

ENTER  
*the*  
RING

*fighting together for  
a gospel-saturated  
marriage*

D. A. & ELICIA  
HORTON



*Enter the Ring* is everything I've come to expect from D. A. and Elicia Horton—gritty, creative, hard hitting, gospel centered, powerful, and life changing. This is a seriously great book—you'll laugh sometimes and feel like you got punched in the gut at other times (and in this book there's usually only seconds between the two, so when you're chuckling to yourself, watch out). In all of it, you'll find yourself looking upward to Jesus with amazement to find the hope and grace in your relationships that D. A. and Elicia have found in theirs.

J. D. GREEAR, PhD

Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina

*Enter the Ring* is an unveiling of the deep struggles involved in making a marriage work. In true millennial fashion, D. A. and Elicia Horton open up their lives before us so we can have front-row seats in seeing God work. This book will challenge readers from all generations to pursue gospel-saturated lifestyles that serve as an apologetic for our faith.

ED STETZER

Billy Graham Distinguished Chair, Wheaton College Graduate School

*Enter the Ring* is a book that considers the nuances of being unapologetically Christian, married, and urban. It's both refreshing and reassuring to see the raw realness of marriage expressed in these pages. The Hortons' vulnerability and practicability in their approach to marriage is a needed voice in the genre.

PROPAGANDA AND DR. ALMA

*The Red Couch Podcast*

Reading *Enter the Ring* makes you feel as though you're sitting in the Hortons' living room on their couch while they're talking to you about marriage. This book is relatable, transparent, and deeply convicting—and all the while it points you back to the One who is able to heal even the deepest of marital hurts. The Hortons remind us that while marriage can be difficult, the Redeemer is still able to make beauty from ashes.

**RICK AND ROSIE HARRIS**

The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina

*Enter the Ring* is a gospel-saturated, practical, informational, and inspirational book on marriage. I love D. A. and Elicia's transparency about their personal struggles for oneness and for defining oneness biblically and relationally. The IDEAL acronym they define is great for handling conflict in a loving and healthy way, and hearing from both of them is helpful. From communication to sexual intimacy, this book covers the whole gamut of what marriage is, what it does, and the goal God has in bringing two people together. This is a great book no matter where you are on your marriage journey. I highly recommended this book for couples and for churches desiring to equip their couples for lasting marriages.

**JEROME GAY JR.**

Pastor, Vision Church, Raleigh, North Carolina

Just yesterday I received a request to pray for a marriage. After praying for this couple, I thought of *Enter the Ring*. D. A. and Elicia are writing to save marriages, and we need to save marriages now more than ever before. Practical and gospel based, this book is a godsend. As D. A. and Elicia write, “We can choose to fight for our marriages. And with God’s help, we can win.”

**OSAZE MURRAY**

Recording artist and African American Network director  
with The Navigators

This is not your *Leave It to Beaver*, “high school sweethearts fall in love and live happily ever after” kind of marriage book. It’s more like a “How in the world did these two end up getting married and staying together?” kind of marriage book. It’s the kind of book that’s needed in a self-absorbed, sex-crazed, anti-commitment world filled with brokenhearted singles and disillusioned young marrieds. With down-to-earth, street-level, blunt honesty, D. A. and Elicia Horton speak out of their own relational struggles and into the lives of anyone willing to listen regarding how to *Enter the Ring* and fight together for a gospel-saturated marriage. Take up and read this book in your single years, in premarital counseling, and in your first years of marriage. Watch as D. A. and Elicia demonstrate how the gospel is worked out in marriage. Let them walk you through the practical ways of fighting *together*, rather than against each other, in various potential areas of conflict facing couples today.

**JUAN AND JEANINE SANCHEZ**

High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas



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*Enter the Ring: Fighting Together for a Gospel-Saturated Marriage*

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# Introduction

*We Are Broken*

*D. A.*

Our wedding date was set for June 28, 2003, and we were two months away from saying “I do.” But there was a problem—or, rather, many problems: Our relationship was like a roller coaster ride, and we’d been through quite a few starts, stops, ups, downs, twists, and turns (and even a malfunction or two). I was only twenty-two, and Elicia was twenty-one. We didn’t have much money, we were dealing with family drama, and neither of us had ever lived on our own before. Were we too close to the wedding to call it quits? Was the only thing keeping us together the embarrassment of having another failed relationship? The pressure was mounting.

And then one Saturday evening in April, we erupted.

I was scheduled to perform a few songs at the Main Street Café in Midtown, Kansas City, but before I left my parents’ house to head to the venue, Elicia and I had another heated exchange on the phone. It was probably our thousandth fight. I can’t remember what it was about, but we both said

things best not repeated. Needing to leave, I bluntly asked Elicia if she was coming to the event, and her reply included two sounds: a click and a dial tone.

I decided not to call her back and instead headed out.

During the last song on my set, around 10:15 p.m., Elicia walked through the door. My heart settled at the sight of her. Things were going to be okay. We would work this out, just as we had all the other times. I finished my song, shared the gospel message with the crowd, and exited stage right. As I maneuvered through the crowd, weaving in and out of small-talk conversations, I searched for Elicia. I finally saw her talking to some mutual friends. When she caught sight of me, I smiled and waved. She rolled her eyes.

Okay, so my work was cut out for me. But I felt optimistic. I pressed on until I was standing next to her, giving her a hug and whispering in her ear, “Thank you for coming, baby!” Her arms remained glued to her sides. I hated it when she did that. For me, it was the ultimate form of rejection because it reopened abandonment wounds from my childhood.

Then she told me the only reason she came was to give me back her engagement ring.

I was so stunned that I didn’t quite register what was going on—until she grabbed my hand and placed the ring in it. When our eyes met again, fury rushed through me. I told her to step outside, and she said she had no time to talk because she was heading home. Then she walked past me and left the venue. I followed her outside, calling her name.

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She refused to turn around. There was only one way I could stop her from getting in her car: a trigger phrase she couldn't ignore. As she reached for her keys, I told her, "I rebuke you!"

It worked. Before I could say anything else, she turned around and went off on me!

After just a few minutes, so furious I had to restrain myself from hitting her car with my fist, I walked away, down the block. Elicia followed me, taunting me every step of the way. When we started cussing each other out, we were literally standing in front of the church where I was the youth pastor!

I hit the front door of the church with my fist and took off running down the middle of the street, my signature untied Timberland boots clunking loudly with each step. When I was halfway down the block, I could hear Elicia laughing out loud.

Then I felt my cell phone buzz in my pocket. It was 12:15 a.m. Elicia's text read, "Come back here, silly boy!" I sighed with relief. It seemed as if we were both ready to talk this out.

I jogged back to the church steps, where Elicia was sitting. When I got about ten feet away from her, I opened my arms and motioned for a hug. She stood up, looked at me, and then started walking in the other direction, deeper into the neighborhood.

Now, this was not the type of neighborhood where any sane person would go for a midnight stroll. I called out for Elicia to stop, but she ignored me and kept walking. Once again I became irate and ran to catch up with her.

We met for round two directly under a streetlight at the

intersection of East Thirty-Seventh and Warwick Boulevard. The next two and a half hours were a profanity-laced shouting match. Things got bad. Really bad. Full disclosure: Drug dealers moved their business two blocks away from us because we were scaring off their clients. The people in the house on the southwest corner of the intersection were having a party, but after an hour of our fight, the partygoers turned off the music and came to the windows to watch us.

We called each other every name in the book. Elicia threatened to sue me for the cost of the wedding dress she would not be using. I told her that I was moving away from Kansas City and she would never have to worry about seeing me again.

At 4:15 a.m., my mom called. I refused to answer, so she left a voice mail telling me to come home—because, as she pointed out, nothing decent ever takes place at that hour of the morning. By this time, Elicia and I both agreed that this fight was taking us nowhere fast. We decided to give ourselves a few days to reconsider if we really wanted to get married.

By Wednesday we agreed to stay together, provided that we went through premarital counseling in the church we had been raised in. The next six weeks of counseling helped us, but it didn't heal us. That process would take years. But our brokenness didn't stop us from taking our vows to become man and wife, before God, family, and hundreds of witnesses.

\* \* \*

Why did we begin this book on marriage with such an embarrassing story from our relationship? Well, first, we

## INTRODUCTION

think there's power in being honest and transparent. And second, if God can do a great work in our relationship, no relationship is beyond His ability to repair and restore. We couldn't write a book about marriage and relationships if we weren't committed to being vulnerable about sharing the good *and* the bad. We're convinced that displaying our deficiencies allows you to see Christ's sufficiency and how He's kept us together in marriage for almost fifteen years.

No one who writes about marriage has it all together—because no one who is married has it all together! We're not here to impress you; we're here to point you to the God who works *in spite of* us, not *because of* us. Marriage is a process, and we're inviting you to look at God's work in the present tense of our lives.

Before we exchanged vows, we were two people fighting for pole position in a race to our wedding day. We had no concept of what a gospel-saturated marriage was. Our communication was poor, and our fights clearly showed that we were not on the same page. We had no idea what oneness and togetherness looked like in the face of suffering. We were both spiritually immature and used emotionalism as a crutch to stay theologically aloof. We struggled sexually—each losing respect for the other because of how much time we'd spend trying to go as far as possible without *technically* having intercourse. And financially speaking, we were on two different planets. Elicia had checking and savings

accounts and good credit, and I had four bank accounts—all with red numbers!

We each had baggage, past issues, and emotional wounds that had never healed properly. Had God not intervened, we would've never made it.

If we had to summarize our marriage in one statement, it would be this: Our marriage is a union of two broken people who have both entrusted their hearts to God (through salvation in Jesus Christ) and each other while living in a broken world that keeps trying to break them apart.

As we've matured in our walk with Christ, both individually and together as husband and wife, we have seen how the world's system assaults our family daily. Marriage can be like a boxing match—and the world is our opponent (Ephesians 2:1-2). By God's grace and power (Ephesians 2:4-10), from the day we said "I do," we entered the ring as a team, and we won't stop fighting the temptations of the world until the final bell sounds!

If you're married, you and your spouse are in the middle of a fight. The world is using different tactics to distract you, trip you up, and tempt you to throw in the towel and leave the ring defeated. The world wants to destroy your marriage. But God is with you in the fight—and through forgiveness and grace He is ready to lead you, to protect you not only from the world but also from yourselves.

You have to choose to fight for your marriage. Together. No matter what you're facing.

Are you ready to enter the ring?

## Our Goal

### *Elicia*

We desire to see more gospel-saturated marriages flood the neighborhoods of our nation and world—marriages that holistically apply the gospel to every nuance of married life, becoming a vivid picture of the saving work of Jesus Christ. We want to help you fight off the assaults of the world so that your marriage can serve as one of the greatest illustrations of the gospel in our society today.

That means we're going to go through some pretty hard-hitting things, and D. A. and I are going to be honest about our own failings and struggles as we do that. You're not alone in this fight. We're going to look at what God has shown us about the institution of marriage through Scripture and how the world is assaulting his intention for it.

As believers, we have a way forward in living out an apologetic for what He's declared. But it's hard! We'll talk about the tension of two people becoming one and how, for the first few years of our marriage, we fought over which "one of us" we would become.

We're also going to get practical. We'll talk about communication, conflict, suffering, and our spiritual lives in marriage. We will work through the different roles of discipleship between husband and wife as well as the high calling of raising children—and the complications that come with it. We'll have an honest conversation about sexuality and physical intimacy as well.

## ENTER THE RING

And we're going to talk about money. We purposely deal with this topic because finances are often a huge struggle in marriage. We filed for bankruptcy before we'd been married five years.

In all of these areas, we do not have a squeaky-clean record! But God has taught us some things along the way, and we want to journey with you through what we've learned.

In our world today, convictions rooted in Scripture are under attack. Since marriage is a tangible illustration for the gospel, the enemy of our souls (2 Corinthians 4:4) doesn't want our marriages to thrive. We can be tempted to give up and give in when the pressures of this life squeeze us from all sides, and the world is waiting to cheer on our failure.

But through the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9-13), we can put to death those temptations, cling to our spouses, and stand with boldness against the evil forces at work. We can choose to fight *for* each other instead of *against* each other. We can choose to fight for our marriages. And with God's help, we can win.

CHAPTER I

# BEAT THE WORLD TO THE PUNCH

*God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."*

GENESIS 1:27-28

*D. A.*

The definition of marriage has been heatedly debated over the past decade. And social media has only accelerated and sometimes inflamed the conversation, as millions of people contribute to the debate with witty memes, posts, and tweets to prove their points and take shots at the opposing side.

As both sides become more polarized, and because Twitter wars rarely lead to helpful outcomes, Elicia and I have purposed to take a different approach. We want to call ourselves and other married believers to gospel-saturated marriages. Talking with believers across the nation about the pressing

social issues of today, we've noticed that married Christians are often distracted by the fight going on around them. They're allowing things that are temporal, not eternal, to dictate their marriages. They're choosing the world's priorities instead of God's, and the world is going to keep fighting against our marriages. We need to fight back—by choosing to live out the gospel with our spouses.

On the morning of June 26, 2015, the day the Supreme Court ruled on the definition of marriage,<sup>1</sup> I tweeted, "Marriage as God defines it in Scripture is a beautiful illustration of the Gospel. The Gospel shines best when in contrast to darkness." The tweet was picked up by a couple of online media outlets who were reporting on the "Christian Twitter" response to the Supreme Court decision.<sup>2</sup> This placed the tweet in front of people who don't usually follow me, which led to an interesting conversation between me and a person who celebrated the court ruling.

This person told me I was wrong to compare the love of two consenting adults with darkness—that I was juxtaposing God's definition of marriage. My definition of marriage, he said, is outdated and oppressive—and is evidence that Christians will lose. When I pushed back, asking exactly what we are going to lose, he warned me that Christians' opinions, ideas, and priorities regarding the definition of marriage would no longer be part of the conversation.

Politely, I asked a few follow-up questions regarding what he believed about the mission of the church, and he shared his conviction that the gospel is not objective—that any

person can interpret it as he or she pleases. He told me that because the “gospel” preached by his lesbian pastor friend differed from the one I preached, the gospel itself must be subjective.

But God’s Word is not subjective. It is, and will always be, the authoritative voice that each of us—me, you, the person I was in dialogue with, and the lesbian pastor—must come into submission under.

Our culture today calls for people to be accepting, affirming, and embracing of all voices, whether privileged or oppressed. However, this principle doesn’t seem to hold true when a Bible-believing Christian, informed by Scripture and seeking to live a consistent biblical worldview, expresses his or her perspective. The culture of tolerance ironically cannot tolerate the biblical worldview.

Mind you, Christians don’t help the situation when we resort to name-calling, sarcasm, and heartless dialogue with anyone who disagrees with us. Sadly, this carnal behavior happens not only between Christians and the unbelieving world but also among Christians who believe differently.

Fighting for a biblical definition of marriage is a challenge on many levels. But the Christian arguments for biblical marriage suffer when the world can point to the same sinfulness in Christian marriages that exists in the marriages of unbelievers. This is why we are not attacking those who agree with the Supreme Court’s definition of marriage—rather, we are calling for Christians to look at their own marriages and

reassess what God's Word says regarding marriage, holy living, and the Christian family.

Christians are just as susceptible as nonbelievers to issues of poor communication, frivolous spending, sexual immorality, and all other vices, because we are still wrestling with our sinful nature. This reality should humble every Christian who is married and simultaneously cause us to operate with sympathy toward those trying to navigate marriage without the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit.

As married Christians living in a pluralistic society, asking for our voices to be heard in the public sphere, we should offer to the nonbelieving world the same respect we want. When legislation directly conflicts with a biblical worldview, Christians should not only respectfully defend biblical convictions but also demonstrate those convictions in their own marriages.

Having gospel-saturated marriages allows Christians to influence the culture without compromising the convictions of the Christian faith. Our efforts can become less about engaging in a war of words on social media and more about living in marriages on mission for God's glory. When we live out the implications of a gospel-saturated marriage, the biblical definition of marriage becomes clear and has greater potential to have an impact on a watching world.

### **Gospel-Saturated**

So, what do we mean when we say "gospel saturated"? First, let's deal with the term *gospel*. When we talk about the gospel, we don't mean a generic term or genre of music—rather, the

gospel includes the hope of salvation and the implication of what life looks like when a person embraces the truth of the gospel. This is how the Bible lays out the gospel message:

- Every human being is born dead in sin (Psalm 51:5; Ephesians 2:1-3), enslaved to sin (John 8:34), and completely unable to save him- or herself from the rightful wrath of God (Romans 2:5-6).
- God sent Jesus—God fully incarnated in human flesh (John 1:1-14)—to die in our place (Mark 10:45). He lived the perfect life no sinful human can live (Hebrews 7:26). He was buried only to rise from the grave, showing that His payment of shed blood (Ephesians 1:7) was approved by God (Romans 4:24-25).
- Sinners—from every ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic situation—who hear the gospel, believe it, and confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead (Romans 1:16; 10:9-17) will be saved from enduring God's wrath (Romans 5:9). And they will receive eternal life (John 17:3) by grace through faith and enjoy a rightly reconciled relationship with God because of Christ's finished work (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

Second, let's talk about the term *saturated*. Something is saturated when it has completely absorbed something else. Once, when I was preparing for a trip out of town, I packed

a small bottle of liquid starch to use when ironing my clothes. During my flight, the top of the bottle came off. When I opened the suitcase, I saw that my clothes were completely saturated with starch. While saturated clothes are certainly not ideal, a marriage completely saturated by the gospel message is a beautiful thing. A gospel-saturated marriage is one in which the husband and wife strive to apply the gospel's content and implications in every area of their marriage.

Let's move from the theoretical to the practical by using Colossians 1:3-8 as a case study on *how* to live out gospel saturation.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

This passage captures what a gospel-saturated life looks like. Imagine the impact a marriage can have when it comprises

two believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit and living this kind of gospel-saturated life! According to the book of Colossians, a gospel-saturated life consists of three things: (1) a regular practice of thankfulness and prayer; (2) a personification of faith, love, and hope; and (3) a healthy commitment to the local church.

### *A Regular Practice of Thankfulness and Prayer*

Paul begins his letter to the Christians in Colossae by informing them that he and Timothy pray for them consistently—and that their prayers include thankfulness to God for these Christians.

The phrasing Paul uses in the Greek tells us that his prayers for these Christians were daily. One lexicon defines the word *pray* as “to petition deity.”<sup>3</sup> Paul is daily seeking the face of the sovereign God of the universe—and praying not for himself but for the saints in Colossae.

Can you say the same regarding your prayer life and the spouse you live with? Do you spend regular amounts of time praying both with and for your spouse?

### *Elicia*

Early in our marriage, D. A. and I didn't make times of prayer a priority. When moments of crisis hit, we approached God's throne of grace together—but sadly, when the crisis subsided, we were not disciplined to continue the practice. We had no problem praying for each other during our personal time with God; however, prayer together was

limited to mealtime and bedtime. When you and another person have entered into a covenant, share a bed, and are both indwelled by the Holy Spirit, not praying together is unhealthy.

It wasn't until we were five years into our marriage that we began praying together regularly. Sadly, it took situations such as entering the pastorate, filing for bankruptcy, making job transitions, and having fallouts with family and friends to drive us to pray together. These times of prayer ranged between five minutes and more than an hour. We began to notice that when we poured our hearts out together before God and laced our prayers with thanksgiving, He answered us quickly. Not every answer was a yes, so we began to ask God to prepare our hearts to receive His will.

The togetherness we gained through consistent times of prayer—which, again, we want to stress were sometimes as short as five minutes—benefited our relationship in many ways. As we made ourselves vulnerable and expressed our anxieties and fears, “my” struggle turned into “our” struggle. And when we took our struggles to God, we knew He was with us in whatever we faced! As we walked in vulnerability together, we experienced a renewed desire to protect each other's hearts, not only from the enemy of our souls and the world but also from each other.

Pride is the great assassin of marriages. And prayer is the ultimate antidote for pride. Coming together in prayer creates the humility to confess wrongs and extend forgiveness. Words of affirmation and thanksgiving become a regular

rhythm in the relationship. Togetherness in prayer is a key aspect of a gospel-saturated marriage.

*A Personification of Faith, Love, and Hope*

*D. A.*

In Colossians 1:4-6, Paul highlights the evidence that the saints in Colossae were living out the gospel: their *faith* in Christ, the *love* they had for all the saints, and their *hope* in heaven. Simply put, their lifestyle was in harmony with the gospel. Their lives showed that Christ the risen Lord reigned in their hearts.

The quality of someone's faith is measured by the quality of the object in which that person places his or her faith. Take a chair, for example. My faith in a chair can only be as strong as the chair. If it is a weak chair, then I have weak faith that the chair will hold me. If it is a strong chair, then I have strong faith. The evidence of my faith becomes visible when I decide to sit in the chair. The phrase "faith in Christ" in Colossians 1:4 shows that the believers found security of salvation in Jesus, not in themselves.

As Christians, we are often tempted to put our faith in things other than Jesus Christ. Our entire lives before we were saved consisted of a cyclical trial-and-error process of placing our faith in temporal things that never ultimately protected our hearts. The world regularly throws various temptations toward us that can cause us to seek to put our marriages in the hands of something outside of Christ. Sadly,

sometimes marriage itself becomes an idol, and spouses wrap up their identity in their relationship with each other. Or perhaps a dream home becomes the security blanket in a marriage. Maybe for some people, their spouse's job—or their own—forms their identity, and they feel that as long as they're collecting a salary with benefits, they're secure. Yet when the trials of life come and the idols of their heart are exposed—when they're laid off, lose their home, face profound conflict with their spouse—their once-solid marriage is now skating on thin, cracking ice. Their faith was weak because they placed it in temporary things. Gospel saturation calls us to place our faith in Someone who never changes.

Hebrews 11:1 says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith for the Christian is anchored not in *something* but in *someone*—the God-man, Jesus Christ. He alone has been tried, tested, and found absolutely true. He is the one who will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). It is impossible to live out the implications of a gospel-saturated life if our faith is not rooted in Jesus Christ.

One evidence of our faith in Christ is a genuine love for other Christians. You can't have a gospel-saturated marriage and you can't truly and wholly love your spouse if Jesus Christ alone is not the object of your faith. This is not a mere verbal profession of Jesus being Lord—rather, it is *living* as if He is Lord, striving to obey His commands from Scripture. When you do this, your love for Christ, for your spouse, for all other saints, and for the entire nonbelieving world becomes

evident through your “good works” toward others (Titus 3:8, 14). Your good works must first take place in your home, toward those who live with you, and then these good works produce a natural outflow of love, placing your marriage on display for the glory of Christ.

Displaying this kind of love and marriage takes time and discipline. It takes a forgiving heart dedicated to building a godly future with the person you have entered into a covenant with. The love you express toward your spouse should resemble what we read in Romans 5:8—that while we were in our lowest spiritual state before salvation (dead in sin, slaves to sin, and separated from God), God demonstrated His love for us by punishing His Son on the cross in our place. If God loved us at our lowest, then no one has the excuse to not do the same for his or her spouse. No matter how our spouses sin, or if they show arrogant stubbornness in an argument or reluctance to engage fully in the spiritual journey alongside us, we should never stop showing unfailing love.

This type of love is possible, and we know this because Paul acknowledged that the saints in Colossae were practicing it. Their motivation to love this way was a result of their hope in heaven—they had heard the Word of Truth, the gospel. Since marriage is an illustration for the gospel, as Paul says in Ephesians 5:25-32, we must assess what love looks like in a gospel-saturated marriage. Paul says Christ demonstrates His love for the church by giving Himself up for her, to have the privilege of sanctifying her and cleansing

her with the Word of God. The outcome Christ is aiming for is a purified and spotless bride.

A gospel-saturated marriage recognizes the hope that carries our hearts through every storm: Holiness in heaven is the secured eternal reality for those of us who are saved and who are part of the bride of Christ. This hope, which is guaranteed (Ephesians 1:13-14), should drive us to emulate the love of Christ toward our spouses by dying to self, holding each other accountable, and regularly digesting God's Word together. Doing this over the course of time will produce in us a level of spiritual maturity that allows us to not be blown over by every wind of false teaching, temptation, and emotion.

### *A Healthy Commitment to the Local Church*

Spiritual maturity, as described in Ephesians 4:14-16, is not designed to be lived out in isolation. Spiritual maturity is affirmed and made evident when we're living in community together. Our marriages will bloom and blossom alongside other marriages when we're planting and rooting ourselves together in local churches. This is why gospel-saturated marriages have strong commitments to the local church.

Colossians 1:5-8 highlights the commitment of the saints in Colossae to the local church. Epaphras was the vessel the Lord used to expose the saints in Colossae to the gospel. Paul calls him a "fellow servant," faithful to Christ. This description clues us in that Epaphras was dependable and reliable (faithful) and selflessly met the needs of the people in the church (a servant).

This type of availability fostered community. Meeting the needs of others naturally produces togetherness. When we live out this reality as couples by seeking to holistically meet the needs of our spouses, we will then have a posture and sensitivity to meet the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of those in our local church.

More than fifty times in the New Testament we see the phrase “one another.” Most of the occurrences deal with the interpersonal relationships of those in the body of Christ. Imagine the impact our local churches can have on broken communities when numerous gospel-saturated marriages engage both inside and outside the walls of the church.

But make no mistake: Operating at this level of togetherness takes sacrifice. We have to choose to carve out time for relationships among the saints, regardless of their marital status. As we devote ourselves to one another (Romans 12:10), over the course of time we will honor those in our local church above ourselves. Doing this produces harmony (12:16) that motivates us to not pass judgment on one another (14:13). During times of community building, we begin to take down the filters we use in public. All our bad habits, emotional scars, personality traits, and quirks begin to come out. It’s important for us to welcome and embrace the nonfiltered, authentic, broken, and spiritually developing brothers and sisters in the faith. This is what it looks like to accept one another as Christ accepted us (15:7).

When this type of life becomes the rhythm of our marriages and homes, our times of celebration and worship in

the church will feel like family reunions! We'll have equal concern for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25), strive to serve one another (Galatians 5:13), fight against devouring one another (5:15), and be prone to carrying one another's burdens (6:2). These actions will produce fruits of tenderheartedness, forgiveness, and truthfulness toward one another (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:9, 13). During times of suffering, we will naturally be driven to encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18; Hebrews 13:3), build one another up (1 Thessalonians 5:11) instead of grumbling at one another (James 5:9), and simply love one another (1 John 3:11, 23, 4:7-2; 2 John 5).

Imagine if all these attributes are first present in our marriages. Then think of the marriages in our local churches making these things tangible. The darkness of the world will be pushed back as we strive to maintain the rhythm of gospel-saturated lives. The world will take notice.

### **The Three Cs**

Now that we've established what a gospel-saturated life looks like, let's look a little closer at marriage itself. As we wrote earlier, our marriage is a union of two broken people who have both entrusted their hearts to God (through salvation in Jesus Christ) and each other while living in a broken world that keeps trying to break them apart.

We believe the greatest potential for living out a gospel-saturated marriage is when each spouse has embraced Christ as Lord and Savior. However, we recognize not every Christian

is married to another Christian. If this is your reality, don't lose heart. You can live out a gospel-saturated life in such a way that the Lord uses it to bring your nonbelieving spouse to salvation. Your faithfulness—and your reliance on God's grace in loving your spouse—will act as an example in your local church.

To understand marriage further, we have to answer a common question: When does God consider a couple married? Couples often ask us this question, and we must discern why the person or couple wants our perspective. Sometimes a couple is living in a cohabitating relationship and declares they are in love and do not need a piece of paper to tell them that. Other times, people express their desire to have a commitment ceremony rather than a traditional marriage ceremony—so they can make an initial commitment but with the option not to maintain it long term. We believe neither of these choices reflect marriage as defined by God.

We view marriage primarily as an institution created and ordained by God to serve as a tangible illustration of the gospel message and its implications. Inside the framework of marriage, especially among believers, we should find self-sacrificing love, patience, loyalty, and endurance. It is possible for nonbelievers, who are image bearers of God, to enjoy long-lasting marriages possessing these same characteristics. However, for Christians, marriage does not exist merely for the purpose of enjoying life; rather, our lives should be so saturated with the gospel that people will want to know how

and why we're making our marriage *work*—giving us the opportunity to point them toward Christ as Savior.

Working in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, Christians who are married—and encountering the same struggles all marriages face—can unveil what it looks like to find victory over the assaults of the world. The conviction to endure the fight must root back to an understanding that marriage is God's idea. None of us can truly endure the fight without Him.

God's desire for marriage to thrive is amazing to see. The concept is on display in both the opening and closing of the Bible, His love letter to His covenant people.<sup>4</sup> And the entire human race traces its lineage back to the first marriage—Adam and Eve's. In Acts 17:26 Paul says Adam was the man God used to bring forth all the ethnicities of the world, and in Genesis 3:20 Adam named his wife Eve because she was the mother of all living human beings. In Genesis 3 the fall of man introduced sin and death universally to the human race (Romans 5:12-21), and this fall provides us with the backdrop to the second and best marriage of all, found in the last parts of Scripture. This is the marriage between the second Adam—Jesus Christ—and His bride: the people of God, all of redeemed humanity.

God's heart and design for marriage is why we must look to Scripture to discern when He considers a couple married. The Bible does not specifically declare a point at which God accepts a couple as married. The answer is more nuanced. Dr. Andreas Kostenberger provides a helpful definition: "Marriage is a

covenant, a sacred bond between a man and a woman instituted by and publicly entered into before God and normally consummated by sexual intercourse.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, our understanding of marriage is rooted in three biblical principles: (1) cultural declaration, (2) ceremony, and (3) consummation.

### *Cultural Declaration*

Throughout human history, couples have needed to cross various cultural hurdles before society would recognize their marriage. In the Hammurabi Empire, “the largest category of laws . . . focused on marriage and the family. Parents arranged marriages for their children. After marriage, the parties involved signed a marriage contract; without it, no one was considered legally married.”<sup>6</sup> In precolonized Aztec culture in Mexico, “marriage rarely took place without the consent of the parents, with the marriage partner usually chosen by them.”<sup>7</sup> In ancient Rome a legal marriage was necessary to have legitimate children. A marriage would be considered legal when a man and a woman fulfilled the requirements of *conubium*, which mandated that “spouses were Roman citizens, were of sufficient age or physical maturity, and lacked a close blood relationship.”<sup>8</sup>

In the United States, each state has different regulations for couples who wish to be recognized as married. Elicia and I were married in the state of Missouri and were mandated by law to apply for and purchase a marriage license. In addition, after the ceremony took place, the officiating clergy member and two witnesses of legal age were required to sign

the license. (When I was twelve, I had the privilege of serving as best man in my older brother's wedding. However, because I was not of legal age in the state of Missouri, I was not allowed to sign the marriage license.) Finally, for a marriage in Missouri to be considered legal, the document had to be signed, sealed, mailed, and then received by the county clerk within fourteen days of the ceremony.

In Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:17, Christians are called to live under submission to the authorities in their society. Therefore, in support of this, believers who desire to be married should go through the proper channels to receive recognition from governing authorities. However, because civilizations have had different customs and we live in a country where federal law now allows couples of the same sex to be married, it's important to note that cultural declaration is only one of three nuances necessary for a marriage to be recognized in the eyes of God.

### *Ceremony*

A ceremony of some sort should take place in addition to the cultural declaration. Prior to receiving Christianity, indigenous Mexican couples whose parents blessed their desire to be married would present themselves before an Aztec priest. The priest would take their hands and begin asking a series of questions that concluded with confirming the personal desire of each person to be married. Then the priest would tie part of the woman's veil to the man's garment and lead the two around a kindled fire seven times at the bride's house.<sup>9</sup>

In Jewish culture, the journey to marriage has two parts: a time of engagement and the marriage itself. Historically the former would last for about a year, while the latter would be for a lifetime. The public wedding ceremony connected these two parts.<sup>10</sup> For modern marriages, the ceremony acts as the framework for the covenant both parties are entering into before God, each other, and all present witnesses.

Arguably the first ceremony in Scripture can be found in Genesis 2:18-23. Since there is no specific biblical framework for a wedding ceremony, we can best define it, based on this passage, as a man and woman joyfully coming together before God to express their desire to remain exclusively together from that moment on. However, the covenantal language between God and the newly wedded couple is found in Genesis 1:26-31, which parallels Genesis 2:15-25. God states He created both man and woman in His image, giving distinction between the human race and all other forms of creation. God mandated for Adam and Eve to populate the earth with other humans, thus showing the biological necessity for both to participate in procreation. God then delegated humans to steward creation while having dominion over it. The task is too heavy for one person to carry alone, thus the need for both the man and woman—and in the future all their offspring—to work in harmony to carry out the task.

Genesis 2:8-17 provides us with clarity about God's covenantal instructions to Adam. Prior to the creation of Eve, God gave Adam a job: stewarding the Garden of Eden. Adam

was to obey God perfectly in two ways: tending the Garden and not eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Disobedience would break the covenant, and death would be the result.

Genesis 2:18 is the first record in Scripture of God saying something is “not good.” This passage contrasts the creation story. All things God created in Genesis 1–2 were good because God the creator is infinitely good. In verse 18 God recognizes that it is not good for man to be alone, and He then makes a complementary helper for Adam.

The word *helper* means, as you might expect, a person who helps someone else—and not as a slave or servant, but rather as one who is supportive of the task at hand. In the context of this passage, the helper—or better yet, supporter—was necessary for Adam to fulfill the task God required. Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke says, “The word *helper*, used for God sixteen of the nineteen times it appears in the Old Testament, signifies the woman’s essential contribution, not inadequacy.”<sup>11</sup> God saying that he would make Adam “a helper fit for him” (verse 18) means that she, too, would be an image bearer of God. This distinguishes her from every other form of creation, thus showing God’s design for humanity. The mission to steward creation would be shared by a man and a woman who desired to walk in obedience to God.

Verses 21-22 of Genesis 2 say, “The LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib

that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.” It has been said God did not select a bone from Adam’s head so that the woman would rule over man or become proud, nor from his feet that he would walk all over her; rather, He brought her forth from Adam’s rib to create an environment of equality, protection, and modesty (by the husband serving as her covering).<sup>12</sup> Adam receives Eve with great joy and verbally declares the connectedness they will share and their desire to remain exclusively together from that moment on.

### *Consummation*

The act of consummation is necessary for a marriage to be recognized by God. Genesis 2:24-25 says, “A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” These two verses are commentary by the author Moses, intended to help readers understand God’s purpose for marriage. Jesus affirms God’s intentions in Matthew 19:5: “A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” The apostle Paul also quotes this passage in Ephesians 5:31, emphasizing how marriage between a man and a woman is an illustration of Christ’s love for His bride, the church.

One definition of the word *consummation* is “the time at which something is finally completed,”<sup>13</sup> and obviously the act of sexual intercourse places the final piece of the

framework for a recognized marriage in the eyes of God. However, Genesis 2:24-25 points to a oneness in marriage that should exist beyond that of sexual intimacy between the husband and wife. The language of the two becoming one flesh speaks also to the intimate unity between the husband and wife to the exclusion of all others.<sup>14</sup>

We see a further picture of this oneness between the couple through the description of them as “naked and . . . not ashamed.” At the beginning of human history there were no fears of abuse, exploitation, infidelity, manipulation, or sexual deviancy because sin had not yet entered the picture. The nakedness of Adam and Eve unveils the fact that each of them had no fear of being exposed. They were walking in complete obedience to God and were at the center of His will.

God had designed Adam and Eve for togetherness in matrimony and mission, and He blessed their union. Moses communicated the necessity of oneness because the readers of Genesis were living in a world tainted by sin, broken family structures, and a loss of the original nakedness (Genesis 3:1-7). In addition, marriage ceremonies after the first one in Genesis 2 would involve parents or guardians of both the bride and groom, necessitating a recognition of possible family tensions that would surround the newlyweds after the ceremony and consummation took place.

Moses introduces what we call the leave-and-cleave principle, where both the husband and wife place each other as the priority over all other preexisting relationships. The

newlyweds continue to love their premarriage family structures; however, the new marriage takes precedence.

The Hebrew word for *cleave* means “be united, joined, i.e., be in a close association”<sup>15</sup>—in other words, being in continued togetherness. This implies a long-lasting togetherness that grows deeper over the course of marriage. The necessity for oneness and togetherness in marriage is a theme throughout Scripture.

### **Be a Billboard**

Now that you have a solid foundation for defining marriage according to God’s standards, you can beat the world to the punch. The greatest apologetic for marriage as God intended is a gospel-saturated marriage in which both the husband and wife believe the content of the gospel, place their trust in Christ to save them by grace through faith, and work to apply the gospel in every area of their lives.

Our world needs to see every Christian couple fighting together as one through the storms of life. The gospel compels us to do this. As gospel-saturated husbands and wives, we express thankfulness toward each other, pray together regularly, ensure our faith is placed rightly in Christ, love each other as God loves us, and embrace biblical hope together—all while living in community with the saints in our local churches. When we do this, the world will watch us draw closer to each other—and God—each passing day.

To our brothers and sisters married to nonbelieving spouses: You can offer a solid gospel witness through

expressing thankfulness to your spouses, asking them to pray with you regularly, and inviting them to engage in mutual friendships with other believers inside and outside your local church. As you sow seeds of a healthy gospel witness, we pray that the Lord will send other believers to water those seeds—and that ultimately God will draw your spouses to salvation (1 Corinthians 3:5-9).

The battle for the togetherness Scripture prescribes does not come automatically with a cultural declaration, a ceremony, and consummation. It takes each spouse committing to walk in step with the Holy Spirit who indwells them—and when they grieve (Ephesians 4:30) and quench His work (1 Thessalonians 5:19), they should humble themselves by confessing and repenting. A gospel-saturated marriage is not perfect—in fact, it’s messy because the Holy Spirit is progressively sanctifying both spouses. The world needs to see the beautiful struggle of Christian marriages, the tension of two striving for oneness. As we do this, our marriages will serve as a billboard for the gospel message. When we dedicate ourselves to living out gospel-saturated marriages, we’re beating the world to the punch, no longer contributing to the lie that God’s definition of marriage doesn’t work. Instead, we get to proclaim the gospel through marriage, sharing the Good News with people from every nation, tribe, and tongue.

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