

FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY

Ready to Wed

12 Ways to Start
a Marriage You'll Love



Dr. Greg & Erin Smalley
General Editors

At Focus on the Family, I have the privilege of working with Dr. Greg and Erin Smalley on a regular basis. When it comes to marriage and relationships, they know their stuff! And they have assembled an amazing team of like-minded Christian marriage experts for this practical and readable volume. Trust me, if you're planning to get married, you need to read this book first. You and your spouse-to-be will be so glad you did.

JIM DALY

President of Focus on the Family

Marriage is a glorious but sometimes difficult journey for a man and a woman. I am thankful Greg wrote this book, and I believe it will become a trusted guide for couples who want a solid foundation for their relationship.

BRADY BOYD

Pastor of New Life Church and author of *Addicted to Busy*

Wow, what a treasure trove! All the best premarital wisdom from all my favorite marriage leaders. Every engaged couple should schedule a short break from auditioning DJs for their reception and read this during that time. It will be the best possible investment they can make.

SHAUNTI FELDHahn

Social researcher and bestselling author of *For Women Only* and *For Men Only*

Striking the perfect balance between practical, instructional, inspirational, and spiritual advice, *Ready to Wed* will immediately take its place as one of the most important and valuable resources available for Christian couples who want to start their marriage off right. Highly recommended.

GARY THOMAS

Author of *Sacred Marriage* and *A Lifelong Love*

Ready to Wed[♥]

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Greg Smalley and Erin Smalley

PLANNING FOR “THE DAY” or for a lifetime?

This question was written with big cursive lettering on a booth display that Erin and I (Greg) used at bridal fairs to advertise our premarital seminars. It was always so much fun to watch not only the prospective brides but also their mothers walk by and testify in their most sassy voices, “Mm-hmm!”

You see, rarely did we get any brides to stop at our booth. Each bride was so busy planning for her special day—the dress, the cake, the venue, the photographer, the honeymoon—she hardly gave much thought to planning for her future marriage. Sadly, only about 35 to 40 percent of engaged couples will receive quality premarital education.¹ And by quality, we mean at least eight to ten hours of instruction from someone who has been equipped to do so. This is so unfortunate because the premarital research is so strong. Note these remarkable statistics:

- You’re 30 percent less likely to get divorced if you get some sort of premarital training before you marry.²
- Eighty percent of the couples who received premarital training stayed together.³
- Couples who participate in premarital programs experience a 30 percent increase in marital satisfaction over those who don’t participate.⁴

The moms who were walking around with their daughters at the bridal fair understood this, and that's why the majority of the tickets we sold were to the mothers as gifts to their daughters and future sons-in-law.

But you're different! We're certain you're also thinking of your future with your fiancé(e)—especially since you are reading this book. That's why we're thrilled that in the midst of all you have going on, you're also spending time working on your relationship. It's so exciting that you're taking time to participate in Focus on the Family's *Ready to Wed* experience. Our desire is to help you grow a strong marriage relationship that will last a lifetime.

Growing a Strong Marriage

Over the years, I (Greg) have been blessed to officiate at several wedding ceremonies. But I'll never forget my first. Erin and I did premarital counseling with this one couple during their engagement period. As I thought about what I would say to them during the ceremony, I decided that I wanted to give them a creative picture of how to build a strong marriage relationship. I had sat through one too many wedding ceremonies where I could barely keep my eyes open during the teaching portion. So I developed what I thought was a powerful analogy of a strong marriage, using the bride's wedding bouquet. The key point I wanted to make was that it takes time and care to mature seeds (where their marriage was starting out) into a beautiful bouquet (a strong marriage). I thought I was so clever!

To construct my "amazing" analogy, I needed to know the types of flowers the bride had chosen for her bridal bouquet. After asking around, I discovered that she would be carrying calla lilies. So I went out in search of a packet of seeds to present to this young, anxious couple during my teaching, only to find out that calla lilies grow from bulbs. Good to know! Since bulbs obviously weren't going to work, I bought generic flower seeds instead and planned on telling the couple that they represented the bride's beautiful bouquet.

So there we were. A beautiful Missouri summer day—hot and humid but very pretty. The bride and groom were anxious with anticipation as they finally reached the day they were to become man and wife. The sanctuary was packed with their special guests, and my precious wife and kids were in the audience both to witness the union and to support me while I officiated.

I began the ceremony by holding up the bride's beautiful wedding bouquet. The audience let out several *oohs* and *aaahs* as I explained that this bouquet was an image of the couple's ideal relationship—the marriage they'd always dreamed of. I then held up the package of seeds for the bride and groom to hold, clarifying that this was where their marriage was starting. I wanted them to understand that it would take time and effort to “mature” their relationship from a package of seeds to a bouquet of beautiful flowers. Then I went on to explain that the key was to use the right nutrients and care to begin growing their relationship seeds.

I was on a roll, and everything was going perfectly until I came to the last point of my brilliant analogy. I had already laid the groundwork for growing the seeds using water, sunshine, and proper pruning, and I related each of these aspects to a particular relationship skill (communication, spiritual connection, and conflict management). However, because I don't have a green thumb, and I know virtually nothing about growing flowers, I quickly ran out of gardening analogies to use for my last relationship point: spending time together. Unfortunately, the only thing I could think of was fertilizer.

I was almost done and was feeling rather proud of myself. But for some reason, the mood of the audience changed suddenly when I said, “Much like fertilizer helps calla lilies grow strong and healthy, if you want a strong marriage, you need to spend at least twenty minutes each day fertilizing each other.”

The crowd broke out into roaring laughter. I had no idea why they were all laughing, so I looked at my wife, Erin—you know, my “help-mate”—for some type of clue, but she, too, had tears streaming down

her face from laughing so hard. As I tried to recover by rambling on about something else, the groom leaned in and said, “If you would finish your point, I could get on with fertilizing my bride!”

I about died. I had never thought about my words from that perspective and very quickly learned why everyone was laughing at me. I did accomplish what I set out to do, though: No one was bored. And I made a point about the importance of spending time together (or fertilizing) that will never be forgotten!

Now back to you and your relationship with your future spouse. Like the couple in my illustration, you are starting out your marriage as a packet of seeds. As you picture your wedding bouquet, realize that growing your relationship will also take time, effort, and some important skills and tools that you’ll learn throughout this book.

We’ve assembled an amazing lineup of marriage experts to help you grow the seeds of your relationship. We hope the time and effort you put into this experience will sprout your marriage and the advice you find in this book will act like Miracle-Gro in your relationship. We’re confident that once you complete the *Ready to Wed* experience, your relationship will grow twice as big and will bloom with more vibrant colors!

So here are four steps to help you make the most out of the *Ready to Wed* experience and grow a marriage more beautiful than your wedding:

Step 1: Take the Couple Checkup. This is the best online relationship assessment available. By taking the Couple Checkup, you’ll identify your unique relationship strengths and potential growth areas. The assessment is organized to match the chapter themes in the book, so it’s a wonderful companion experience, and the results will help you focus on what’s most necessary for your relationship. Refer to appendix A for more information on why this assessment is such an important part of your premarital training. Go to www.FocusOnTheFamily.com/ReadyToWed to take the assessment and receive your customized report.

Step 2: Find a mentor couple. You and your fiancé(e) will gain so much by reading this book together; however, we highly recommend that you go through *Ready to Wed* with a mentor couple as well. A mentor couple

is a relatively happy (but not perfect), more experienced couple who will help you successfully navigate your journey to the altar and thrive during your first year of marriage. This is exactly why King Solomon wrote, “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14, ESV). Go to www.FocusOnTheFamily.com/ReadyToWed for some ideas and tips on how to find a mentor couple.

Step 3: Complete the discussion questions. Be sure to answer the discussion questions and complete the activity points at the end of every chapter. These activities are designed to help you apply the key concepts you’ll read throughout the book.

Step 4: Use the Ready to Wed app. This companion app provides the opportunity to have some fun with each other as you walk through your engagement journey. You’ll find helpful questions to ask each other, games, quizzes, videos, Q&As, and other insights to strengthen your relationship while you’re preparing for a marriage you’ll love. Go to www.FocusOnTheFamily.com/ReadyToWed to download the app.

We applaud you for taking the time to prepare for the journey of marriage. We know that you have a lot on your plate right now as you plan for your wedding. What an amazing day that’s going to be! But remember, your wedding is only *one* day; your relationship will last a lifetime. Thus, we strongly encourage you to avoid rushing through this experience—like one more thing to cross off your prewedding checklist. Take your time. Try to read only one chapter per week so that you have plenty of time to discuss these important topics and work through the discussion questions and activities together. Savor these moments of discussion.

Dig deep as you share with each other. Be real and honest and vulnerable with each other and your mentor couple. And get ready to experience love and commitment on a whole new level. If you happen to come across topics or issues that seem to cause concern or red flags, enlist the help of a pastor or counselor. You can call Focus on the Family at any time using our toll-free number (1-800-A-FAMILY). We have

licensed counselors standing by who can help or can give you a referral for a counselor in your area. This is a free service, so don't hesitate to call us. The time you spend now preparing for your marriage will pay out dividends in the long run.

But before we jump into talking about skills and tools, we need to lay the proper foundation. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." We believe that the first step in your journey toward the marital relationship you've always dreamed of is to understand God's true design for marriage.

CHAPTER 1

GOD'S DESIGN FOR MARRIAGE

Dr. Greg Smalley and Erin Smalley

GOD IS THE CREATOR OF MARRIAGE—it was His idea from the very beginning. Listen to how Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, paraphrases this truth:

GOD, not you, made marriage. His Spirit inhabits even the smallest details of marriage. And what does he want from marriage? Children of God, that's what. So guard the spirit of marriage within you. Don't cheat on your spouse.

“I hate divorce,” says the GOD of Israel. GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies says, “I hate the violent dismembering of the ‘one flesh’ of marriage.” So watch yourselves. Don't let your guard down.

MALACHI 2:15–16, MSG

God is so passionate about marriage that He gave it a very important place throughout the Bible. The Scriptures *begin* with a marriage: “It is

not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18). Then right in the *middle* of the Bible is a remarkable and very provocative book: the Song of Songs. It’s a love story—passionate, provocatively physical, something that makes good Christians blush—between two lovers, a husband and wife. Finally God’s Word *ends* with a very different but even more important wedding: the marriage of Christ to His imperfect but redeemed bride, the church, “the wife of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:9).

Scripture also records Jesus performing His first miracle at a wedding (John 2:1–11). And the metaphor of a bride and groom is used to describe the relationship between God and Israel—“I will make you my wife forever.” (Hosea 2:19, NLT)—as well as Christ and the church. The apostle Paul wrote about this in Ephesians 5:31–32:

A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound,
and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

When God said, “I hate divorce,” in Malachi 2:16, we wonder if His words were less about His feelings toward divorce than they were about His love for marriage. Authors John and Stasi Eldredge, in their book *Love and War*, explain God’s passion for marriage:

When through the prophet Malachi the Lord God of Israel says, “I hate divorce,” we hear it with a shudder. But it ought to be with a surge of hope—the passion conveyed in those three words reveals how deeply he *loves* marriage, how strong his vested interests are in its success.¹

So if God is that passionate about marriage and has given it such a prominent place throughout the Scriptures, it’s vital that we begin this *Ready to Wed* journey with a clear understanding of the true purpose of marriage.

At this point, some of you might be thinking, *Who cares? What difference does it make if I understand the true purpose of marriage or not? We're already engaged, and we're about to be married. We need to acquire new tools and learn new skills!*

Certainly tools and skills are important, and we're going to give you plenty as you read through the pages of this book. However, if you don't first understand how something is supposed to work, you might misuse it and end up frustrated, or worse.

I (Greg) learned this lesson the hard way on our honeymoon. On the night before Erin and I married, my mother surprised me with a special gift. She had carefully wrapped a small box and told me that it was something for our honeymoon night. Actually, her exact words were, "I got you something." This was the extent of her explanation.

After Erin and I checked into our hotel room that first night, she disappeared into the bathroom. As I nervously waited for my bride, I found the present that my mom had given me. I'd totally forgotten that I'd put it in my suitcase. As I unwrapped the box, I found a tiny pair of black underwear. And when I say "tiny," I mean extremely little—like a thong but much, much smaller. You get the picture.

I held this tiny black thong to the light, and I could literally see right through it. However, it looked so massively uncomfortable, and I wasn't even sure that I could wear the stupid thing. As I tried it on, I thought to myself, *Will seeing me in this minuscule patch of cloth really be something that my wife will find thrilling? I can't possibly believe that she would think this is sexy.*

Luckily I decided to go with my gut on this one, and I hid it away in my suitcase. Actually, to be honest, it was the fear of my wife seeing my gut squeezed around that microscopic thong that made me chicken out!

The next night, however, I showed Erin the underwear and asked her why my mother would have bought me something like that to wear.

"Would this have been sexy?" I innocently asked my wife.

I'll never forget Erin's reaction. She instantly started laughing at me.

I thought, *If this is all it takes to get her laughing, praise God I didn't wear the thong!*

I'm certain Erin must have realized that I was confused, so my wife, in her most tender and compassionate voice, said, "I think your mom gave you the lingerie to give to me."

All I could say was, "What? Oh! I'm an idiot."

As we said before, if you don't know how something works or what it's for, you'll end up either making a fool of yourself or misusing it and potentially causing frustration and heartache. We want to help you clearly understand how marriage is supposed to work, and we want to show you God's true purpose for marriage so you can avoid making some devastating mistakes.

Have you thought about *why* you're getting married? We're sure that your first response will probably be, "We're in love." That's usually what couples say when we ask that question. But let's dig a little deeper. Many couples enter marriage with a host of romanticized ideas about love and marriage. With great excitement they anticipate a spouse who will be all they ever dreamed of in a mate.

Here are some of the reasons for getting married that we've heard from engaged couples over the years as we've guided them through pre-marital counseling:

- To marry their soul mate
- To signify a lifelong commitment
- To find companionship—"I'm marrying my best friend so I won't be lonely anymore."
- To get their emotional needs met
- To raise kids and have a family
- To take the next logical step in the relationship—"It's what you do."
- Because they share common values and interests
- To fulfill sexual needs and desires

- Because of the amazing attraction and chemistry
- To become whole or complete as individuals
- To make a public declaration of their love
- For financial security (tax benefits, higher earning potential, better health care)
- To have the safety of a legal contract
- To find happiness

But we have to tell you, if any of these reasons describe the purpose of your upcoming marriage, then you could be in trouble. *Big* trouble! If seeking happiness or finding a soul mate is your objective, then you're setting yourself up for many years of hurt and frustration. Why? The real question is, What happens when you are *not* happy? What will an absence of happiness mean for your relationship? We can predict the questions couples begin to ask themselves, because we've heard them time and again:

- Did I marry the wrong person?
- Is something wrong with me or with my spouse?
- Is my true soul mate still out there somewhere?
- If I'm not happy with this person, then shouldn't I look for someone who will make me happy?

Shortly after the wedding, most of us begin to see faults in our spouses and “chinks in the armor” that we overlooked before the ceremony. Or we simply become disappointed.

Our future spouses *will* let us down. We suddenly realize that our new spouses need some serious work. In fact, it appears that they are far from being able to fully meet our needs. We begin to see that—horrors—instead of being sold out to *our* ideas of marriage, our spouses entered into the union with their own goals, along with their own lists of needs and expectations.

You know what happens then, don't you? Our goal of happiness or finding our soul mate shifts from marrying the right person to changing our spouses into the people we want them to be. We buy into the myth that if our spouses could change one or two key things, our marriages would be great. This is where the real trouble starts for many couples and leads them down a very dark path toward unhappiness, frustration, and disconnection. We love how author Reb Bradley, in *Help for the Struggling Marriage*, describes this truth:

Considering that 20th century America places such emphasis on building marriages [with] the right romantic “chemistry,” it should be no surprise that many [couples] are easily disappointed in their marriages. What we have come to believe to be right romantic “chemistry” is actually nothing more than “self-centered” love. Most people are romantically drawn to those who *gratify* them, so [they] marry with expectations of being fulfilled by their mate. That type of love is not true selfless love, but is self-centered, basing its attraction on personal gratification. It says, “I love you for what you do for me. I am drawn to you for how you make me feel. I know I am in love with you, because I need you so much.” Needing someone is not evidence of a selfless, giving love for them—contrarily, it is evidence that you want them for the emotional fulfillment you will receive from them. It is a reasonable estimate to suggest that 98% of all Christian marriages today are based on this dangerous form of self-serving love. Is it a surprise that so many are unhappy in marriage?²

Isn't it interesting, however, that God never mentions *any* of these goals in the Bible? Nowhere does He talk about happiness, the search for a soul mate, chemistry, kids, security, comfort, companionship, sex, or even love as the “true” purpose for marriage.

God created marriage with something far more wonderful in mind

than simply a place where we can get our needs met and find happiness. God uses marriage to accomplish a very important goal: to help us become like Christ. The apostle Paul clearly understood this: “Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). If you miss out on *this* understanding, your marriage is destined for pain and frustration. But if you “get it”—especially now as you prepare to walk down the aisle—then you’ll be far ahead of the rest of the pack.

Listen to how Tim and Kathy Keller explain the true purpose of marriage in their book *The Meaning of Marriage*:

When looking for a marriage partner, each must be able to look inside the other and see what God is doing, and be excited about being part of the process of liberating the emerging “new you.” . . . This is by no means a naïve, romanticized approach—rather it is brutally realistic. In this view of marriage, each person says to the other, “I see all your flaws, imperfections, weaknesses, dependencies. But underneath them all I see growing the person God wants you to be.” . . . The goal is to see something absolutely ravishing that God is making of the beloved. You see even now flashes of glory. You want to help your spouse become the person God wants him or her to be. . . . What keeps the marriage going is your commitment to your spouse’s holiness.³

How Do You Know?

As you prepare to get married, rather than asking yourself, “How will my needs be met?” ask, “How will my life show evidence of Christ’s character?” Marriage is not the answer. It never was designed to meet our needs. Christ is the answer. In God’s infinite wisdom, He knows that our greatest relational needs will be met as we become more like His Son. As with everything else He created, God wants to use marriage to direct us toward Himself. God uses the challenges and the joys of marriage to

help shape and mold us into the image of Jesus—and that's been His goal from the very beginning:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

GENESIS 1:26–27

This seems so simple: A great marriage is the outcome of becoming Christlike. So the real question is, How do we know if we are becoming like Jesus? The good news is that Christ Himself gives us the answer in John 13:34–35:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

As you both become Christlike, the evidence is your ability to love each other as Christ loves you. That's what this book is really about: *helping you love your future spouse as Christ loves you*. This is exactly what the apostle Paul wrote: "Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband" (Ephesians 5:33).

We hope this makes sense. God's paramount goal for your upcoming marriage is not your mutual happiness. It really isn't! That will surely come, if you cooperate with God's real purpose for your marriage. But in fact He wants so much more than mere happiness for you. He wants joy, significance, spiritual power, and a compelling attractiveness that

turns people's heads. In other words, He wants to use your marriage to help you and others become more like His Son.

If Erin and I had known, going into marriage, that it wasn't intended to be the answer to all of our problems and the antidote to all of our fears and weaknesses and deficits, we both would have saved ourselves a lot of pain and matured a lot faster than we did. It helps enormously just to know that God *designed* marriage—with its joys and its trials, its ups and its downs, its good times and its bad times—to help us to grow to be more like Christ. If you realize ahead of time that the process won't always be pain-free and easy (and that it's not supposed to be), then when the rough times come, they won't feel quite so threatening. Especially since God will use your marriage struggles and challenges to benefit you spiritually and to grow your Christian character.

Knowing the true purpose of marriage also helps to vastly increase your chances of creating a satisfying and fulfilling relationship as a couple. And it has the power to change even “bad” things, the things that otherwise could threaten your marriage, into things that will actually make it stronger, better, and more solid. We want to end this section with a great summary of Gary Thomas's book *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?*:

Marriage is even more than a sacred covenant. If our hearts are attuned to what God is teaching us, our marriage relationship can help us learn sacrificial love, forgiveness, servanthood, and perseverance. Marriage is a sacred tool that helps us grow spiritually in ways nothing else can. . . .

If I focus on changing myself rather than trying to change my spouse, I find I must depend on God and in that process I will find deep fulfillment. . . .

We must be clear about why we married and why we should stay faithful in that marriage. A worldly point of view promotes staying married only if our desires and “needs” are being fulfilled. But from God's perspective, we are to maintain

our marriage because doing so brings glory to God and points others to Him. What a drastic difference!⁴

Now that we've laid the proper foundation and you understand God's true design for marriage, let's talk about the tools and skills you're going to learn as you read this book.

Twelve Ways to Grow a Strong Marriage

The good news is, you are just beginning to grow the “seeds” of your marriage, and you get to decide what you want your “bouquet” to grow into. What should you focus on to set your marriage up for success? After many years of working with couples, studying the Scriptures, and investigating the scientific research, we have isolated twelve essential behaviors needed to help you grow your relationship into a thriving marriage. These twelve behaviors are divided into two main parts in this book.

The first part is about learning how to proactively invest in your fiancé(e) and marriage. French author André Maurois wrote, “A successful marriage is an edifice that must be rebuilt every day.” He was right on the mark. Marriage is a lifelong process that we must commit ourselves to again and again. Every day we have to *decide* to love our spouses and invest in our marriages. In part 1 are six key chapters on the following topics to help you proactively invest in your marriage:

1. *Leaving and cleaving.* A thriving couple puts into practice Genesis 2:24: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife.” They *leave* their dependency on Mom and Dad, the single lifestyle, and personal issues and learn how to *cleave* and unite with their new spouse.
2. *Making a lifelong commitment.* A thriving couple understands that *divorce is not an option* and that marriage is a *lifelong adventure*. They have the same attitude toward each other as God has toward us: “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3).

3. *Honoring each other.* A thriving couple intentionally honors each other. They seek to “be devoted to one another in . . . love [and] honor one another above [themselves]” (Romans 12:10). They recognize that the key to keeping their hearts open to each other is to view one another as a priceless treasure, “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21).
4. *Sharing spiritual intimacy.* A thriving couple has a deep, shared faith. They consciously regard Christ as the bedrock of their relationship. Their relationship is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20), and together they daily pursue an intimate relationship with Christ.
5. *Engaging in mutually satisfying physical intimacy.* A thriving couple regularly celebrates their marriage with passionate sexual intimacy, joining together to “become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). They regard sex not as a chore or an obligation but as a delightful dance in which each spouse puts the other’s needs and interests ahead of his or her own.
6. *Fostering positive communication.* A thriving couple knows that communication is the lifeblood of a vibrant relationship. They spend time every day in conversation to *know* each other and to be *known* by their partner, recognizing that one day they “shall know fully, even as [they are] fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The second part of the book focuses on healthy ways to manage conflict. When two fallen, inherently selfish people marry, they are bound to experience moments of disagreement, hurt, frustration, and irritation. It’s inevitable! Instead of trying to eliminate conflict or avoid arguments, the key is to face our disagreements and learn how to use conflict as a doorway into the deepest levels of intimacy and connection. The chapters in part 2 are designed with exactly that goal in mind.

7. *Valuing differences.* A thriving couple realizes that God created men and women differently—and that’s a very good thing! Genesis tells us that “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (1:31). A thriving couple understands that their differences (gender, personality, family of origin, etc.) can cause conflict, but they’re never the problem; instead, it’s attempting to manage these differences that creates many of the challenges they face in their marriage.
8. *Creating realistic expectations.* A thriving couple realizes that they have many expectations—things they want, hope, wish, and expect will happen in their marriage. However, unclear or unrealistic expectations cause many challenges within a marriage. Therefore, a thriving couple spends regular time talking through what they expect and finding win-win solutions for unrealistic expectations. The apostle Paul knew the secret to a win-win approach to expectations: “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4).
9. *Practicing healthy conflict management.* A thriving couple recognizes that *conflict is inevitable*. They know that the secret of their success lies in the way they *manage* conflict, and they embrace the concept that God uses this bumping and jarring to cause them to grow—“As iron sharpens iron, so one [person] sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). Instead of avoiding conflict, they believe that healthy conflict is the doorway to intimacy and deeper connection.
10. *Sharing responsibility as a team.* A thriving couple finds ways to resolve the issue of male and female roles *between themselves*. They hammer out a plan that preserves fairness and equity in the way they divide household tasks and responsibilities. They try to outserve each other every day, and they strive to

be unified, to “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2, *ESV*), and to function as a *team*. Their goal is to “have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (1 Peter 3:8).

11. *Pursuing financial peace and harmony.* A thriving couple understands that the number one conflict in marriage is money, and that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). They take time to understand their different money personalities and how to make financial decisions as a team.
12. *Coping with stress and crises.* A thriving couple expects that they will face challenges and painful trials in the course of their marriage. The Scriptures make this fact clear: “Dear friends, don’t be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12, *NLT*). They learn how to manage the stress and challenges that are inevitable, especially during their first year of marriage.

During your engagement, and in the first months of your marriage, you are “seeding” behaviors, patterns, and habits into your relationship. We believe that these twelve healthy behaviors are the best way to equip and prepare yourselves for a thriving marriage.

We’re thrilled that you’ve invited Focus on the Family and some of the nation’s best relationship experts on your marriage journey with you. We’re excited to continue supporting you and encouraging you through all the seasons of life to come in your marriage and family.

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READY TO WED

ERIN SMALLEY is a program manager at Focus on the Family. She is a registered nurse (labor and delivery) and earned her master's degree in clinical psychology from Evangel University. Erin is the coauthor of several books, including *Before You Plan Your Wedding, Plan Your Marriage, Grown-Up Girlfriends*, and *The Wholehearted Wife*. Greg and Erin have led marriage seminars around the world and trained pastors, professionals, and lay leaders on how to effectively work with married and engaged couples. They've been married for more than twenty-three years and are the proud parents of three daughters and one son.

Ready to Talk

Here are some questions the two of you can discuss. Share as honestly as you can; it's good practice for when you're married!

1. When you hear that God's purpose for marriage is to help you become more like Christ, how do you feel? Why?

- Fortunate
- Contemplative
- Doubtful
- Worried
- Eager to get started
- Excited

How do you *hope* to feel about it by the time you finish this book?

2. This chapter lists a lot of reasons why couples want to get married. Which of the following are closest to yours?

- I've found my soul mate.
- I want to signify a lifelong commitment.

- I want companionship—I'm marrying my best friend so I won't be lonely anymore.
- I want to get my emotional needs met.
- I want to raise kids and have a family.
- I want to take the next logical step in our relationship—it's what you do.
- We share common values and interests.
- I want to fulfill my sexual needs and desires.
- We have amazing attraction and chemistry.
- I want to be whole or complete as an individual.
- I want to make a public declaration of our love.
- I'm looking for financial security (tax benefits, higher earning potential, etc.).
- I'd like the safety of a legal contract.
- I want to find happiness.

Having read the chapter, did you change any of your reasons for desiring to get married? Why or why not?

3. Pick one of the twelve traits of a thriving marriage listed in this chapter. Have you seen this trait in anyone else's marriage? If so, what did it look like? What do you think it might look like in yours? What would you like to learn about it between now and your wedding day?

Ready to Try

Choose a project that takes extra patience such as:

- Find a recipe for a three-course meal (on Pinterest, in a recipe book, or online) and together go through the process of planning, shopping, and preparing the meal.

READY TO WED

- Plan a day to do a service project at a homeless shelter or a retirement community. Or volunteer to babysit someone's children for the day.
- Find a crafting project together that you can make to use at your wedding ceremony, reception, or in your new home (a centerpiece or decorative item). Come up with an idea, plan out its steps, shop for supplies, and carry out the project together.

Follow up by discussing the experience. Were there some tense moments, frustrations, and disagreements? When did you have to watch your words? How can experiences like these sand off rough edges and help you develop Christ-like traits? How can you get the most out of these times after marriage?