

ROBERT PAUL & GREG SMALLEY



9 LIES

THAT WILL DESTROY
YOUR MARRIAGE

**And the Truths That Will
Save It and Set It Free**

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY[®]

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INTRODUCTION:

YOUR JOURNEY TO A BETTER MARRIAGE

Jim and Mary have been married eighteen years but say they now feel more like friends than lovers. “It’s like we’re roommates, or business partners,” says Jim. “Not husband and wife.” They want to be closer and go deeper, but they don’t know how to get there.

According to their many friends, Marissa and Todd are warm, outgoing, and talkative. But when the two of them try to talk to each other, bombs explode. Even simple discussions about their daily schedules can rapidly veer off track, as unresolved conflicts from a month or a decade earlier resurface and inflame powerful passions.

Roger and Brittany both hoped that marriage would be calmer the second time around. Both left their first marriages because they said their partners subjected them to verbal attacks and abuse. But now, a few years into their marriage, they’re too emotionally self-protective to risk sharing openly and honestly with each other.

Beverly and Andrew have been married for thirteen years. Everything seemed perfect for a long time. Now, things are tense, ever since Andrew found out that Beverly, who is fifteen years younger, had an affair with a coworker. She has repeatedly apologized, but a cloud of distance and distrust remains.

These four couples are struggling. Their marriages began with love and hope but have since spiraled downhill.

Now it's a Monday morning, and they're all sitting on big, comfy couches in a meeting room at Focus on the Family's Hope Restored Marriage Intensive in Branson, Missouri. They're hoping for a miracle, and as the leaders of this week's intensive, we're praying that they experience one. We're not miracle workers, but God is.

We've worked with more than seven thousand couples over the last twenty years as retreat leaders and trained therapists. We've reached even more people through our talks and books. All these men and women have provided a type of "marriage lab" for us. And what we keep learning is amazing.

The results have been nothing short of miraculous. Most of the couples who come to us for therapy are in real crisis, many on the brink of divorce. Yet, some of our research indicates that more than 80 percent remain married two years after they let us help them.

We've brought together some of our top marriage insights and tools in the pages that follow. This isn't theory. It's practical wisdom that comes from being able to walk alongside people who struggle to make their marriages stronger. In fact, these are the very tools and strategies our entire team uses in their own lives. If you've been struggling in your marriage, we pray you may find a miracle or two of your own. If not, we know that these insights and tools can make a good marriage even better.

Why We Love Lies About Love

Each couple is unique and faces unique challenges in marriage. But in our decades of working with couples—both in marriages that are healthy and in those that are struggling—we've repeatedly encountered the same major problems happening over and over and over again.

Yes, the individual circumstances of each marriage may be

unique, but the problems we see weakening and destroying marriages are often common and predictable. That's because one of the biggest problems we see is that men and women grow up learning lies about love, lies generally taught by well-meaning people. Then they put these love lies into practice in their marriages, which prevents them from experiencing the wonder and beauty of real love.

Why would people build a marriage on a foundation of attractive but destructive lies instead of building on the solid foundation of God's loving truth? These lies are taught as truth and can be very subtle; sometimes they're even partially true. The problem is, they result in relational strategies that cannot actually work—and we don't realize it. And if we're using fundamentally flawed strategies we've been told are right and will work, what are we left to assume is the problem when these strategies inevitably fail? The people themselves!

Many of these marriage myths have now permeated our culture, filtering down even into our churches and our dating and marriage rituals. Sadly, we allow these insidious ideas to burrow deep down in the foundations of our marriages and fatally weaken the whole structure.

In this book we will be exploring the biggest lies we've seen at work in people's relationships. We think of them as big, ugly, hungry termites designed to devour and destroy the foundations of love and marriage.

For example, chapter 2 will shine a light on the "1 + 1 = 1" lie. This particular myth may seem attractive when heard in just the right circumstances—for example, when Tom Cruise looks passionately at Renée Zellweger in the movie *Jerry Maguire* and declares, "You complete me." Or when Elvis Presley belts out the chorus of his 1956 hit "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You."

The "1 + 1 = 1" lie sounds romantic, like something you might

see in a greeting card or love note. But we've talked to many spouses who started off wanting to generously provide the key ingredients to fulfill and complete their incomplete partners. Yet after years of genuine effort, they don't know why they appear to be failing and their spouses still feel unfulfilled.

We've seen the sad legacy of this attractive but destructive lie in hundreds of couples unknowingly caught in the webs of codependency—the belief held by many spouses that they must look to their partners to find their true happiness, sense of self-worth, and identity.

In chapter 9 we'll explore the popular lie that says fights between marriage partners are natural and unavoidable, but that everything will be okay if everyone just remembers to fight fair and make up afterward. We have personally seen the destructive impact of this lie in hundreds of couples who can't settle conflicts without going ballistic and attacking or tearing each other down, leaving both partners emotionally (and sometimes physically) wounded and scarred.

As we show you the destructive power of these major marriage lies in people's lives, we will point toward stronger foundations to build on, foundations based on our Creator's will and design for marriage.

Because the lies we've loved and lived with all our lives don't suddenly disappear overnight once we see the light, we'll also lead you through some of the techniques and tools we've used ourselves and with the many couples we've counseled. If you want a marriage that's stronger, more loving, and more resilient, these time-tested tools will help you make steady progress.

Consider the Source

We've worked with people of all religions and creeds, but most of our work is with Christian couples, and when we work with

believers, we talk about the spiritual forces and powers that are at play in our lives. That same Christian view will also be our vantage point for this book.

As you will see, our faith is more than a collection of Bible verses or dos and don'ts. We believe in a living relationship with Christ, the One who rose from the dead and is active in real ways in our lives.

But God is not the only spiritual force in our cosmos. His Enemy, the devil, is at work as well. We see his evil imprint all over the lies we'll explore here. After all, he is the author of lies.

So why would the devil spend his time trying to destroy marriages? Because marriage is one of God's greatest and most glorious gifts. As we will see, marriage is about much more than just two people and their personal happiness. There are larger legacies at stake, and the devil wants to tear apart as many marriages as possible.

We see his impact when men and women believe his lies and try to make them work in their marriages. We also see his power when he succeeds in turning men and women against each other.

We know that some people think it's silly or mediocrally old-fashioned to talk of the devil impacting marriages for the worse. But that's just the way the devil likes us to remain: blind to all his varied schemes.

We have seen the devil and his lies create hatred where there should be love, distance and division where there should be oneness and unity, and family separation and generational pain where there should be strong family legacies continuing generation after generation.

Men and women need to realize there are supernatural forces at work in our lives and marriages. We shouldn't be surprised that the evil force wants to cause chaos and distrust in our relationships. The warnings Peter gave apply to couples: "Be sober-minded;

be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

Paul also warned against the devil’s schemes:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

EPHESIANS 6:10-13

The devil is real, and he is out to destroy you and ruin your marriage. We’re not saying this so you can mistreat and abuse your partner then turn around and blame it on the devil. We are simply warning you that as we explore the lies that destroy marriages, don’t forget to guard yourself and your marriage from the author of these lies.

Just remember: *My partner isn’t my enemy, but the devil is.*

Twin Brothers of Different Mothers?

No matter what kind of marriage you have, we want to invite you to join us on a journey toward a better marriage based on God’s design.

If your marriage is good but could be better, we want to help you make it great.

If your marriage is in crisis, and you feel everything will fall apart unless you get emergency care, we want to hold your hand and help you get a clear understanding of your situation and what you can do.

But before we launch our journey to a better marriage, please let us introduce ourselves to you.

Each of us has known of the other's work for decades, and the two of us have worked together for years, having cofounded Focus on the Family's Hope Restored Marriage Intensive program. Now we have the chance to collaborate more closely again, and we couldn't be more excited.

We're 100 percent committed to helping couples improve their marriages. We've seen broken marriages healed and restored. We've seen good marriages become great marriages. We've seen marriages that neither partner appreciated become transformed into marriages both partners absolutely love.

Both of us grew up in families known for pioneering approaches to help people enjoy deeper and happier marriages. Today, both of us choose to continue in "the family business." For us, it's not something we inherited or simply a career path we chose. It's our life's work, our sacred calling, our mission, our ministry, our passion.

Greg's Story

My dad, Gary Smalley, may have been the world's most famous Christian marriage counselor. Today all three of Gary and Norma's children remain involved in this vital work. For my part, I serve as the vice president of Marriage at Focus.

You may have seen Gary during some of his many TV appearances on popular programs including *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Fox & Friends*. Or perhaps you heard him speak to millions of men at Promise Keepers rallies, attended one of his marriage conferences, heard one of his fifty Focus on the Family broadcasts, read one of his sixty books (they've sold more than five million copies), or watched one of his marriage videos (more than nine million sold).

It was fun having a famous dad who counseled and coached so many people, including John Tesh and Connie Sellecca, and Frank

and Kathie Lee Gifford. Even better, he was the same man at home with us as he was up on stage. He was a man of prayer and Bible study who spent his life honoring his wife and family.

Whenever he did something foolish—as all of us do—he was humble enough to admit he had made a mistake. He constantly sought to grow and learn, both as a dad and follower of Christ. He was one expert who was never too proud to tell people that he had messed up as a husband and father.

“I haven’t arrived yet,” he would often say. “I’ll arrive when I get to heaven.”

Dad was authentic and transparent, and this helped his three children embrace his deep faith in Christ to make it our own. He saw the importance of a good relationship with his children, telling me once that having a child was like making a best friend. I can honestly say that he was one of my best friends.

He also had a great sense of humor, which came in handy for me the time he woke up from a nap to find that my brother, Michael, and I had clasped the dog’s electric bark collar around his neck. He didn’t get mad when we made loud barking sounds and the collar zapped him.

Dad went to heaven in 2016. I was by his side when he died, me having just spoken at a big marriage conference. There are times when I’m counseling couples, or speaking about marriage at conferences, or writing a book like this one, and I feel like I’m following in his footsteps. That makes me happy.

Bob’s Story

Like Greg, I grew up in a family of popular, best-selling marriage gurus. And like Greg, I inherited their love of counseling, eventually deciding to follow in their footsteps by working as a marriage counselor, author, lecturer, and college professor.

But unlike Greg, I grew up in a broken home. My parents

divorced when I was only a year old. My mom remarried when I was three and my dad remarried when I was five. But I always felt loved by all four adults in my life.

Another important difference was that I didn't grow up in a Christian home. My dad and stepmom's underlying philosophy of life was more "New Agey" than Christian. I would not become a follower of Jesus until the day before my wedding, at twenty-three (and that's a story in itself!). Coming to faith in Christ changed my whole paradigm not only for life but also for helping couples who struggle in marriage.

I came to idolize my father, Jordan, and was inspired by my stepmother, Margie. I watched them pioneer ideas and techniques in marriage and relational counseling. They coauthored the best-selling marriage book *Do I Have to Give Up Me to Be Loved by You?*, which has sold more than a million copies and been translated into ten languages. They promoted their books on TV shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *The Phil Donahue Show*.

With fame and a private practice in West Los Angeles came opportunities to work with celebrities. My stepmom even coached one famous actress so she could play a convincing therapist in a famous, award-winning movie.

Another memory of my youth: The day after actress and *Playboy* Playmate Pamela Anderson appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and raved to Jay about how Margie had helped her, media film crews showed up at our house clamoring to interview my stepmother for the next news broadcast.

For me, the most exciting opportunity was the five years I had the privilege to work alongside my stepmom, helping her Los Angeles-based company, Inner Bonding Educational Technologies, facilitate dozens of five-day group therapy intensives throughout the country. I truly had the opportunity to learn from one of the best.

While other therapists were sitting alone figuring out their practice, I was sitting side by side with a master, doing therapy with her and learning all I could about leading group therapy intensives. Seeing my stepmom help people discover and address their problems made me fall in love with this kind of intensive, valuable counseling work, and I'm grateful I've spent my life doing it.

Counselors' Confessions

Our families of origin couldn't be more different, but they introduced both of us to the calling we would follow all our lives: helping men and women build better marriages.

So our professional partnership is based on the same things that provide a solid foundation for good marriages: love for each other, mutual respect, a desire to learn from and serve each other, and a commitment to truth and honesty. That commitment to truth and honesty means we must confess something to you, dear reader: If you bought this book based on the assumption that our track records as therapists would enable us to have perfect marriages and families, you should probably stop reading now.

Each of us is a broken, selfish man who has struggled with the same issues you face. Remember the love lies? We've believed them all, at least in part, and tried them out before we found them lacking. Like other married men and women around the world, we're still constantly working on this important relationship.

We thank God that each of us has been married for a long time: Greg for more than twenty-eight years and Bob for more than thirty-nine. Both of us confess that there were times when it seemed our marriages would not survive. But we have worked to make our marriages better day after day, year after year, decade after decade. We hope the same for you.

Let the Journey Begin

God designed marriage as an amazing gift for men and women, their families, and our world. He wants us to experience this gift in all its richness.

The couples you met at the beginning of this chapter aren't experiencing this gift to its fullest. Perhaps you feel the same way.

But you can make your marriage better if you want to. If your marriage is in crisis, you can help it not only survive but thrive. We've seen many broken and imperfect marriages transformed. If your marriage is great and you want it to grow to be even greater, you can take it to a new level. We've seen men and women weave strong, lasting relationships overflowing with love, beauty, and grace.

Our goal in this book is to live out the goal in Scripture: "Let marriage be held in honor among all" (Hebrews 13:4).

We have a vision for you: We want you to enjoy a healthy, happy, growing marriage that you and your partner both love. But that's not the end. It's just the beginning of this vision, a vision that your great marriage will become contagious. Wouldn't it be amazing if more couples had marriages that were so exciting and fulfilling that everyone around them wanted what they had? And what if some of those couples not only took care of their own marriages but also invested time and energy in helping other people who want to have a healthy marriage? What a powerful way to steward this amazing gift God has given us—a gift that many of us have messed up. But we have a vision that thousands of men and women enjoying these healthy and contagious relationships will grow into a marriage movement that helps men and women realize this beauty for themselves.

May God bless you on your journey to a better marriage. Let's start the journey by taking a look at something many people don't really understand: God's design for a healthy marriage.

LOVE LIE #1:

AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Katie and Zach were the kind of cute, contented couple that people loved to be around. “They look so happy together,” said friends, family members, and church members who knew them. Each was considered attractive and a good catch as a potential mate. Both were cheerful, with glass-half-full attitudes. Even when at rest, their lips formed nice smiles, not frowns. A few of their friends jokingly referred to them as Ken and Barbie because they were as blond and sculpted as the popular dolls.

Their romance had a fairy-tale quality to it. Introduced to each other by friends who promised, “You will be perfect for each other,” they actually were, quickly falling in love and making plans for their big wedding. And in the months before their marriage, they spent most evenings going out to dinner and seeing movies. When they saw Disney’s *The Lion King*, they both cried as Simba triumphed over his archrival, Scar.

Their love of film—particularly Disney movies and romantic comedies with happy endings—led them to add this line to their marriage ceremony: “And they lived happily ever after!”

It’s Complicated!

For years Katie and Zach were happy. They loved each other, enjoyed the same things, and built a loving home and family together. The front yard of their suburban home even had a picket fence! (The paint was taupe, though, not white.)

“We went into marriage expecting we would be happy,” Zach offered, when he and Katie first came to us. “Why get married if you don’t think you would be happy?”

But over time, alien elements of unhappiness invaded their love nest. The problems started soon after the birth of their first child, an overactive boy.

“Everybody told us we’d be tired,” Katie said, “but we had no idea *how* tired.”

Strange feelings began to cloud their relationship. They disagreed over whose turn it was to do the 4 a.m. feeding, and they found themselves disappointed to experience these petty arguments.

“We truly love our precious baby boy but feel guilty about not being ‘good enough’ parents,” Zach confessed. “We even feel guilty about feeling guilty!”

There was no more time for dining out, going to movies, or even talking.

After two weeks of paid paternity leave, Zach couldn’t wait to return to the people and predictability at his work. Over the following weeks, Katie grew resentful that Zach now helped her less, and Zach became frustrated.

“I don’t get it,” Zach said. “We need my income now more than ever.”

Unhappily Seeking Happiness

In time, a pattern developed. After problems arose, things would then calm down again and life would return to normal. But each new normal seemed a few steps below their original ideals. A simmering discontent grew between them.

“We were so young and innocent when we said we would live happily ever after,” Katie said. “But right now, nobody’s happy!”

Their scenario is far from unusual. Happy endings happen frequently in fairy tales and romantic movies, but real life turns out to be a bit more complicated and messy.

Zach and Katie embraced a popular version of the “Happily Ever After” lie. They had come to believe:

- A good marriage is like a big greenhouse that grows happiness.
- If happiness is fading, so is the marriage.
- If happiness is gone, so is the marriage.

Unfortunately, they’ve set themselves on a path that leads in a downward spiral. When happiness is seen as a major purpose for getting married, lack of happiness can lead to disappointment, frustration, and even comparison to other marriages perceived to be happier than theirs.

Now, as the distance between Katie and Zach has grown, feelings of happiness are increasingly rare, replaced by feelings of discouragement and being cheated. They want to work and make things better, but both question whether it would require too much investment and whether it would be worth it.

We’ve seen this story before. The people and the details change, but the impact of the “Happily Ever After” lie remains. Unmet expectations for continued happiness in marriage are actually one of the greatest causes of marital disappointment.

A Reasonable Pursuit, a Problematic Goal

Katie and Zach are facing a problem, and in some ways, it's commonly an American problem. Understandably, we Americans believe in happiness and aggressively seek it out. Many of us even consider it a "right," based on our recognition of its mention in our Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

But look carefully. The Declaration defends our right to *pursue* happiness, but does that statement mean to suggest that nothing is more important?

For many people, the pursuit of happiness becomes the primary purpose of both life and marriage. Since they believe they will be happier with someone, they want to team up with a partner in order to make each other *supremely* happy. But unfortunately, once happiness becomes the main goal of marriage, all the normal ups and downs and challenges of life can pose serious dangers to the relationship. And in some cases, marital unhappiness becomes a potential justification for emotional distance, affairs, or divorce.

When things go south in our marriages, when they don't live up to our hopes and expectations, or when there are periods of dissatisfaction, the commitment to stay together becomes strained, and people often say things like:

"This isn't what I had in mind."

"I've fallen out of love with my partner."

"I didn't sign up for this."

"There's something wrong with my spouse."

"We've grown apart."

"This is just too hard and painful."

"I don't want to do this anymore."

Or, as Katie often said, “Sometimes I don’t even remember why we married each other.”

Seeing God’s Higher Purposes for Your Marriage

Let’s stop for a minute, take a deep breath, and look at Katie and Zach’s particular scenario. Is it possible that they’ve bought into a flawed picture about what constitutes happiness? Are they navigating toward a fairy-tale destination that’s illusory rather than attempting to identify and align with the truth of God’s intent?

God wants men and women to be really happy in marriage. That’s part of why He created it. As the Lord declares throughout Scripture, He loves us and wants us to be full of joy. But that’s not the whole story. Marital happiness is only one aspect of God’s much bigger picture for this important relationship.

Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10, NIV). The word *full* here means over and above, more than enough. God wants us to experience not only the fullness of joy in Him, but also the fullness of *life* through gifts of His such as marriage.

Somewhere along the way we’ve become confused about how to experience life fully. Katie and Zach believed happiness was their primary purpose in life. But is happiness the only meaningful aspect of life? How about things like relationships, family, caring, compassion, creativity, creating, learning, growing, freedom, commitment, effort, devotion, hope, vision, sacrifice, making a difference, teamwork, and on and on? As important as happiness is, we struggle to imagine that it’s more important than the rest of these.

In fact, we are confident that God wants us all to be personally blessed. However, His purposes for us individually, and His purposes for us in the world, are much bigger than just our personal blessings.

We have good news for Katie and Zach and the many other people who are having problems experiencing the marital happiness they've dreamed of. When God created marriage, He meant the blessings to extend beyond just Zach and Katie, beyond just you and me. He is at work on a larger plan, and it's clear He wants us to be a part of it with Him: God sees marriage as a powerful relationship that can help redeem the world and build His Kingdom.

Don't get us wrong. We like happiness. We're not fundamentalist killjoys promoting the benefits of pain and suffering. Rather, we're enthusiastic believers in the idea that begins the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

We are incredibly pro-happiness. Happiness is a good thing, and marriage often makes people happier. But there's so much more to marriage than just the feelings of two people. God created marriage for your good, but He also has purposes that are far more meaningful and far-reaching.

Let's take a look at some of God's higher purposes for your marriage.

Your Partner in the Journey of Life

Many of you probably remember studying the famous Lewis and Clark Expedition, commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson, that set out to map the previously uncharted territory west of the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. Where would Meriwether Lewis have been without his fellow explorer, William Clark? It's likely that if either of these men had tried to cross the continent alone, neither would have survived or achieved their amazing exploits.

The trip included circumstances that were sometimes awe-inspiring, sometimes miraculous, sometimes difficult, and sometimes life-threatening. Along the way they discovered things that had never been known or recorded before. Because they worked together and helped each other out, they were successful on a journey that covered more than 7,500 miles over two and a half years.

We want you to think about Lewis and Clark as you consider the purpose of marriage. You and your spouse may not be mapping the American wilderness, but you are creating your own maps together as you walk together in the journey of life. As a married couple you are now commissioned by God to go on a sacred journey with Him *and* your spouse. The marital expedition has potential personal, community, and Kingdom purposes. We want to help you embrace a vision of some of the ways your marriage can benefit both you and the world so you don't miss all God wants to show you.

When we work with couples like Zach and Katie, we encourage them to try and embrace a paradigm shift in the way they look at each other and the state of their marriages. They started out believing that they would help each other live happily ever after. Now they're running into problems with that model, but that doesn't mean their marriage is fatally endangered. It just means they were trying to arrive at the wrong destination.

Instead of seeing your partner as the primary source of your happiness in marriage, we want you to take a fresh look and see your partner as something better—something more! On one level, your spouse is designed to be your journeying partner, walking alongside you and supporting you as you confront the issues and challenges you will face in life.

Have you ever experienced a success or victory but lacked someone to share your joy? Or have you ever experienced a humiliating

defeat but lacked someone to help you carry the emotional burden? These are the *supportive roles* you and your partner can serve for each other. However, as great as that can be, there's even more beyond your personal journey. Together with your journeying partner you can experience an even deeper sense of purpose that is possible when you join together with God, focused on His plan.

Have you ever worked as part of a team that accomplished something special? Generally, the hard work required only adds to the value of what was achieved. Or have you pulled together with others in valiant effort, only to come up a little short? Perhaps rather than seeing that experience as a failure, you all learned important lessons together. Everyone involved grew as a result, increasing the likelihood of future success.

As two of God's intentionally designed children, your lives were created on purpose, with purpose. Once married, your spouse is also meant to be your life partner, working together with you to create and build beautiful and significant things. These relational activities reflect some of the *creative roles* you and your spouse can have together in marriage.

I (Greg) have some good friends, Brian and Kari, who made great money investing in commercial real estate in New York City. They were living very comfortably and enjoying all the city had to offer. And then one day they started wondering if this was going to be their life—eating out every night at the best restaurants, orchestra row seats on Broadway, Fifth Avenue shopping, exclusive parties, and so on.

But God began tugging at their hearts. One day while they were walking around Central Park, they talked about how they might use their marriage to serve others. They didn't have a clear vision but had a peace that they were supposed to do something more with the financial blessings they'd been given. As their hearts joined around a common call, they felt united and supported.

That Sunday, as they were listening to a sermon about serving God, the visiting preacher flashed a verse on the screen that caused them both to well up with tears: “To you [God] the helpless commits himself; you have been the helper of the fatherless” (Psalm 10:14). Instantly they knew they were being called to care for the fatherless—orphans. But where? How?

Several weeks later, Brian had a meeting with a gentleman who was seeking an investor for a business idea in Beijing, China. As Brian listened to the man’s pitch, he suddenly had a clear vision: He could use the profits from this business in China to fund an orphanage. Kari’s spirit was moved by the idea, and she felt complete confirmation. So Brian and Kari left the comforts of New York City and headed to China with their three young daughters in tow.

Soon after getting the factory up and running, Kari discovered a need for foster care for medically needy children in Chinese orphanages. After months of red tape and hard work, Brian and Kari opened their first medical foster-care home outside of Beijing. Over the years, they’ve cared for hundreds of orphans and have seen more than 360 children get adopted worldwide—many to become members of Christian families. In service to the Lord, together they *created* something amazing and beautiful.

Erin and I are so grateful that God gave Brian and Kari a vision of how they could use their marriage to invest in others. Had it not been for their foster-care homes, a newborn baby girl left on their doorstep would not have survived the night. Annie, as they named her, would have never made the 6,300-mile flight to America, where she became our youngest daughter. The point of this story is not that in order to become journeying partners you must leave everything and become missionaries. But because Brian and Kari joined in their calling as a married couple to be the helper of the fatherless and journey together as friends and

followers of Christ, they meaningfully contributed to our journey to complete our family and help build our Christ-honoring family legacy.

Your Intimate Friend

One of the main reasons God created marriage was so you could experience deep, meaningful friendship with your primary journeying partner. Your marriage is a vehicle to share moments of joy, passion, and pleasure that could seem empty if you were alone. This gift is also a vehicle to share moments of sadness and sorrow that might crush you if you faced them alone. Marriage provides the ideal stimulus for personal growth as you become more fully the man or woman God created you to be. Simply put, you and your spouse have an opportunity to experience the deepest form of friendship and love there is. You have an opportunity to journey through life with a person who is united with you in love *and* purpose.

In addition, marriage can be a creative, positive agent of hope and change for a world desperately in need. How many people in your circles right now need to see examples of marriages that actually work, personally and relationally? Marriages where couples face normal challenges and difficulties, but they face them together as teammates? They overcome together, and together they learn and grow.

We're also talking about marriages that understand God's activity in this world and intentionally join in to make a difference in the world and in those around them. These are the marriages that demonstrate what is really possible with God—in part, by being deeply satisfying and full of joy, but also being connected to a greater purpose. We see this as *intimate friendship* at its best.

Now that's something to be happy about, and studies show that

working on building a deeper friendship with your spouse can be one of life's greatest sources of happiness. And this growing friendship can transform your marriage into one of deep satisfaction and meaningful purpose, even when encountering the challenges that precede every accomplishment and every victory. In real life the obstacles themselves become important elements in the story, just like every inspirational story you've ever heard. Real people who are facing and overcoming real problems with patience and love, who become great friends in the process, are the elements of any real love story.

When we shift our ultimate goal from happiness to having a satisfying intimate friendship filled with meaning and purpose, our relationship foundation fundamentally changes. The result becomes a relationship that truly inspires others to want what you have.

When those newly inspired couples then take those same steps to transform their marriages, they now become a source of inspiration to others, too. As more and more couples join in, we all begin to show the world what's possible in marriage with Christ, and over time we restore marriage to its rightful place of honor (see Hebrews 13:4). This may sound at first like a pipe dream, but this is actually what we have been doing now for more than twenty years. Not just with us personally, but with thousands of other couples too.

More than You and Me

When we work with couples like Katie and Zach, we want to help them experience more happiness in marriage. We also want to challenge them to cast a bigger vision for their life together based on God's design.

Here are four ways God uses marriage to help us to look beyond ourselves and our own happiness.

1. Marriage Transforms Lives

Martin Luther called marriage a school for character. Your marriage has the potential of continually transforming you, your partner, and your children, so that all of you daily grow closer to becoming the people God created you to be.

Zach and Katie's emphasis on personal happiness has somewhat short-circuited this higher purpose. Because engaging in deep conversations may create differences or tensions, they have shied away from such talks, preferring to keep things light and superficial. Unfortunately, this means they often miss out on their potential to partner with each other in their mutual redemption, healing, and growth. Yet marriage can help us become all we were created to be if we let it do so.

2. Marriage Is Proof of God's Love

God is love, but not everyone sees or believes that. Some people are skeptical because they see God's followers often acting in non-loving ways. Other people don't even believe real love exists in our world because they don't see it practiced.

You and your spouse have an opportunity to turn the tables on this despair and show the world that true, faithful, devoted love really exists outside of fairy tales and Disney movies. Simply by loving each other and letting that love be seen by others wherever you go, the two of you can serve as powerful ambassadors for God's love.

3. Marriage Is a Way to Share Love with Your Neighbors

Remember when the rich young man asked Jesus what the main commandment was? Jesus told him there were actually *two* main commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall

love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Families are one of God’s favorite ways of spreading His love and grace around in a world that needs it. Think about it: Your love has the potential of revealing God’s love to others and to the world.

Zach and Katie’s friendship now permeates a loving household. With open hearts and open arms, their house becomes a home. New opportunities abound to practice hospitality and share that love with people outside, and the mat on the front doorstep simply says, “Welcome.”

They may not *yet* be as happy as they might like to be, or as happy as they’re likely to become. But happiness frequently finds us along the way when we truly embrace and engage our intimate friendship journey through marriage.

As Zach and Katie continue to develop this friendship, they have ongoing opportunity to serve as both models and mentors to other couples who are floundering, helping those couples embrace their own journeys.

Their marriage now more fully reveals God’s love to all the men and women they meet. As they step out, let others know them, and share that love, they positively impact their neighborhood, church, and community. It creates a powerful cultural impact.

4. Marriage Becomes a Living Legacy

Have you ever noticed how many married couples have children? What a privilege it is to cocreate a whole new life and prepare this person to make the world a better place. The legacy of your children will outlast your own marriage and your life, and so this legacy is worth your investment. Although parenting and raising children is not the focus of this book, it’s a central piece of God’s design for marriage.

However, even beyond our children, couples who are living as intimate friends connected together with God and His purposes demonstrate what God can do in and through marriage. We live in a culture that questions whether a good, godly marriage is even possible or relevant in the world today. We hear young people ask, “Why would I want to get married when I don’t know anyone married any length of time who’s happy?”

We wholeheartedly believe that great marriages are not only possible but are actually the cornerstone of God’s plan for families, communities, and the world. Together we can show the world what *is* possible with God and those submitted to His purpose. We can create marriages that are deeply satisfying and filled with rich meaning and purpose.

Then, as our successful marriages are seen by others, they become an inspiration. As those couples then create their own enjoyable and meaningful journeys together, our marriages have created a powerful, positive legacy that can be passed on from generation to generation.

An Elusive Goal

Zach and Katie have been unhappy—there’s no denying that. But even though happiness is important, Zach and Katie have overrated and overemphasized it. God’s primary purpose in marriage is not merely to grow their personal happiness.

Think about it: Happiness can be elusive at times, and it actually seems to be most elusive when we seek it most desperately. Ultimately, our happiness is subject to the many variables and circumstances in life. Everything from bad weather to hunger can heavily impact our moment-to-moment feelings.

That’s why it’s dangerous to evaluate the success and quality of a marriage by a simple happiness quotient. The things you and

I do to be happier may not be directly tied to the happiness we experience at any particular time.

So rather than focusing on happiness, we want to help you learn how you can experience joy in your marriage journey, even amidst difficulties. Let's see how that can work.

Self-Assessment: What's the Purpose of Marriage?

All married people seek to be happy, but not all marriages achieve this goal. Answer the questions and respond to the statements below to evaluate your feelings.

1. Why did you get married? What is your marriage primarily about?

Zach and Katie made happiness a priority. Is that why you got married? Reflect on your decision to marry and the reasons you chose this mode of living.

2. I don't look to my spouse to be my source of happiness, but rather as my journeying partner who I can count on to be with me in good times and also through life's challenges.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Never Rarely Sometimes Always

3. My spouse and I are clear about, and actively pursuing, the fulfillment of the larger calling and purposes of our marriage, the impact of which reach beyond just us.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Never Rarely Sometimes Always

4. Beyond being lovers, our marriage is characterized by being a deep and personal friendship.

| | | | | | | |
|-------|---|--------|---|-----------|---|--------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Never | | Rarely | | Sometimes | | Always |

Exercises for Friends on the Marriage Journey

Horizontal Communication: Rekindling the Lost Art of Conversation

Once upon a time, Jenni and I (Bob), like Katie and Zach, couldn't wait to see each other and talk to each other. Throughout our early life together we were enthralled and infatuated by getting to know each other. We went out to dinner, went to the beach to watch sunsets, went on walks together, enthusiastically asking each other questions and telling each other our life stories.

But as time went on, our conversations became increasingly dominated by the many frustrations and disappointments we encountered. Our "talks" went from enjoying getting to know each other to trying to resolve conflicts. Sadly, growing our friendship became a distant memory.

Unfortunately, we know we're not alone in this. Many people struggle to find either the time or the interest to sit down and have an open-ended conversation with their spouses. That's too bad, because conversation motivated by a desire to know each other waters relationships and nourishes love. It's hard to grow love and friendship without good conversation.

Friendship-building conversation is under assault today by the pace of life, addictive digital devices, and 24/7 media and entertainment options. How often have you seen this picture? Two people sit together having dinner in a restaurant, but they don't talk to each other, focusing instead on their phones.

We're on a crusade to grow great, inspiring marriages based

on real, intimate friendship. Toward that end, we're going to be exploring all kinds of conversations during our journey together in this book. But let's begin with the basics.

When we encounter couples like Zach and Katie, we prescribe a precise procedure to cure their lack of communication: regular conversations full of curiosity, just like the kinds of conversations that build all great friendships and romances. During a typical day, husbands and wives have all kinds of conversations, from simple logistical check-ins (Who's going to pick up some milk on the way home?) to the deepest kinds of heart-to-heart talks (So do we think I should explore this new career opportunity with greater responsibility and greater income?).

We want you to start conversations with a different goal: to build friendship through curiosity. Your goal here is not to deal with family logistics or fix a relational problem. Think of your goal as getting reacquainted with someone you've lost contact with over the years by kindling curiosity. The underlying excitement of infatuation and romance is the fascination of getting to know someone interesting. Treat yourself to the joy of infatuation and romance by allowing yourself to rediscover and cultivate your fascination and interest in your spouse.

Here are some of our recommended conversation starters:

- How was your day? (Warning: Some couples often ask this question but don't wait to hear the answer. Ask this and other questions only if you are really interested to hear what the other person has to say.)
- What's the most interesting experience you had in the last week?
- What is something you're looking forward to?
- What is something you're dreading?

- Where were you and what were you doing on this date ten years ago? Twenty years ago?
- If your life were a big book, what chapter would you say you are in right now?
- If you could ask God to completely eradicate one problem in this world, what would it be?
- Who would you say are the friends you most enjoy being with and talking to?
- Has someone recently disappointed or offended you?
- What are two things that I still don't know about you?
- What is one thing you appreciate about our relationship?
- If you were to die tomorrow, what would be the one thing you've felt best about accomplishing in life? What is the one thing that has been your biggest waste of time?
- What are you feeling most grateful for today?

Horizontal Affirmation: Appreciating Your Partner

When you ask your partner a curiosity question, we want you to do two things:

1. Listen instead of talking. (You are allowed to ask clarifying questions, but don't talk. It's not about you!)
2. Take good notes, because you can use some of the information you learn in our next recommended tool.

Katie and Zach quit talking long ago. About the same time, they also stopped appreciating each other, as their annoyances with each other grew.

To turn this process around, we want you to develop a "Cherish List," itemizing twenty to thirty items that you appreciate and love

about your partner. What qualities of character or behaviors do you most appreciate? What about your partner makes you smile or laugh?

We both regularly practice this partner appreciation exercise with our wives. Here are a few of the items we have articulated to let them know specifically what we appreciate about them, followed by a few of their items about us.

What Bob most appreciates about Jenni:

- She's artistic and creative. She makes everything around her more beautiful. She's also an incredibly creative problem solver.
- She's loyal. (She calls it "dysfunctionally loyal.") Her commitment to God, me, and our family is without exception. Without this, among other things, we'd have never made it!
- She's an outside-the-box thinker. Her perspective is so different that at times it seems odd. But because she sees the world differently than anyone else I know, I've been able to see some things I never would have otherwise.

What Jenni most appreciates about Bob:

- His sense of humor. He loves to make others laugh, especially me, even though the jokes are sometimes really dumb!
- His passion for life and hunger to learn. He approaches life with real passion and loves to help others find their own.
- His commitment to God and family. He's never given up on God. Even when times were tough and uncertain, he has yielded to the Lord.

What Greg most appreciates about Erin:

- She's highly relational. She loves being with people and relating to them, especially other women.
- She's diligent: She likes to accomplish a lot in each day.
- She's compassionate: She loves to help others when they are hurting both physically and emotionally. That's why she became a nurse and now works as a counselor.

What Erin most appreciates about Greg:

- He has a great sense of humor and he's a lot of fun to be around.
- He is a hard worker and a great provider for our family.
- He has a sensitive heart. He is gentle and kind with me and our children.

Here are some words and phrases you might use to help you articulate precisely what your partner means to you:

| | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| humble | generous |
| happy | creative |
| courageous | full of integrity |
| funny | intelligent |
| self-confident | sensitive |
| loyal | curious |
| caring | responsible |
| determined | fun loving |

When you praise your spouse, be precise about what you appreciate so you can avoid two major problems:

1. When you are vague or overly general (“You are awesome”), your partner has no idea about the specific things you appreciate most.
2. When you focus on external characteristics of attractiveness (“You are incredibly hot!”), your partner may conclude that the attraction is all physical and has nothing to do with other characteristics, so remember to focus primarily on interior qualities and personality traits.

Vertical Communication: Couples That Pray Together Stay Together

It’s important for Zach and Katie to communicate with each other and appreciate each other, but there’s a third form of communication couples need to keep their love growing deeper: communication with God.

Praying together as a couple is more than a reassuring ritual. It’s a way to connect your lives to your Creator and show that, ultimately, the two of you depend on Him for your sustenance—not each other.

Prayer can help the two of you in profound ways. First, it’s a way to lay your anxieties and issues before God rather than continually beating each other up with them. Paul’s advice on prayer is particularly helpful for couples facing stress: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

Praying together can be a very intimate experience, both with your spouse and with God. But some couples don’t know where to begin. That’s why we’re offering you this simple five-step process you can use to get started.

1. *Open with thanks.*
 - Thank God for showing up in the past and helping both you and your spouse.
 - Thank Him for creating the two of you and giving you the personalities and gifts you have.
 - Thank God for His promise to give you His peace when you bring your concerns to Him.

2. *Confess and submit.*
 - Confess your dependence on God for your life and the good things in it.
 - Express your desire to submit your will to His leadership and direction.
 - Ask Him to use your current situations to shape and mold you into the person He desires you to be.

3. *Seek God's direction.*
 - Ask God to guide you, your partner, and your family.
 - Ask Him to show both of you how to love and serve each other.
 - Ask God for guidance and direction so that His will may prevail as you both make important decisions.

4. *Pray for a bigger vision for your marriage.*
 - God desires your happiness together, but that's only part of His vision for married life. Ask Him to show the two of you how you can work together to serve Him.
 - Pray this prayer: "Lord, help me to see what You see, and help me to see what You want me to see."

5. *Close with thanks.*

- Thank God for hearing your prayer and answering it according to His will.
- Thank Him for your marriage and your opportunity to grow closer to each other and to Him.

Prayer isn't just something to do at church or in emergency "fox-hole" situations. Prayer is part of life, and couples that make prayer part of their life together can experience a deeper love and sense of spiritual purpose together.

From Happiness to Oneness

Happy endings are expected in many stories and movies, but marriages based only on the pursuit of happiness often experience unhappiness.

God created both of you and brought you together for the journey of married life. The marriage you have experienced so far, be it good or bad, is not the end of the story. You are actually in the middle of writing a love story with your spouse and with God, and you get to write your part.

Instead of blaming your partner for failing to make you happy, focus some conversation on how the two of you can better help each other in your personal journeys through life, which is the supportive role of marriage.

Then spend some time discussing what you each think might be some of the things God is already doing, or wanting to do, through you as a couple. What are the opportunities through your lives and marriage where God can reveal Himself (the creative role of marriage)?

Remember, the Good News of Jesus Christ (the gospel) is never about how good we are, but rather what He is willing to do in us and through us, in spite of us and our many imperfections! Make

sure you leave plenty of room for each of you, and for your marriage, to be an imperfect work in progress. As you do so, you may find yourself experiencing something that's even better than happiness: a deep and lasting joy, and a marriage filled with meaning and purpose.