

CHRIS & JENNI GRAEBE

THE RHYTHM OF US

"Find your way
into the unique rhythms
that will make your
marriage flourish."

JOHN AND STASI
ELDREDGE

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHORS

CREATE THE
THRIVING MARRIAGE
YOU LONG FOR



This isn't just another marriage book. *The Rhythm of Us* is an invitation—or maybe the word is *activation*—of the thriving marriage you long for. Chris and Jenni have placed some incredibly powerful tools in the hands of the reader, life-saving questions, practices, and rhythms that will have you dreaming of the marriage you desire and what it looks like to pursue that dream in the here and now.

CHRISTY NOCKELS, worship leader, songwriter, author of *The Life You Long For*

Chris and Jenni's winsome book is chock-full of wisdom, complete with practical steps to help you find your way into the unique rhythms that will make your marriage flourish.

JOHN and STASI ELDREDGE, *New York Times* bestselling authors

I have always believed that marriage books are the hardest to write because anyone who is or has been married knows exactly how much work a good marriage requires. People want real answers and practical solutions to building a healthier, happier marriage and aren't interested in a bunch of well-meaning platitudes or clichés. In *The Rhythm of Us*, Jenni and Chris Graebe have written what I truly believe is one of the greatest marriage books I have read. It's honest and real, full of practical tips and exercises that will help strengthen your marriage and help you and your spouse grow closer as you learn how to find your rhythm as a couple. You will be challenged and encouraged as you turn each page of this book and end it feeling like you've just made a wise new couple friend you can't wait to have over for dinner.

MELANIE SHANKLE, *New York Times* bestselling author

Marriage has been the source of both our deepest struggles and our deepest healing. Chris and Jenni offer their own hard-won wisdom, reminding us our good/hard relationships are so worth fighting for.

KATHERINE and JAY WOLF, authors of *Hope Heals* and *Suffer Strong*

I absolutely love *The Rhythm of Us*. It's inspiring. It's empowering. It's equipping. Jenni and Chris cast a clear vision for a thriving marriage that is biblical, beautiful, bountiful, and—because of grace—achievable. Written with an “us too,” not a “how to” tone, you'll find yourself delightfully eager to create your own transforming “rhythm of us” with your spouse!

JEANNIE CUNNION, author of *Don't Miss Out*

I have always admired Chris and Jenni and their obvious connection. After reading this book, I understand why they are one special couple: Their marriage is clearly based in healthy rhythms! It's a must-read for any couple that is seeking a great marriage. I love this practical and profound guide for a great marriage. I'm so thankful Chris and Jenni have shared their secret sauce with all of us! This is an excellent resource for any couple just beginning or those married for many years. This admirable couple understands the ups and downs of marriage and offers a profound yet practical way to grow together through healthy rhythms.

COURTNEY DEFEO, author of *In This House, We Will Giggle* and *Treasured* study

No matter your season, married or single, this book is for you! It's a brilliant guide on creating rhythms for a healthy, life-giving marriage. God's desire for us is strong relationships, and this book gives amazing tools on how to cultivate, nurture, and protect that.

MESHALI MITCHELL, photographer, host of *A Thousand Words*,
founder of A House God Is Building

Jenni and Chris welcome us into real-life relationship, opening the conversation to everyone from a *his* and *her*—as well as an *us*—perspective. This isn't a right-way or a do-this-and-get-that handbook but an invitation to learn about, practice, and lean into relationship rhythms that are as powerful as they are gentle. *The Rhythm of Us* addresses marriage, but its insight and tips prove beneficial to all our relationships.

KAY WYMA, blogger, vodcaster, author of *The Peace Project*

The Rhythm of Us comes through a distinct door that separates it from most writings on marriage. It's not only biblical and honest but is actually doable. *The Rhythm of Us* gives us practical handles to see our marriages transformed. These pages create what the Graebes call "Team Us," igniting the next exciting chapter of any marriage.

MARK and JAN FOREMAN, authors of *Never Say No* and parents of Jon and Tim Foreman of Switchfoot

It only takes a few minutes to realize that Jenni and Chris have a special relationship, and their advice and intentionality are a gift to other marriages. We're all trying to figure out a

rhythm that allows us to thrive as individuals, spouses, and families—and this book will be invaluable as we navigate the days and years to come. I'm so grateful for a resource that I can confidently pass along to others, knowing that it will quickly become a favorite!

ANGIE SMITH, bestselling author of *Seamless*

No matter where you are or what you've gone through, *The Rhythm of Us* is for you. It can help you make a good thing great or help raise a struggling relationship to a healthier rhythm. A must-read for any couple!

ALLI WORTHINGTON, business coach, speaker, author of *Standing Strong*

Chris and Jenni have written a must-read for any married couple. . . . *The Rhythm of Us* gives a practical road map for a thriving marriage. We loved it!

ANDREW EAST, NFL player, and SHAWN JOHNSON EAST, Olympic gymnast

If marriages ever needed renewal, it's now, and the path to renewal begins with rhythms. In *The Rhythm of Us*, Chris and Jenni warmly welcome us into their home, their struggles, and their committed journey to create a healthy marriage amid the demands of life, children, and never-ceasing distractions. We love this book and believe it will encourage you to stay the course, get creative, and find a vision of "us" that brings out the best in your marriage.

GABE and REBEKAH LYONS, authors and hosts of *Rhythms for Life* podcast

THE RHYTHM OF US

CHRIS & JENNI GRAEBE

The Rhythm of Us

Create the Thriving Marriage You Long For

Chris and Jenni Graebe

NavPress

THE
RHYTHM
OF US

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The Rhythm of Us: Create the Thriving Marriage You Long For

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INTRODUCTION

WE WON'T GET
THERE BY ACCIDENT

God ordained a rhythm for this life. A dance
between the holy and the human.

EUGENE PETERSON

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

MARY OLIVER

Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

PSALM 90:12

JENNI

For almost forty years now, I've been studying couples. Well, thirty-nine, to be exact. I have no idea why or when it started, but for as long as I can remember, I've been an obsessive observer of relationships. I was totally that kid. At home, at school, at church, out in the world around me, always taking great notice of the marriages I encountered, especially those that seemed

to truly thrive. You know the ones I'm talking about—those couples who are somehow still wildly in love after decades of marriage. It's undeniable. You can see it every time his eyes light up when she walks into the room, in the way she laughs at his cheesy jokes, or simply in how they seem to genuinely enjoy each other.

I remember making constant mental notes about these happy couples I observed along the way. Something deep down inside me knew if I wanted a marriage like that, I needed to start paying great attention. Every time I encountered a couple that spoke to the deep longing within me, I found myself making a new mental note. I even started a list in the back of my Bible of things to look for in my future husband. (Cheesy, I know. Anyone else do this?)

What I didn't realize God was doing throughout all those years, with every mental note taken, was giving me an invaluable gift. He was teaching me the rhythms of a thriving marriage,

the kind of marriage we all dream of having.

Underneath
it all, the best
relationships
share the same
basic rhythms.

As it turns out, this kind of marriage isn't only meant for a select few. While every relationship is different, bringing its own unique set of struggles, needs, and desires to the table, what I have discovered after a lifetime of studying couples, from friends and family and mentors

and leaders to world-renowned authors and speakers Chris and I have the privilege of interviewing on our podcast is that, underneath it all, the best relationships share the same basic rhythms.

Throughout our time together, we'll unpack what those core essential rhythms are, how they work, and the results they can

have on our relationships if we choose to practice them. We'll also spend some time uncovering your unique rhythms as a couple and how, as you become aware of them, you can begin to transform your marriage by intentionally filling your life with the things you both value most.

CHRIS

Jenni and I are just two weeks apart in age. (I'm older and like to remind her.) We're both Xennials—part of that tiny generation tucked right in between Millennials and Gen Xers.¹ We have fond memories of the fifteen-foot cord hanging from the family telephone on the kitchen wall, we printed directions off MapQuest, and we took great pride in our CD collections. Though we didn't meet until we were twenty-one, we experienced the world around us in a very similar way, due to being almost the exact same age. In many ways, it's felt as though God was intentionally weaving our lives together from the very beginning.

Long before we ever met, our lives were full of uncanny similarities. We are both headstrong firstborns, with only a younger brother for a sibling; our parents separated when we were around six years old; we both had roommates that moved out halfway through our freshman year of college, leaving us with the highly coveted single-occupant room; and we both spent spring break of that freshman year having too much fun in Panama City. But maybe the craziest similarity is that during high school, we each stumbled into an empty classroom (me in Indiana, Jenni in Texas) to find the same rude comment written underneath our full names on an empty chalkboard. (I know. Weird, right?)

The most important similarity we share, however, is that God massively changed both of our lives just before we met at the age of twenty-one. One was a “Yankee” (me) and the other was a smokin’-hot Southern blonde from the great state of Texas (not me). But one fact was strikingly the same: We were both desperately broken and in need of a Savior. Through His grace, God lovingly pulled us out of our mess, rescued us from the dangerous trajectory we were on, and set us on a brand-new path that would thankfully include meeting each other.

Despite all the overlap in our lives, there was one key area that remained drastically different: the view we developed of marriage in our early years. After a brief separation, Jenni’s parents chose to reunite and have actually been married for over forty years now. Mine, however, did not. Over my life, I have had four dads and three moms, including a smattering of step-parents who came in and out of my life throughout the years. I experienced firsthand the detrimental effects divorce can have on a child.

I don’t fault my parents—I know life isn’t easy. And through God’s grace, I’m grateful to say, both of my parents have since found amazing spouses and are now happily married. But needless to say, I didn’t reach adulthood with the healthiest understanding of what a thriving marriage could look like.

I knew there had to be a better way, and I was determined to find it.

But here’s how God has redeemed this part of my story and used it to shape who I am today. Just like Jenni, I was paying careful attention to the notable marriages around me—except while Jenni was noticing what *to* do, I was learning what *not* to do. The heartbreaking examples I observed along the way ignited a

passionate resolve in me to make my own mental list of things I refused to do in my future marriage.

When I look across the landscape of my early years, it's hard for me to think of a married couple that I wanted to emulate. I didn't understand the concept of being in "rhythm" with your spouse, but I had a pretty clear understanding of what it meant to be "out of rhythm." I knew there had to be a better way, and I was determined to find it.

What Jenni and I have both learned about creating a thriving marriage is that we won't get there by accident. As a kid, it's pretty easy to keep a running list of all the specific things you do and don't want in your future marriage. But intentionally living them out as an adult in your own actual marriage? That's a horse of a different color. Thriving together in a life we love doesn't just happen. It takes developing intentional rhythms that guide us into the life and marriage we long for. As pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson said, "What kingfishers and falling stones and chiming bells do without effort requires development on our part, a formation into who we truly are."²

We won't
get there by
accident.

THE RULE OF LIFE

JENNI

When we enter into marriage, we each carry with us our own unique vision for our life together that we bring to the relationship. Throughout our time together, we will begin to bring those visions to the surface and see how they line up. No marriage can thrive when our eyes are consistently focused on ourselves. Together we'll learn to shift our focus from just our own lives to noticing, nurturing, and supporting the work God is

up to in our spouse, as well. There are a thousand different ways we could choose to live our life together. But to create a thriving marriage, we must intentionally center our lives around

rhythms that lead us toward God and toward each other. In other words, we need to develop a “rule of life” for our marriage.

No marriage
can thrive
when our eyes
are consistently
focused on
ourselves.

What is a rule of life? I’m so glad you asked! It’s not as crazy as it sounds; I promise. Stick with me. Maybe you’ve already heard this term floating around spiritual circles, or maybe you haven’t heard it at all. But either way, don’t let

the word *rule* intimidate you—crafting a rule of life is a simple, practical tool that absolutely anyone can use.

In spiritual formation, the ancient practice of developing a rule of life—or what I like to call a “rhythm of life”—essentially involves envisioning the person we want to become and the specific life we feel called to live, then crafting a set of personal habits to guide us toward that place. Not a list of rigid rules, but something more like a trellis supporting the growth of a budding vine, our rhythm supports intentional movement and growth toward the life we long to live. A rule of life is an intentional plan for what we will do with our “one wild and precious life.”³ As Andy Crouch so simply puts it, our rhythm of life is “a set of practices to guard our hearts and guide our lives.”⁴

When I first learned about this idea of crafting a rule of life, I fell in love with this beautiful, life-changing practice. Taking the time to evaluate my life allowed me to realize which habits needed to go and which needed to stay, which relationships needed pruning and which needed nurturing.

Light bulbs came on, allowing me to prioritize the parts of life that were crucial to my overall well-being. Habits such as running through the trees, savoring the sacred morning hour, and enjoying time at the table each night with my people—I realized these are not just occasional hobbies I wish I could enjoy more of; they are actually crucial to my spiritual growth, worthy of prioritizing.

But as I began cultivating and following my new rhythm of life, I began to notice that something wasn't quite right: It was still all about me. The truth is, because I am married, I have the responsibility to consider my spouse and his journey as well. As John Eldredge puts it, "You are the most powerful person in your spouse's life. You are *the* greatest instrument of redemption in their world."⁵ It's not enough to focus on my own thriving alone. I have been given the remarkable gift of a spouse, entrusted with the honor and privilege to care for, notice, and support him as he attempts every day to grow and thrive in his own walk with Christ. In marriage, we're no longer two but *one* (see Matthew 19:6). So, in crafting our rhythm of life, we must include and consider our other half as well. Practicing a "rhythm of me" doesn't cut it. We need a "rhythm of us" in order to move toward the life we long for.

We will never be content living only for ourselves. To move toward my best self requires that I not only examine my own life-giving rhythms but that I consider Chris's, as well. What makes him come alive? What keeps him healthy and feeling at home in our life together? What rhythms draw us closer to one another?

Practicing a "rhythm of me" doesn't cut it. We need a "rhythm of us" in order to move toward the life we long for.

These are things I want to know, things I *need* to know. Because he is a part of me, my rhythm is no longer complete without his. Part of my rhythm needs to be prioritizing his flourishing, as well as my own.

At a wedding, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once gave this beautiful advice to a young couple: “Today you are young and very much in love and you think that your love can sustain your marriage. It can’t. Let your marriage sustain your love.”⁶ As we will learn more in depth throughout our time together, this kind of rich, mature, thriving love that we all long for requires not only deep desire but also intentional direction. The consistent rhythms we choose to fill our marriage and life with will either stoke the fire of that initial flame or eventually snuff it out completely.

I am convinced that becoming the kind of couple that stays wildly in love means we must develop a rhythm of life that will lead us continually toward God and toward each other. As writer and teacher Ronald Rolheiser puts it, “What sustains a relationship long-term is ritual, routine, a regular rhythm that incarnates the commitment.”⁷ But how do we do that? Where do we even begin? We start by examining where we are. As Margaret Guenther says, “Before we can formulate a wise rule for our lives, we need to take a hard look at ourselves and ask, ‘What is the shape of my life right now? What does my stewardship of time, energy, substance, and creativity look like?’”⁸

Whether we realize it or not, we already have a “rhythm of us.” The question is, where is it taking us? Do we like the couple our rhythm is shaping us to become? And if not, how do we change it?

Over our time together, we’ll take a look at that current

life rhythm—because knowing where we are helps us discover where we want to go. Our goal throughout this journey is not to provide you with a weekly schedule you should follow but rather to offer a simple guide to examine the rhythms that are contributing to the couple you're becoming. Together, we'll learn some essential healthy habits true of every thriving marriage. We'll let go of the habits that keep leading us into ruts. And lastly, we'll uncover the unique rhythms you and your spouse have as a couple that draw you closer to God and closer to each other.

Whether we realize it or not, we already have a “rhythm of us.”

I don't know about you, but I don't want to live a life of just skimming by. I don't want to merely survive each week, or just drift wherever the current of the world decides to take me. I want to become one of those “wildly in love for decades” kind of couples I admired as a kid. I want us to strengthen each other's life and faith over our years together. I want to cultivate the kind of marriage, family, and life that my kids' wildest dreams are made of. I want to be one of those couples for *them* that would stop the younger me in my tracks. Through God's grace, I want the love we share to become a light to those around us in our community.

The rhythms we create will also live on well beyond our years. When our kids grow up and leave home to enter the world and find spouses of their own, what rhythms will they take with them? What dream of life together will they carry in their hearts? Will they be able to say, “I want a love like that!”? It's the most important gift we can give them. We could get almost everything else wrong in life and in parenting, but if our kids know deep down to their core that Mom and Dad are

passionately in love with God and crazy about each other, we're supplying them with the most significant legacy possible.

God has entrusted us with the incredible gift of life *together*. What will we choose to do with it? Developing a rhythm for our marriage is a plan to steward well the precious gift of each other. As Margaret Guenther writes, "If we are to be good stewards of our abundance of time, energy, and creativity, we need to live in awareness. We need a rule, not to hem us in but to enable us to flourish."⁹ Crafting our rhythm will give us the tools we need to live with intention, remind us of the life we want to build together, and gently guide us to grow closer to Christ and to each other.

So, we invite you to take this journey with us toward a thriving marriage, toward becoming one of those "still wildly in love after decades" kind of couples. As we begin this journey together, with God as our unwavering guide, we'll learn together what a thriving marriage looks like and the practices that will get us there. **There are a thousand different ways we could choose to live our life together. The goal is to intentionally center our lives around the rhythms that lead us toward God and toward each other.**

May these essential rhythms we unpack together be as life-giving to you as they have been to us. May the Lord use these powerful practices to lift you and carry you from wherever these words currently find you—to the marriage you've only dreamed of.

Here's to the beginning of a beautiful journey.

Here's to the miracle of marriage.

Here's to *the rhythm of us*.

PRACTICE

- Name some couples you admire for their thriving relationship.
- What healthy rhythms have you noticed in the couples you admire?
- What unhealthy rhythms have you learned to avoid or reject?
- As we begin this journey together, offer a prayer of gratitude for the gift of having a spouse to love and ask the Lord for guidance and wisdom to steward this great gift well.

NAMING WHERE WE ARE

THE FIRST IMPORTANT STEP in any worthwhile journey is *naming where we are*. Before we can determine where we want to go and the healthy rhythms we want to fill our life with, it's important to take a good, long look at where we actually are. Who do we want to become together? What kind of life do we long to build? What choices are we consistently making? Where have we drifted from our highest values? Where do we wish things could be different?

Before we can fill our lives with the rhythms we value most, it's important to identify the practices we don't. Moving toward a thriving marriage means getting on the same page about where we want to go, unlearning unhealthy rhythms, and discovering what might be missing. In this section, we'll learn more about how we fall out of rhythm in the first place, the dangerous ruts to avoid, and how to craft a vision for the couple we want to become in the future.

THE FUTURE US

Starting with a Vision

We were together, I forget the rest.

PARAPHRASE OF WALT WHITMAN

JENNI

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine hosted a beautiful gathering for her daughter's high school graduation. She had a wonderful celebration planned for her senior, including a lovely round table filled with all the things that represented eighteen years of life for her precious young daughter on the brink of adulthood. Pictures of family and close friends; tiny, stamped footprints and baby rattles; playbills and vinyl records; a pair of old cowboy boots; faded summer-camp T-shirts. The cherished treasures that make up a young life. Tears immediately sprang to my eyes as I glanced over each item on her table, and a question arose from somewhere deep within me: *What do you want on your table?*

So many tables to fill. An anniversary table after decades of loving each other well. What does that table look like? A graduation table for each of our five kiddos, eighteen years in the making. Gah. What does that table look like? My own table, at the end of a life well lived. What do I want that table to look like?

Before we can craft a rhythm of us, we first must envision the *future* us. What do we want on our table? What does the future *us* look like? Who do we hope to become twenty, thirty, forty years from now? When they leave our home, what will our kids say about the love they watched us share? What kind of relationship do we long to enjoy together? The truth is, the habits we choose to practice today will determine the couple we become tomorrow.

Our rhythms determine our future. The strength, of course, is not in the rhythms themselves, but in the people they can lead us to become. Before we can craft a rhythm of us, we

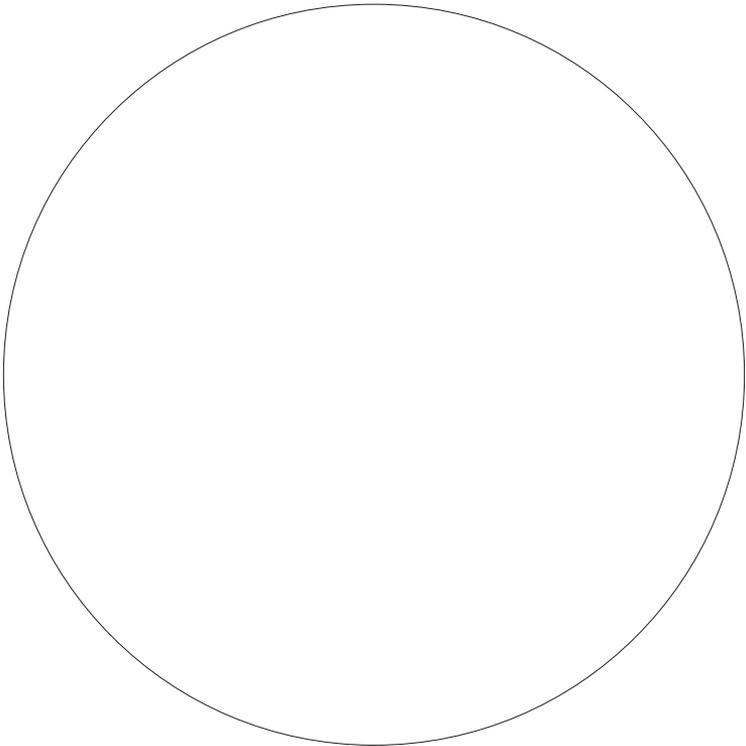
The habits
we choose to
practice today
will determine
the couple
we become
tomorrow.

first must envision our future together. Getting specific about your vision of the future takes it out of fantasy land and into a reachable goal. Looking at a clear picture of the future allows us to evaluate the things we're doing now and determine which habits will take us there and which will not.

We each get a set of tables. I have my own, one for my marriage, and one for my family. That's it. Those are all the tables I get, the only ones I am invited to fill. You have your own tables to fill. Stop for a moment. If you can, sit quietly, and close your eyes for a few seconds. Think about the tables in your life, and envision each of them in the future.

At the end of your life, what do you hope your tables will look like? When your friends and family gather to celebrate your fifty-year wedding anniversary, what do you hope to find on that table? Who do you want to see around it? Take a moment and write down your vision. Get as specific as you can.

What's on Your Future Table?



YOUR ACTUAL TABLE

CHRIS

Now that we've got a clear vision for the future, let's take a moment to examine where we currently find ourselves. What is the shape of my table in this current season of my life? What does it look like? Are there things I want to remove? Things that need redemption? Things I wish to add? What am I waiting for?

All change begins with honesty. If we want to grow, we need to first take a good, hard look at where we are now. Not where we are in our heads, where we wish we could be, or where we were one Friday night three years ago. Something shifts when we admit and locate exactly where we find ourselves in this current moment. Maybe it's been a while since you've had this conversation with your spouse, or maybe it's never happened at all. It's time to get brutally honest.

Take a moment and rate on the line below where you'd say you and your spouse are on a scale from miserable to thriving. If your biggest conflict is over who left the peanut butter out or whose turn it is to do the dishes, you're probably closer to the thriving side. But if you can't go a day without fighting, can't remember the last time you had sex, and find it difficult just to be in the same room together, I'm guessing you're closer to miserable. (Of course, conflict is a part of every relationship, including thriving ones. But conflict that is constant or that degrades and dehumanizes is never a sign of a healthy marriage.)



MISERABLE

THRIVING

We can only grow to the degree we are honest. The healing process can only begin in areas where we've taken the time to truthfully admit our lack and our pain. It's important that we assess the quality of our relationship based on what is *actually true* rather than what we *wish* were true. How we *actually feel* as opposed to how we *think* we should feel. As Larry Crabb says, "God meets us where we are, not where we pretend to be."¹

Take some time to discuss with your spouse where you are as a couple, free of judgment. This is not an invitation to point out each other's flaws. As much as you can, with grace and openness and a desire to move your marriage closer to the thriving end of the scale, honestly assess your marriage.

- Where do each of you feel in and out of rhythm?
- What words would you use to describe your relationship in its current state?
- How would other key people in your life describe your relationship?
- What does your current table look like?

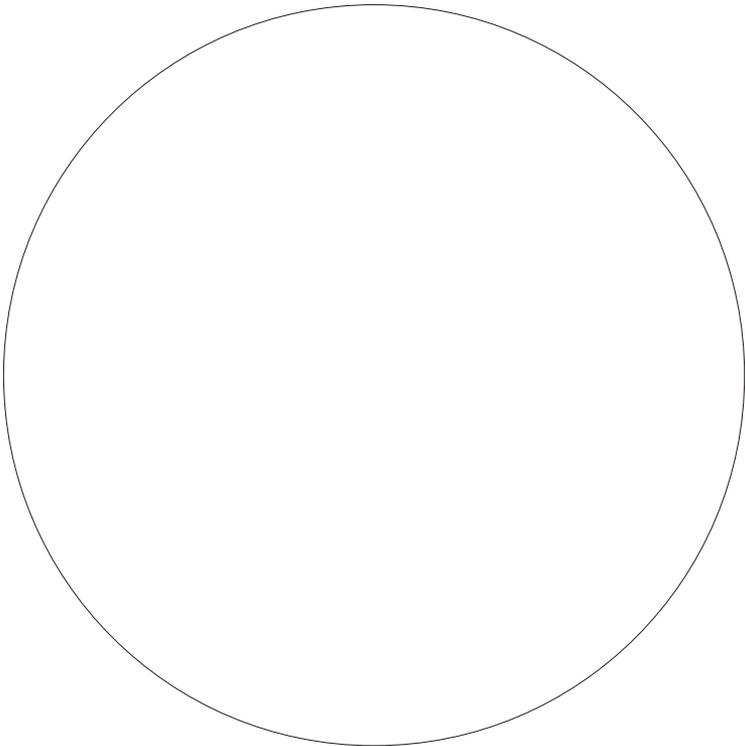
One thing I have found extremely helpful in this practice of naming is to pay attention to the areas I find myself continually thinking, *This shouldn't matter so much to me*, or, *I really shouldn't feel this way*. If I am continually tempted to "shouldn't" away my feelings, that usually means it's pointing to something important. As the song goes, "If it matters, let it matter."² Sometimes we need to give ourselves permission to allow what's bothering us to finally surface, so that we can begin to change it.

Throughout our time together, we will keep a continual finger on the pulse of where we are, identify where we want to be,

and practice the rhythms that will take us there. Wherever you find yourself right now on the relational scale, whether deeply in rhythm or significantly out of rhythm, be encouraged. Truth frees. Honestly admitting where we are is the greatest catalyst for change to begin. As the apostle John once wrote, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

Take a moment to write it out. Be as specific as you can. This is only for you and your spouse. Resist the urge to judge wherever you may be today. Remember, naming and acknowledging where we are is the first, important step in the right direction.

What’s on Your Current Table?



THE POWER OF PRAYER

JENNI

Something strange happens every once in a while, during the night when our daughter is fast asleep. If you also happen to be the parent of a tween daughter, you may be familiar with this delightful little dance yourself. Before putting her to bed, we help her pick out her clothes and hang them neatly on the dresser, ready for morning. Then somehow, mysteriously during the night, something switches in her brain. When she awakens, she has no recollection of choosing said outfit and decides she *must* instead wear a stained pajama shirt paired with track shorts in the middle of winter. All manner of sobs ensue as she is told she cannot wear summer clothes in December and that she must instead stick with the outfit she chose when she was in her right mind the night before. Tears. Stomps. Pouts. Out the door.

This is my least favorite way to start a morning. And here's the thing—having four girls, I'm very familiar with this rhythm (or, actually, this rut). I know by the time we pull up to the school and she sees her friends, by the time she's fully awake and her breakfast has settled, she'll forget all about her outfit frustrations and jump joyfully into her morning. By the end of the day, she will even lie in bed with me and laugh at how absurd her morning antics were. Yes, by bedtime, it will all be water under the bridge. And yet, today, I let it throw off my entire morning.

I should have paused right then and there to name where I

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am, recognize how I am feeling, and lay the day at the feet of the only one who can bring true healing to it. But alas, I don't. Instead, I choose to let my mind drift, becoming so preoccupied with thoughts and strategies for ending this crazy cycle that I completely lose track of time and have now pulled into the preschool drop-off with one minute to spare.

Snapping myself back to reality, I quickly gather my three-year-old's things and unbuckle her car seat. She's crying. I try to console her while moving at the speed of light (a quite impossible task, let me tell you). Too late. As I rush to the drop-off line, I am met with a sweet but sympathetic look from the preschool director. "I'm sorry. You'll have to go around the building to drop her off at the office door." I can see her class—they're all literally standing right in front of me, walking in a single-file line into the building. Nevertheless, I obediently comply.

What a morning, I think to myself as we make our way down the walk of shame to the late-parent drop-off spot. My precious three-year-old wraps her little arms around my neck, plops her beautiful blonde head on my shoulder, and I pull her close. The warm beat of her heart against mine somehow reminds me what a gift this all is—to be *her* mom, to be alive—and I finally decide to pause and offer up a silent prayer of surrender.

Oh Jesus. I've been running all morning without acknowledging you, haven't I? It's only 9:15 a.m., and I'm already in desperate need of a do-over. I don't know how I got here, but would you turn this day around, Lord? I lay it all at your feet.

As we reach the door, I put Keris down and look into her adorable blue eyes to say goodbye for the day. “I sure love you, babe.” Kisses and hugs. Feeling a little better already. I sign her in as the director motions her to join her class. She turns back, launching herself around my legs for one last embrace. “I’m gonna miss you *so* much, Mommy!” Then with a smile, she happily bounces her way down the hall. Gah. Melt. Me. Completely. *Thank you, Lord. I sure needed that.*

“Hey, Jenni!” I turn around to see a sweet young couple making their way behind me on the walk of shame. We met over a year ago, right after we moved to this new city, right before COVID-19 shut the world down completely. Chris and I hadn’t seen them since, but it turns out their son is in Keris’s class. We enjoy a great conversation, and I am surprised at what a simple, pleasant interaction with a few lovely humans does for my spirit in the middle of this isolating pandemic.

I head to my car feeling significantly lighter than when I’d arrived, and I realize the power of a simple prayer of surrender . . . of confession, of (gulp) repentance. Something dramatically shifts the moment we pause to honestly name where we are, admit our need for God, and cry out to Him for help. A burden lifts, the atmosphere shifts, and our hearts are renewed as we finally plop our head on His shoulder and lean on Him to guide us to a better place.

Unfortunately, it usually takes getting to a breaking point of significant pain to cause us to cry out for help. But we don’t

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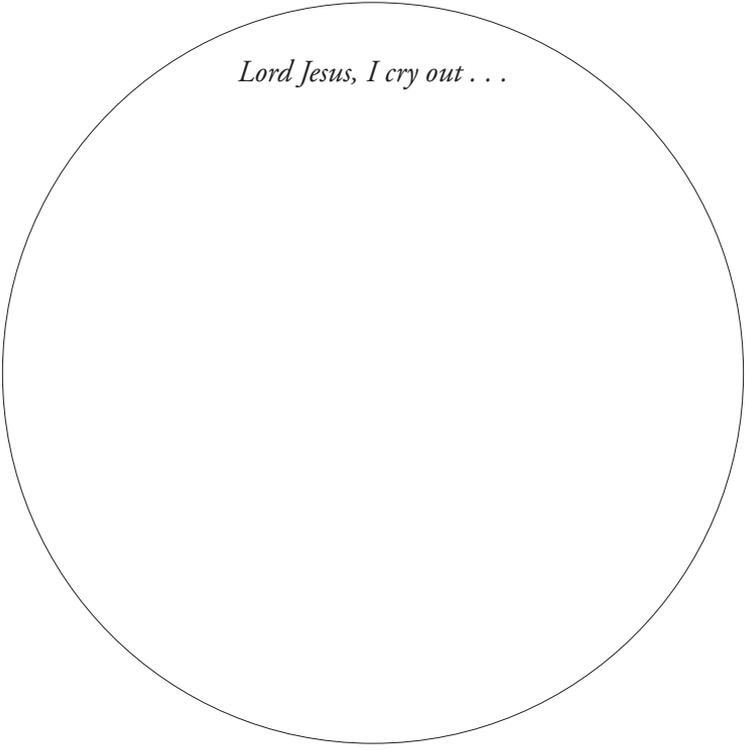
have to wait until we reach the bottom of the misery scale in our marriage before we cry out to the Lord for help. We can cry out right now. We can begin the healing journey now.

When's the last time you cried out? Are you at the point in your marriage where you realize you need a power greater than yourself to take you where you want to go? To bring healing where there is great pain? Have you tried everything you know to try in your own strength? True change begins with honesty. Honesty with ourselves about where we are. Honesty with our spouse about where we feel out of rhythm. And honesty with the Lord about our complete and desperate need for Him. The truth is, most marital problems are spiritual problems.³ We must begin by crying out to the only one who has the power to save us.

Take a moment to offer a prayer of surrender for your marriage. To the One who created it. To the One who truly knows the rhythms of a thriving marriage and how to get you there better than anyone. Acknowledge your need for Him. There's a notable difference between gritting it out on our own and the healthy rhythms that naturally flow from a heart that's been strengthened by the Lord. Thank Him for the gift of someone to love for a lifetime, for the miracle of marriage, and for the good future He has for you. Acknowledge where you are today and ask Him to lead you through *His* strength to the more beautiful life He has for you.

A Prayer of Surrender

Lord Jesus, I cry out . . .



PRACTICE

- Put on a pot of good coffee and some great music. Start to dream together of what you want the future “us” to look like—twenty, thirty, forty years from now.

- Make a list of things you hope your kids will say about you as a couple when they leave your home.
- Take some time to fill in your tables on pages 17 and 21. Be as honest and specific as you possibly can. Recognizing where we are is the first step toward change.