performance, but because of the perfection of his Son. That is the gospel of grace. And it is grace that gives us hope.

When we grasp the depth of God's love for us revealed in the gospel, when we rest in the joy of God's forgiveness toward us in the gospel, when we experience God's transforming power in us through the gospel, and when we begin to emulate the pattern of humility and obedience we see in the gospel, what a wonderful difference this will make in our lives and marriages! Nothing is more essential to a marriage, and nothing brings more hope, than applying the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Does Your Marriage Find Its Home in the Local Church?

Woefully neglected in so much of the marriage material I have come across is the vital role of the local church. Simply put, Jesus is building his church (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 4:15-16), and the local church is the biblical home for Christian marriage, the indispensable context

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where love and marriage are to be lived out. Without the church we will be squeezed inexorably into the world's mold. Let's briefly examine God's provision and protection through the church.

The church is the place where men and women exchange worldly independence for biblical humility. As a pastor, I have often watched with great sadness the gradual erosion of a family under the influence of an independent man or woman blinded and controlled by his or her pride.

Most couples in our society have grown up breathing the cultural air of a husband's independence and a wife's feminism. Keeping our own counsel; pursuing our own goals, gratification, and fulfillment; hiding our struggles, weaknesses, and problems; being self-sufficient and self-absorbed—it's all second (sinful) nature to us. While this may make for some great executives, entertainers, athletes, and marketers, it makes for terrible marriages. We need others not only beside us but ahead of us and even over us. There is no room in Scripture for Lone Ranger spouses.

The Bible says that "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose" (1 Corinthians 12:18). A couple who commits to a local church begins to put to death proud and dangerous independence. As they press forward, seeking to be fully known, to walk in the light, and to confess temptations, struggles, and sin, they begin to take on the raw material of true greatness—humility and servanthood. And they begin to get the help we all need but are often too proud to ask for.

Josh Harris, our Senior Pastor at Covenant Life Church, has written a fine book titled *Stop Dating the Church: Fall in Love with the Family of God*. In a wise and winsome way he provides clear biblical direction for the freelance wandering that characterizes the lives of so many Christians. He comments:

The longer I'm a Christian, the more aware I become that I cannot live the Christian life on my own. My individual and direct relationship with God through Jesus is the greatest privilege and he is truly all I need—and yet God in his wisdom has created all of us to need others, too. Is this a contradiction? Not at all—for God has ordained that much of his grace flows to us *through* others. Says Pastor John Piper, "Sanctification is a community project."²

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Friends, sanctification—becoming like Christ—is indeed a community project. And marriage, growing to represent Christ and the church, is every bit as much a community project.

The church is the place where marriages are fed and supported with truth. The local church is God's primary context for the teaching and application of God's Word. As helpful as recorded messages, Christian media, conferences, *and even books* can be, the Lord has established the church as the central depository and dispensary of truth. If you truly want to mature as a husband or wife, if you want your spouse to spiritually thrive, if you want to see your family nurtured into the truth, the local church is your God-given context.

Finally, the church is the place where marriages are helped in seasons of need. In every marriage there are times of trial, struggles with sin, and seasons of suffering. The loss of a job, a significant illness or injury, a financial crisis, persistent patterns of sin in one or both spouses—there are many ways in which serious trials can assault a marriage. It is at these times that our brothers and sisters in the local church embody the love of Christ to us.

One afternoon while I was in my office getting this book ready for republication, the receptionist called. A couple in the lobby was asking if they could stop in for a few moments. Down the hall I could hear a woman's familiar voice laughing and proclaiming, "Tell him not to worry. This isn't for counseling!"

It was Mike and Angela (not their real names), beaming with joy. A few months earlier I'd had the privilege of overseeing the renewal of their wedding vows on their twenty-fifth anniversary. They had come by to drop off a few thank-you gifts, ignoring my appeals that the honor of celebrating God's grace and faithfulness with them was more than enough thanks.

You see, the first time Mike and Angela had stopped by, joy was nowhere to be found. Years ago they had sat at our kitchen table, virtual strangers to Betsy and me, not knowing what to do or where to go. They only knew their marriage needed help. Thus began their journey into Covenant Life Church and many profound experiences of God's love and care expressed through his people.

Their struggles were agonizing, and their setbacks more than a few.

Love That Lasts

But God had placed them among people committed to help carry their burdens with grace and truth. Through fellow members of the Body of Christ, God met Mike and Angela at each crisis—through a sermon, a couple, a friend, a worship song, or a small-group leader ready to care, counsel, and, yes, firmly correct in love. At first, change was slow, but God was faithful, his Word true, and his church an indispensable means of grace.

I am deeply affected by Mike and Angela's humility and perseverance, and I am profoundly touched by the many dear servants who loved them at all times with fervency and faith. What can compare with the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ lived out among fellow sinners saved by grace? As this precious couple sat in my office, they were radiant with the joy of forgiveness, fruitfulness, and genuine friendships. Now as I sit here recording that visit, I can only say through tears, "Lord, thank you for the cross, and thank you for the church."

Of all the leadership decisions I have made by the grace of God, the very best one has been leading my wife and family into our local church. Here we have remained for more than twenty-eight years. We were married here, our children were born and raised and are now serving here, and as I write this, one child is just weeks away from being married here! We are a part of it. It is a part of us and our entire family. For us, life, marriage, and raising children apart from the local church is literally unimaginable. Friends, this should be the norm, not the exception, for every Christian. And regardless of the cultural whirlwind around us, it is the local church—Christians living a shared life biblically before God and one another—that will ultimately secure the place and role of marriage and family from generation to generation.

LOOKING FORWARD

So you see, the defining questions of biblical marriage posed in this chapter are more than casual inquiries. A couple's understanding of marriage must begin with God's purpose. A marriage that reflects Christ and the church must be founded, directed, and nurtured by the gospel and by grace. And a marriage can only prosper and be fruitful if it finds its home in a local church.

THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

These are not simply a set of suggested steps to a healthy home life. Nor are they one of several possible routes to a marriage filled with God-glorifying joy. Rather, because of the authority and reliability of Scripture, we can say with confidence that they are necessary and essential to what God intends marriage (*your marriage*) to be.

The rest of this book is, in effect, an elaboration and application of the biblical truths set forth in this chapter. To do that we will take the next two chapters to discuss the roles of husband and wife. From there we will move on to the why and how of communication and the resolution of conflict. Finally, we'll end with a couple of chapters on romance and sexual intimacy. If you are eager to take the next step in enriching your marriage, or if you have encountered trials and difficulties in your marriage and are looking for help, or if your marriage has not yet begun, don't be impatient—give yourselves plenty of time to understand and apply and grow. There's enough in this book to keep you busy for the rest of your married life! So don't expect to attain perfection in the next twenty-four hours, or the next twenty-four years.

We advise you to start slowly, establish convictions from Scripture, and concentrate on becoming consistent in one or two areas at a time. Remember, the contents of this book are almost thirty years in the making, and trust me, Betsy and I still have plenty of work to do.

Too many marriages are far from what they can and should be. Even the most mature marriages are still made up of two redeemed sinners who are continually being tempted to pursue “all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions” (1 John 2:16) rather than the loving commands of God. We all have work to do. By God's grace and because of God's truth, every marriage can benefit from this book. As you read on, please don't simply scan the pages for some how-to tips and techniques. Instead, open your heart fully to the voice of God's Spirit and the work of the Savior, who can change *you* (not just what you do) in ways beyond what you can even ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

Before we close this chapter, could Betsy and I offer just a couple of thoughts for your consideration? This will only take a minute.

Ladies, this is Betsy. If your husband begins to demonstrate biblical love after a long season of neglect, be patient and receive his love thank-

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fully. Please don't think, *Oh, he's only doing that because it said to in the book. He doesn't really mean it.* It may feel that way for a while, but he needs to start somewhere. He is trying, perhaps for the first time, to love you as God intends. God's call to you is not to read this book and then judge his progress but to give yourself to God's will for you.

Guys, Gary here. The first steps to restoring or rejuvenating a drifting marriage can be very awkward. It's difficult to admit, "You know, I've never said this to you before, but in my heart I really want God's glory and your best in our marriage. I haven't done a good job at pursuing this, but I want to. I don't exactly know how yet, but please be patient with me as I try." Just this sort of simple statement is a great next step.

Whether husband or wife, it's those first steps of humility and faith, of confession and repentance that are nearly always the hardest. But note this: even *wanting* to change is an indication that God is already at work in your marriage! Already his Spirit is stirring your faith with the power of the gospel. Already he is filling your heart with hope for a love that lasts.

Friends, this is exactly what starts to happen when marriage meets grace.

Notes

1. Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), p. 17.
2. Joshua Harris, *Stop Dating the Church: Fall in Love with the Family of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), p. 50.
3. John Piper, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Wayne Grudem and John Piper, general editors (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
8. Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), p. 15.
9. Carolyn Mahaney, *Feminine Appeal* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), p. 37.
10. Charles Spurgeon, *Morning & Evening*, Morning, February 19.
11. George MacDonald, *An Anthology*, ed. C. S. Lewis (New York: Macmillan, 1978), in George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), p. 75.
12. Carolyn Mahaney, *Feminine Appeal*, p. 142.
13. John Piper, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, p. 53.
14. John Piper, "A Woman Who Feels the Lord Is to be Praised," a sermon delivered May 10, 1981; <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/81/051081.html>
15. Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), p. 50.