

the
BEST YEAR
of your marriage



52 DEVOTIONS TO BRING
YOU CLOSER

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of your marriage

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- GENERAL EDITORS -

WITH PAUL BATURA

FOCUS
ON THE
FAMILY



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

The Best Year of Your Marriage: 52 Devotions to Bring You Closer

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A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

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Portions of this book are adapted from *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, ISBN-10: 1-58997-041-1; ISBN-13: 978-1-58997-041-0. Copyright © 2006 by Focus on the Family.

Some names and details of certain case studies in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. The events and underlying principles, however, have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

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Cover design by Jennifer Ghionzoli

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data pending
ISBN 978-1-62405-136-4

Printed in the United States of America

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FOREWORD

By Jim and Jean Daly

Remember the moment you first fell in love?

It seems like an easy, straightforward question. But is it?

Many of us, when asked, find our minds wandering back to our first “crush” or an innocent kiss stolen under the stars. At the time we thought we were “in love,” but if we were really young, chances are we weren’t.

Instead, we were in love with the idea of it all, not the person whose hand we first held.

There’s a big difference—as the two of us know.

We’re still passionate about marriage—helping couples experience marriages that don’t just survive but thrive. Having recently passed our twenty-seventh anniversary, we can honestly say our marriage is getting better by the year.

But we haven’t always experienced this upward trajectory. There have been tough times, as there always are. There have been seasons of struggle and periods of frustration. We’ll share some of them in the following pages. Through it all, though, we’ve challenged ourselves to keep close by seeking to remain in consistent fellowship with the Lord.

We don’t know where you are on the marital spectrum, of course. Maybe you’re newly married and the future looks as bright as the morning sun. Maybe you find yourself in the

“doldrums,” a period of stagnation; things aren’t really bad, but they aren’t very good, either. Or maybe you’re doing pretty well and want to maintain that status—which is why you’re reading this book.

Wherever you are on the marriage continuum, there’s something here for you. Because marriage was God’s idea, He wants the very best for our relationships. It must break His heart to see so much strain, strife, and stress battering homes around the world.

It need not be this way.

Designed as a gift to mankind that brings glory to the Creator, marriage is an institution critical to the sustainability and stability of society. God has built into every human being a desire for companionship and craving to love and be loved.

There are some who seem determined to undermine the importance of marriage as God intended. Sadly, these individuals and movements grab the headlines. But they don’t represent the majority opinion. David Popenoe, a former professor of sociology at Rutgers University, recently suggested that people who say traditional marriage is becoming obsolete might be voicing a fear, not expressing a wish. We think that’s pretty insightful.

If you ask people what they fear most, it’s not uncommon to hear talk of terrorism, death, pain, and even public speaking and spiders. Yet, if you speak more intimately with these same

people—or even watch how they live as opposed to listening to what they say—you often get a very different take on what truly burdens them.

Since God created people for companionship, it makes sense that many of us fear loneliness most of all. Studies have confirmed that loneliness is on the rise in the U.S., a curious thing since we're increasingly connected—at least technologically speaking.

By some estimates, 60 million Americans (20 percent) are lonely. A significant percentage of these people have absolutely nobody with whom to talk over important or intimate matters.

It's no wonder that many would fear the loss of marriage as an institution, especially given its emotional, spiritual, and physical benefits. If there's no marriage, there's no hope of that long walk into the sunset with your aging spouse by your side.

We're reminded of a favorite observation from the late President Ronald Reagan, whose love affair with his beloved Nancy has been so well chronicled. Regarding the gift and beauty of marriage, consider the Gipper's poignant reflection in a 1989 interview with reporter Mike Wallace:

Nancy's power was the power of, well, giving me a marriage that was like an adolescent's dream of what marriage should be. Clark Gable had some words once, when he said there is nothing more wonderful for a man

than to know as he approaches his own doorstep that someone on the other side of that door is listening for the sound of his footsteps.¹

Even while he was president, Mr. Reagan used to stand by the window in the White House and watch for the lights of the car that would bring his Nancy home.

We're called not only to preserve the God-ordained institution of marriage and highlight its benefits and His reasons for it; we're to model it well, too. Perhaps many people fear the loss of marriage because they've never seen a healthy one in their own families or communities. We'd be wise to quell that anxiety by living out our marriages as they were intended to be.

We hope this book helps you do that. We're delighted to add our perspective to it. In fact, we consider it a privilege to contribute. Most of what you're about to read has been lovingly and prayerfully written by the counselors of Focus on the Family. How we admire these wise women and men who day in and day out help millions of people see their relationships as God sees them. May the Lord bless them—and you and your spouse—as you journey through these pages.

INTRODUCTION

*By Phillip J. Swihart, Ph.D. and
Wilford Wooten, M.S.W., L.M.F.T., L.C.S.W.*

Most marriages start with the delight of “being in love.” The question is what happens next. Does bliss lead to adjustment, compromises, and learning to really love another person who may have very different needs and expectations? Or does it give way to poorly handled conflict, power struggles, and deepening frustration and resentment?

Even in marriages that end up thriving, marital bliss is often replaced by marital stress. Financial problems, for instance, challenge many couples. So do schedules; if some spouses feel as if they never see each other, it’s because they never do.

Trying to agree on priorities is stressful, too. What purchases should you make? What should you forgo? Where should you live? Just finding out what your spouse thinks is normal to spend on clothes can be enlightening—in a very negative way.

Other stressors include getting used to in-laws. Discovering what your mate’s family is really like can be a shock.

So is finding that neither of you seems to have any conflict management skills. As one comedian noted, “My wife and I never fight; we just have moments of intense fellowship.” Instead of dealing constructively with the inevitable conflicts and disagreements found in any marriage, you may quickly

devolve into blaming, yelling, and withdrawing—a toxic cocktail that can send a marriage spiraling downward.

And then there's sex. Whatever happened to the glorious expectations you had in that wonder-world of dating? It may only take a few months of marital reality for the fantasies of “true love” and sexual excitement to clash with the disappointments of sharing a bed with another imperfect person who's sometimes tough to like, let alone love.

Another stressor for many married couples is pregnancy—and the joys and strains of parenting. Trying to learn a whole new skill set is hard enough, but it's much harder when you're desperate for a few more hours of sleep. Even spouses with more than the usual maturity find themselves unusually irritable and hard to get along with.

The spiritual dimension of your relationship can be a point of contention, too. This often forms fertile ground for spiritual attack by an enemy who would love to destroy a relationship that God has blessed as holy.

Many of these challenges stem from distorted expectations. More and more, we want everything to happen on demand. But marriage doesn't work that way.

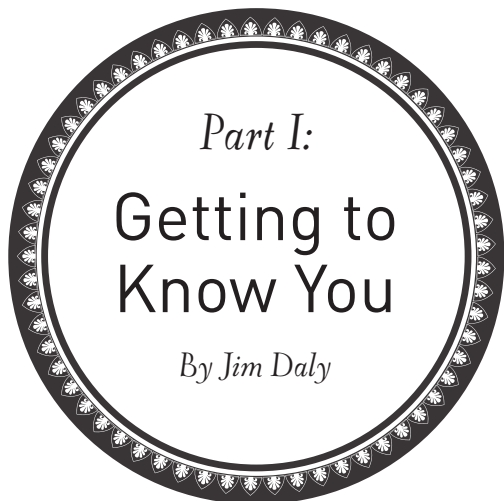
The apostle Paul advised Christians to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). As radio Bible teacher Alistair Begg has noted, we need to do the same in our marriages.

This is a book about working things out—trembling or

otherwise. But it doesn't just dispense advice. It gives you and your spouse a way to spend special time together, talking about things that matter, considering God's Word, praying, and taking action to strengthen and recharge your relationship. You can share these times as often as you like; once a week is a good place to start. It's our hope and prayer that these devotions will be a rich source of help and encouragement on your journey through the partnership called marriage.

There's another distinctive to this volume, too. Most of the authors are current or former professional staff members with Focus on the Family's counseling department. They're committed Christians and highly qualified mental health, marriage, and family therapists with many years of combined experience in working with thousands of couples like you.

Marriage is an adventure. As you enjoy your God-given partnership, enjoy this book, too.



I'd like to tell you how Jean and I first met.

We first crossed paths in 1985 at a wedding in California. People often say that weddings are great places to meet people (for good reason), but at the time I wasn't interested in finding a girlfriend. Honest! I'd recently returned from a semester in Japan and graduated from college. Business degree in hand, I landed a good position with a local paper company and began the corporate climb.

I'd decided to take a break from dating. It was just something the Lord had laid on my heart. As a result of that decision, my head was clearing and my prayer life was improving. It felt great to devote my full attention to my spiritual development, not the pursuit of a pretty girl.

My good friend Dan was incredulous. We bantered about it; he respected my decision to steer clear of romance, but I

could tell he was unconvinced. He was on the verge of marrying his fiancée, Tina, and asked me to be his best man. Honored, I accepted his invitation.

But something extraordinary happened on the Wednesday night before Dan and Tina's wedding. I'd decided to attend a service at Lake Arrowhead Christian Fellowship. I was not a regular attendee, and knew very few people there. In the midst of the worship service the pastor—whom I did not know—walked directly toward me.

“I have a word from the Lord for you,” he said. “The Lord has picked out a wife for you. She will have a heart for the things of God.” He paused and then continued. “And in the years to come you will spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to people all around the world.”

I was stunned. But my heart was tender and receptive to what this man said.

That coming Saturday, at the wedding, I met Tina's good friend. Her name was Jean. Despite the fact that it was Dan and Tina's big day, they worked like crazy to get us together—and succeeded. Jean and I made some pleasant small talk, but quickly parted ways. When I returned to my table, I couldn't believe what I heard myself say to my friend Victor: “I think I met the woman I'm going to marry.”

But life got busy; Jean and I didn't talk to or see one another for the next nine months! Once again our friends tried to play Cupid and orchestrated another meeting. For our first

get-together (not our official first date), I escorted Jean to an Amy Grant concert at the Pacific Amphitheatre in Newport Beach. I packed a picnic dinner of grapes, cheese, crackers, and iced tea. (I later learned that Jean hated iced tea—but that night she drank it with a smile.) In the fading twilight of that warm evening, I think we both realized something good was happening. But we kept our thoughts to ourselves.

Jean was still in college and due back to classes in September for her next year at the University of California at Davis. I hated to see her go, and wasn't crazy about having a long-distance relationship.

So what does a love-struck young man in this situation do? I quit my job and moved in with my brother Mike, who happened to live in Sacramento about 40 miles from Jean's school. For two semesters I burned through savings and income from a few odd jobs while Jean worked on her pre-vet degree.

Our dating life was lots of fun. We talked and talked and talked! While Jean was still in school, I bought a ring and proposed (with her father's permission) under the shade of a large Santa Barbara oak tree.

She said "yes"!

There's more to the story, but we'll save it for later. For now, I'll just point out what strikes me when I think back to the way Jean and I met. I'm reminded that though man has his plans, God will always have His way!

I'll also encourage you to explore the readings in this

“Getting to Know You” section. As Jean and I have found, discovering each other doesn’t end with the proposal or the walk down the aisle. It’s a lifelong process. As you read, have fun remembering the story of how you met—and looking forward to knowing each other better with each passing week.



I

Making Time to Talk

*“You who dwell in the gardens with friends
in attendance, let me hear your voice! Come
away, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a
young stag on the spice-laden mountains.”*

SONG OF SONGS 8:13-14

Caleb and Trina, recently married, didn't have much spare time. They had full-time jobs and took evening classes. They also found themselves over-invested in church duties and under-invested in each other. They spent little time together, and found even less time to converse. When they did talk, it was mostly to argue and criticize each other. They even questioned whether or not they should be married because they were “falling out of love.”

One day, Caleb took a drive in the country. Long into the evening, about two miles from home, the car suddenly stopped. It had run out of gas.

Something came to Caleb's mind at that moment: His marriage was running out of fuel, too. He knew that he and his wife needed help, and needed it immediately.

Fortunately, they were referred to a marriage counselor. The

first thing they learned there was the “24-5 Principle”—based in part on Deuteronomy 24:5: “If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.”

Like Caleb and Trina, many couples don’t take enough time to talk, bond, and firmly connect with each other. How about you?

If you’re a newlywed, you can apply the 24-5 Principle by making an agreement for one year. Refrain from extra responsibilities in order to focus on and establish your marriage. Bond with your spouse. Bring happiness to one another. If your church asks you to take on a major task during this time, you might say something like, “Thank you for thinking of us. We’re so pleased with the church and so encouraged by all of you. But we’ve been strongly advised to invest in each other this first year. Please ask us again in a year or so.”

What if you’re past the one-year mark? You can apply the 24-5 Principle anytime by doing five things:

1. *Keep your promise to “become one.”* One of the best ways to do this is by spending time talking, setting goals, going shopping, playing tennis—even reading a devotional book.
2. *Be intentional and selective.* Everyone has the same amount of time—24 hours a day. If talking really is a priority for you, you’ll say no to time-stealers like TV sitcoms, reality shows, and the Internet.

3. *Be creative and perseverant.* Talk about a variety of subjects—solving problems, overcoming challenges, strengthening your spiritual life, and just having fun. And remember that bonding and connecting don't happen overnight.
4. *Enjoy and encourage uniqueness.* Think of how boring it would be to be married to yourself! Those conversations wouldn't be very interesting, would they? As you spend time together, resist the temptation to try remaking your spouse in your image. Let the Holy Spirit transform both of you into the image of Christ.
5. *Respect God's gift.* God has given you and your spouse each other. How are you nurturing that gift? Taking time to talk is part of that.

—James Groesbeck with Amy Swierczek

WORTH THINKING ABOUT

Read Song of Songs 8:13-14 again. What does it mean to you to hear your spouse's voice? Where are your favorite places to "come away" and talk?

WORTH PRAYING ABOUT

Ask God to help you make wise choices about how you use your time this week, and to give you wisdom to make the most of your time together.

WORTH DOING

Choose a chore or recreational activity (washing dishes, hiking, weeding the garden, etc.) that you and your spouse can do together during the next 24 hours. Make sure it's something you can do while talking. Then pick a topic you'll discuss—something positive, like planning a vacation or remembering the two best movies you ever watched together. Some conversations require lots of concentration and eye contact, but talking while doing something else can be an efficient, nonthreatening way to break the ice—especially if you haven't communicated in a while.