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Preparing for Your Marriage

Here's what you
need to know before
you say "I do."



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Preparing for Your Marriage

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Introduction



Marriage Preparation 101

By Janine Petry

I was all of twenty years old when that big, shiny rock went on my finger. And I was still a college student. Perhaps that explains why I was so convinced that Steve and I needed to enroll in a marriage preparation class offered at a local church. For me, the class held the promise of marital enlightenment. After it's completion, I was sure we would be enjoying the most satisfying marriage relationship *possible*. So it's no wonder I sprinted all the way to our first class, dragging Steve behind me. We were going to get off to a great start, even if it killed us.



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Marriage Preparation 101

As class began, we were handed a folder containing a marriage preparation book and some handouts—our pathway to a brighter future. And week after week, we discussed all the important issues. During one class we took a personality test, the results of which held the keys to our ability to thrive in the same household without supervision. Yes, I'm positive we covered every secret to a happy and fulfilling marriage, and it was everything I hoped for.

I just can't remember any of it. Not one lecture. Not one test result. Not one "red flag" issue, pointer, or helpful piece of advice. *Nothing.*

But thankfully, I do remember my wedding—like it was yesterday. The covenant we made that day—to love one another—is still fresh in my mind. In fact, it's kind of funny to reflect on all of my pre-marital neuroticism. Because in the end, it's not the classes we attended or the tests we took that keeps our marriage thriving. It takes much more than that. Don't get me wrong—we did learn things in class, even if I can't recall the particulars. And know that we used the test as a discussion tool. We met with a mentoring couple, as well as without pastor, and we sought out great advice. In fact, there was no stone left unturned when it came to talking about issues before we were married. I'm convinced that our open communication made our transition into marriage a smooth one, and set a healthy pattern in place that helps us to this day.





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Just remember that wisdom without love is nothing. 1 Corinthians 1:2 says it like this: "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." We need more than knowledge to make a marriage work. 1 John 4:7 says this, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God." Steve and I didn't get *love* at our classes or through tests or from mentors. The thing we needed most came from God. And nine years later, He's still the one who provides what we need.

In the following collection of articles, you'll find practical advice from experts to help guide you in preparing for your marriage. I encourage you to communicate openly as much as possible, and to take to heart the advice that follows. Pair that with the love that comes from God, and like us, you'll be on your way to a "happily ever after."

Blessings,

Janine Petry

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Leader's Guide

How to use “Preparing for Your Marriage” for a group study.



“**P**reparing for Your Marriage” can be used for individual or group study, but if you intend to lead a group study on this, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the “Thought Provokers,” be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**

A Firm Foundation



With God in control, your marriage can thrive.

By Tim and Popie Stafford

A good marriage isn't necessarily an easy marriage. Take, for example, our friends Dan and Debbie. They fell desperately in love during high school and got married in college. The intoxication of young love was intense, but so was the hangover when infatuation wore off. Both came from divorced parents, so they had few good role models of happy marriages. Both were stubborn and willful. Lots of days they just didn't like each other and wondered whether they should be married at all. So many members of their extended families had divorced that failure was almost expected. They felt quite alone.



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Yet today, 25 years later, Dan and Debbie make one of the best marriages we know. Their differences complement each other. They encourage and strengthen many others through their hospitality and outreach.

How did they make it? The answer has to do with faith. During their high school years both had come to trust in Jesus Christ. In fact, their faith drew them together in that intoxicating love. Through their struggles, they lost the intoxication but not the faith. They held on to the conviction that God loved them. They believed God wanted them to persist—and they were deeply committed to following God. That gave them the extra strength they needed. They came out tested and strong.

When we see people struggling in their marriage, this is our message, before any other: God is *for* you as a married couple. Too often your friends and family aren't sure. When they recognize the depth of your differences, they may stand back and wait to see if you self-destruct.

God is unreservedly on your side, not in some abstract and theoretical sense, but in earthy, deeply practical ways. He doesn't wait to see how marriage works out. He works for your marriage.

When Jesus was asked about divorce, he didn't speak to the legalities. Nor did he offer advice on how to overcome problems. His response went directly to God: "Haven't you read in your Bible that the Creator originally made man and woman for each other, male and female?...Because God created this organic union of the two sexes, no one should desecrate his art by cutting them apart" (Matthew 19:4, 6, *The Message*).





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An important corollary is this: God is working on your spouse. Sooner or later every married person comes to the traumatic realization that his or her mate has character flaws. We don't mean bad habits, such as leaving wet towels on the bathroom floor. If your spouse can't be trusted to tell the truth, or shows an uncontrollable temper, or reacts with fear and rigidity to change, those are character flaws. You probably have limited leverage to change them. Those flaws are well defended!

However, you aren't the only one involved. God is working on your spouse. (He's also working on you.) Sometimes your job is simply to trust God's pace of change. Tell God, "I trust you to do what you need to do with my partner. Take the time you need: I give it to you."

When marriage partners have that kind of faith, they learn to accept each other. They don't have to like each other's character defects. Nor should they ignore them. (If your spouse abuses you or has problems with alcohol, for example, intervention is essential.) Accepting each other means you accept Jesus as the person in charge of your partner's life. If Jesus is willing to work patiently with such material—and to love it despite the obvious flaws—you can be willing to do the same. Such faith helps a marriage endure and grow.

Making faith work for your marriage

So far we've talked about faith as a way of looking at the world—a perspective that brings God into your understanding of reality. To make faith a pillar in your





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marriage takes more than perspective, though. Some practical steps are necessary.

Find a church where you can worship together. How basic can you get? Yet some marriages fail to settle this fundamental point. If you don't attend church, or if you sit in different pews on Sunday morning, you'll have a hard time building your marriage on faith. Likewise, if you're in the same building but one partner is mentally out to lunch, your "spiritual unity" will be fractured.

Some neighborhood friends of ours used to faithfully attend a nearby church. We thought they were happy there until one day Beth stopped us in the street. "What do I have to do," she asked, "if I want to go to your church?"

It came out that her husband, Peter, had attended her church for years but never really liked it. Recently, some events had completely alienated him. He swore he was done attending. Worse, their children followed his lead and wanted to stay home too.

It was difficult for Beth to stop attending her church. She realized, though, that her family needed a church they all could appreciate. Though she agonized over leaving the church traditions she'd grown up with, the traditions she loved, Beth began attending our church with Peter. Soon the whole family became involved. They never miss a service. Beth has come to love our church deeply. She has no regrets, because she loves going to church with her whole family.

The point is not that our particular church is wonderful. The same thing has happened with some families leaving our church. While we regret losing them,





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we understand their need. To build your marriage on faith, you need to worship together. Church provides a common starting point for everything you do—and especially for your life of faith together.

Find a community of faith for you as a couple. This isn't the same as finding a place to worship together. A "fellowship" group or a Bible study often supply such support. You need people who, like God, are *for* you as a married couple—people who know you both well, who interact with you frequently, and who believe in you as a unit.

Early in our marriage, we had a Bible study with a collection of single and married couples from several different churches. We met in our apartment, and not all the meetings were fabulous or inspiring. Some people who came had deep problems, and sometimes those threatened to dominate the group. Nevertheless, that group came to know us intimately, and they shared their lives with us. They believed in us! As a married couple, we grew closer in faith through that small, struggling community.

Pray together. For many couples, this is difficult advice. They can't explain what the problem is—after all, they're not shy about sleeping together—but when they try to pray they feel awkward.

Prayer is a deeply intimate exercise, with great personal vulnerability. Every couple needs to find a way that's comfortable to them. Charlie Shedd, a wise counselor, used to advise couples to pray silently while holding hands, and then tell each other what they'd prayed. We've known couples that could only pray together reading from a prayer book. Whatever works!





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Sometimes couples have such an idealistic conception of what family prayer should be, it keeps them from praying. We're grateful we haven't suffered from such high standards. For us, prayer is usually a few minutes at the beginning of the day, done "on the fly." Nevertheless prayer is a connection point for our day. It reminds us our faith is the glue that holds us together.

God made your marriage. He put you together. He isn't a God who goes halfway. He doesn't give up on something he's started. God is for your marriage. Get a grip on that, and it will make a strong pillar for your marriage.

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Reflect

- *Why is it important to believe that God is for your marriage? How do you think this view can affect your marriage relationship?*
- *How can being deeply committed to following God give you the strength you need to persist in marriage?*
- *What role does church and worship play in your relationship now, as you prepare for marriage? How can attending church together help you to build your relationship on faith?*
- *Consider the effect that getting involved in a small group or Bible study could have on your marriage relationship. What appeals to you most about joining a small group? What obstacles might stand in your way regarding this?*



The Truth about Love



The heart of a marriage lies
in the heart of the Gospel.

By Caryn D. Rivadeneira

When at age 16, David Ferguson and Teresa Carpenter decided they wanted to get married, they gave their parents an ultimatum: "Sign the consent form or we'll elope to Kansas." Their parents signed the form.

The morning after their wedding, one of David's buddies knocked on their motel room door; he wanted David to shoot some pool. So the newly married teenager left his sleeping bride without any clue as to where he went. Teresa woke up alone and walked to her parents' house, crying.



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In his book *The Great Commandment Principle* (Tyndale), David writes, "Somehow Teresa and I survived that rocky beginning. But I had communicated through my behavior that she was not the only thing in my life—and not even the most important thing. Without the tools to deal with such deep insensitivity and selfishness on my part, Teresa buried her pain, and we simply carried on with life."

The chasm between them deepened as David first went off to college, then entered the ministry. Teresa dedicated herself to their children, and they both took care of everyone's needs but each other's. One night after years of increasing emotional distance, David asked Teresa if she loved him. Teresa said only that she felt "numb."

Though her response stunned David, it wasn't until he preached a sermon on Jesus' suffering and aloneness that he discovered what was missing in their marriage: Great Commandment Love. He describes it as "the application of the command to love the Lord with all of our heart and then to love our neighbors, beginning with our spouse. This is the critical component to experiencing the blessing of marriage as God intended." For the past 15 years, the Fergusons have worked through Intimate Life Ministries to help other couples avoid the trap of loneliness in their marriages.

How does Great Commandment Love improve marriages?

Teresa: I call it "in spite of" love. It means reaching out to your mate in spite of the hurt and anger you may feel and not letting that hinder your love. It's a good





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picture of God's unconditional love. He continues to reach out to us in spite of our actions.

That type of love doesn't come easily. How can couples be that selfless?

David: It involves the regular discipline of experiencing Romans 12:15: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." So we might stop daily—at breakfast or when lying in bed at night—to reflect on something positive that happened that day. And then rejoice together about it.

And we ask each other if there's been a disappointment or something hurtful that day. If so, we connect by "mourning" those experiences together. That's what the Bible means by "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). We don't need to rejoice alone, and we don't need to mourn or hurt alone.

Why is Great Commandment Love so essential to experiencing marriage as God designed it?

David: 1 John 4:19 tells us we can love others because we have first been loved by God. He loves us through his initiative—he took the first steps. So I learn to take the initiative with Teresa—whether it's thinking of what might be on her heart or just thinking of her.

So we can't just sit around waiting for good things to happen in our marriage. We have to take the initiative to get things started.

Teresa: And one thing that makes that difficult is that sometimes we aren't well equipped to give what our spouse needs. For example, I grew up in a family of six





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kids, and my parents loved us, but they weren't able to demonstrate it. So when we got married, I didn't know how to show or tell David how much I loved him. He'd say, "Teresa, I love you." And I'd say, "I love you too." But what David wanted to hear was me initiating the "I love you, David."

What if we work overtime at initiating love and our spouses don't respond?

Teresa: Great Commandment Love is contagious. As David freely gave to me even when I wasn't responding in the way he desired, it motivated me. He was loving me whether he received anything in return or not.

When people tell me they don't feel loved by their spouses, I tell them to put love into the relationship. Whatever you need, give that very thing to your mate, and then continue to give it. Pretty soon you'll be content with your giving as God works to remind the other person what you gave.

David: During the first ten or twelve years of our marriage, our priorities with each other were really out of place. But once I began to prioritize Teresa in my time and my attention, God began to give back freely through Teresa by making me more of a priority in her life.

What if a spouse's heart has become numb, as Teresa's was, from years of neglect?

David: It used to be that when I'd find Teresa frustrated or upset about something, I'd say things like, "What's wrong with you *now*?" That didn't help, of course. Then I went through a period where I'd give her reasons why the frustrating thing might've happened. I was shocked





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when she told me it actually *did not* help for me to give her advice when she was upset.

Some days later God prompted me, when I came home to find her irritated about something, to say, "I can really see that you're hurting, and I want you to know that I care." I saw the immediate softening in her face, in her heart. And that brought us together.

Teresa: A hard heart is the result of no one caring, or feeling like no one cares. So whenever someone comes in with tenderness and care, it softens us.

Are you saying that identifying with a spouse's hurt can make him or her more loving?

David: Well it certainly takes away the person's aloneness. Adam actually had a full relationship with God at the time our Creator said aloneness was not good (Gen. 2:18). For years I believed that all I needed was God. I didn't acknowledge that I also needed Teresa.

But God addressed Adam's aloneness by supplying Eve. God intends marriage to be a relationship through which he removes a measure of our aloneness. And that begins to define a successful husband. It has nothing to do with trips we take or gifts we buy. A successful husband wonders, "Is my wife less alone this year than she has ever been?"

What are the negative consequences of a spouse feeling alone?

David: There's nothing good that comes out of aloneness. We find ourselves vulnerable to temptation and compromise. We're more likely to escape into sometimes good things like ministry or computers





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or entertainment, or even in destructive things like addictions.

Teresa: One of the consequences for me was false guilt. I felt guilty over needing David when he was out doing "the Lord's work." But the guilt was false because my need for him was valid.

David: Not long ago, Teresa and I were helping a couple work through the pain of infidelity. The husband had been busy, off doing his thing, and the wife looked after the children. Their two sons were stars on the soccer team, and the mom would rejoice on the sidelines over their success. The next school term a new student joined the team, and his single dad also rejoiced along the sidelines. It wasn't long until this wife was rejoicing together with the single dad. And you see where the pain of her aloneness took her.

When we feel alone, how can we reach out to our spouses?

Teresa: One time David came in after working late, and I was feeling alone. Normally I'd complain, "Why are you always late? Why can't you come home on time?" Of course, that never helped either one of us get in touch with my real needs.

So when David and I were lying in bed that night, I reached over, touched him and said, "Sweetheart, I see how busy you've been and all the neat things you're doing. I'm proud of you. And yet I'm feeling alone. Is there something we can look forward to doing together this week?"

David responded well and my need was met. Too much of the time we attack the person and the behavior instead





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of getting in touch with "What is it I'm really feeling and needing?"

Intimacy is a problem partly because it's difficult to know how to meet our mate's needs. When we feel distant, how can we move closer together?

David: One way is to understand one another well enough that you know some of your partner's key needs, and to realize that those needs often are different from yours. The Bible says husbands should live with their wives in an understanding way (1 Pet. 3:7). A part of my understanding Teresa is realizing she has high needs for security, attention and acceptance. For instance, when we travel she needs to feel secure that there's enough time to get to the airport and find a parking place and that there will be enough luggage room in the airplane. When those needs are met, she's relaxed and fulfilled. There's a closeness between us. I can help meet her needs when I know her well.

Teresa: Early in our marriage, we were trying to work through this dilemma of how to come closer when we felt distant. My pattern would be to put my walls of protection up whenever I was hurt. Not share my needs.

But one day I told David, "You know, whenever I'm pushing you away the most, don't let me. That's when I need you to be the most aggressive and come toward me." I was asking him in the midst of my rejecting him to pursue me. That's a pretty tall order. But it's a great picture of how God entered into our world even when we didn't know that we needed him.





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In a close relationship like marriage, it's easy to be hurt again and again and to start holding a grudge. How does forgiveness figure into intimacy?

Teresa: When you're harboring unforgiveness, love can't flow the way it needs to. An example is when David asked me if I loved him and I told him I was numb. This was largely the result of my being hurt, not forgiving him and then holding the hurt inside. That is a great barrier to intimacy.

David: Think about Ephesians 4:32, which says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." When forgiveness isn't there, then kindness, tenderheartedness and compassion are stifled. Anger and resentment and bitterness accumulate when unforgiveness hinders us from being kind, tenderhearted and compassionate.

If you've got hurt bottled up inside, if you're feeling distant from one another, if little things lead to big fights, then start working on forgiveness. That's what opens the door to giving each other the love you've both been wanting.

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The Truth about Love

Reflect

- *How does your relationship reflect "Great Commandment Love" right now?*
- *What do you find most difficult about practicing this type of "in spite of" love?*
- *Reread Ephesians 4:32. What are the keys to maintaining the intimacy that you will want in your marriage relationship? In what areas can you begin to apply these principles in your relationship today?*



Marriage Insurance



Today's good habits can take care of tomorrow's tough times.

By Les and Leslie Parrott

When they married 18 months ago, Kim would've never dreamed that her husband, Steve, wouldn't show her enough affection.

"He used to be so attentive that he'd notice if I changed my hair or bought a new dress," she told us. But Steve's loving words and compliments were coming less often, and Kim felt ignored. Steve was feeling confused. He couldn't figure out why Kim had lost interest in sex.



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Kim and Steve aren't alone. The frequent expressions of affection and approval that couples give each other during courtship and the honeymoon stage can dwindle in the first years of marriage. You may still love each other just as much, but you talk about it less. The early emotional intimacy that was so exciting peaks, then "I love you" dwindles and the romance tapers off. You fear that things have gone terribly wrong. But have they?

Contrary to the fairy tales we were weaned on, romance always fades. We just aren't built to maintain the high levels of feverish passion and romance experienced during the days of engagement and the honeymoon. And yet that's what most couples, like Kim and Steve, expect.

Consider the most popular story of doomed love—Romeo and Juliet. Their overpowering love was snuffed out in the heat of passion. But can you imagine Romeo and Juliet as a married couple—rushing to leave for work, worrying over unpaid bills, pushing a cart through a crowded grocery store? Would their passion have survived the mundane tasks of daily life? The truth is that the romancing and wooing that led up to your marriage are not what will sustain it in real life.

Couples who expect their marriage to be a long-running cinematic fairy tale end up drinking the poison of untold heartache. But don't despair. The good news is that you can keep romantic love alive long after the honeymoon has ended. And the secret is quite simple: do everything you can in the early years of marriage to establish habits of loving behavior.





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Honeymoon Habits

Habits can lead to actions that nurture lasting love, or they can lead to behaviors that will sabotage your love. And once a habit is set, it's next to impossible to break.

The habits you establish in the first few months of marriage will determine many of the practices you will naturally fall into for the rest of your marriage. The little things you do now—without thinking—will cut a groove in your relationship that will likely last a lifetime. That's why "honeymoon habits" are so important.

When we moved from Chicago to Los Angeles after returning home from our honeymoon, we moved into a tiny, one-bedroom apartment. All of our earthly belongings were squeezed into a moving van and put at the bottom of the company's priority list. We spent the first couple of weeks in our new home without a stick of furniture—not even a TV. As a result, we spent nearly every evening taking long walks around town discovering hidden treasures. And we did a lot of talking.

We didn't know it then, but we were connecting our spirits and paving a path in our relationship. Today, 14 years later, going for a walk is almost second nature. Rain or shine, we take a long walk. It's one honeymoon habit that we don't plan on breaking.

A Lifelong Honeymoon

No matter how wonderful your honeymoon was, the years that follow won't be filled with harmony and love unless you take the initiative to cultivate romantic habits. Here's a two-step plan that will help you keep romance, passion and intimacy alive.





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I. Pay attention to the little things. Chances are good that you've never been bitten by an elephant. But you've probably been bitten by a mosquito. Too often, we concentrate on the elephant and overlook the mosquito, not realizing that the little things matter the most. We think on a grand scale about romance—creating the perfect once-a-year getaway—and neglect the little opportunities that present themselves every day.

Consider how you greet one another after work. If you make a consistent effort to reconnect with a tender touch or embrace, you will establish one of the most important patterns for setting a positive tone. "Well, of course we'll do that," you may be thinking. Don't be so sure. The vast majority of couples end up with what researchers call the "grocery list" connection: "Did you pick up my dry cleaning?"; "I'll need the car tomorrow"; "What's for dinner?" But if you start with a tender touch before you get to the nitty-gritty, you will create an aura of love that leads to a level of fulfillment most married couples only dream about. Sure, it's a little thing, but a tender reconnection at the end of the day makes a huge difference when it becomes a habit.

Other "little things" to consider include common courtesies like saying "please" and "thank you." One of the first things to go in a new marriage is politeness. In some ways this reflects increasing levels of comfort. But if left unchecked, it can lead to rudeness. One study revealed that when paired with a stranger, even newlyweds were more polite to the person they didn't know than they were to each





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other. If you establish a pattern of politeness now, you'll likely be even more polite on your 50th wedding anniversary.

2. Develop a dating habit. Many couples claim they spend time together, but they typically spend that time running errands or meeting with other friends. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, but to keep romance alive you need to spend quality time together. That means it's just the two of you, with no agenda other than to connect. Some couples call this a "date night"—a good term when you consider that dating is as important as ever after you've said your vows and settled into being a permanent couple. Whatever you call it, this time needs to be scheduled—routinely and consistently.

Every Thursday evening, for example, you need to be able to count on having a date. It can be as simple as window-shopping downtown or as elaborate as dressing up for a special event. Do whatever you enjoyed doing before you were married. The point of making dating a habit is to keep your marriage from falling into the doldrums of working all week and collapsing on the weekends. Don't let it happen to you.

In addition to scheduling a weekly time for just the two of you to spend together, consider one overnight stay at a hotel every four months and a one-week vacation every year. By the way, once kids enter the picture these romantic interludes become even more essential.





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Many couples return to the location of their first wedding trip for a second, third or fourth honeymoon to recapture the bliss of their first few days as a married couple. But you don't have to wait for an anniversary to recreate that special time. Keep love alive—starting now—by establishing daily habits of romance, passion and intimacy. If you do, your honeymoon will become more than just a memory. It will become a way of life.

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Reflect

- *The authors write, "Couples who expect their marriage to be a long-running cinematic fairy tale end up drinking the poison of untold heartache." How could this be true?*
- *Consider your "honeymoon habits." What habits and ways of expressing your love do you share now that you can carry through your first few months of marriage?*
- *How does your daily communication about "the small things" reflect love and care? If you tend toward "grocery list" connections, how can you introduce tenderness in your relationship?*
- *Does making a weekly commitment to date one another after marriage seem to be a manageable commitment? Why or why not? What else could you do to developing a dating habit?*



Promise Keeping



People can break their vows in two ways: big exits or little exits.

By John Ortberg

What makes a wedding a wedding? For all the paraphernalia we associate with weddings, what is absolutely essential? Most involve expensive clothes, music, ring-bearers, flowers, guest-books, ushers—and the list goes on. Hours upon hours are given to planning out these details. Often the least amount of time and thought is spent on the wedding vows. But I'll tell you a secret: That's what a wedding is. Everything else is disposable.



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Promise Keeping

A marriage doesn't start with feelings. It doesn't start with physical intimacy or by meeting emotional needs. It may not even start with love. A man and woman stand in a church, a chapel, or a backyard and before each other, witnesses, and almighty God, they make a vow. They give their word. That's what a marriage is built on.

A wedding vow is a moving, wonderful, frightening thing because it is a promise for "as long as we both shall live." It's a "no matter what" promise. It's like what God does for the human race when he makes a covenant with us through Christ Jesus—a vow of unending, unending love.

This leads to an important question: What exactly did you commit to? The Bible says that "a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). In a phrase, you are promising to pursue oneness. Oneness of heart, mind, loyalty, servanthood. Two becoming one.

How are you doing at keeping your word? Is your oneness growing stronger, or is there distance that threatens your promise to love each other? Perhaps the drifting happens rapidly, or perhaps it slowly ebbs. Wherever you are, you can learn to move toward each other daily.

There are two ways that people can break their promise and damage oneness. They either take big exits, or they take little exits. Big exits are the obvious ones: divorce, abandonment, adultery. These are the ones that get our attention. But no couple stands on a platform and makes a vow, planning on taking a big exit. So how does a couple end up there?





Preparing for Your Marriage

Promise Keeping

Every time you see people take a big exit—you can count on this—they have taken many small exits to lead up to it. They engaged in activities that eroded oneness. They withheld words and actions that would have strengthened oneness. Every day they hid a little, withdrew a little, fantasized a little, or nursed resentment a little. Never did they say: "I think I'll break my promise today." Little exits are subtle. But add up enough little exits, and a big one may be a matter of time.

Now, there's a difference between taking an exit (which destroys community) and allowing space for a husband and wife to be two separate people. "Closing exits" doesn't mean I'm supposed to want to share every waking moment with my spouse and engage only in those pastimes that we can do together. If I spend the afternoon watching football with my Christian brothers, that is not an exit. It's a life-enriching exercise in individuality that will enable me to return home and connect in a deeper and more profound way.

Every day we can choose to take exits or build bridges in our marriage. One of the most important things a husband or wife can do is identify the little exits they are most prone toward taking and then make a solid decision to close them off. Any marriage where one or both partners do this can begin to experience wonderful improvements.

What does a little exit look like? Let me give you an example. When our three children were small, Nancy was home full-time, while I worked at a church. One day she brought the kids to my office. We were going out to eat that evening, and I assumed that she would





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find a sitter. After finding out that she hadn't, I didn't say anything more. I didn't get overtly mad. I just focused on the kids a little more than usual. I also didn't look at Nancy, talk to her, or touch her as much as I usually did.

In my mind I was exemplary. I wasn't yelling or throwing things. But I withdrew. After you've been married a while you can calculate this so precisely—it was just enough to make her notice, but not so much to be too obvious. When she asked if something was wrong, I responded, "No, I'm fine. Why? Is something wrong with you?"

I was hurt, frustrated, and angry, but I didn't want to admit it. Not to her. Not even to myself. That moment when oneness is damaged and one spouse asks the other "What's wrong?" is critical in marriage. And in that moment, I broke my promise.

I know how hard it is to respond well. I come from a Swedish background. We're taught to say "nothing" from before we're born. We could be dying, and someone asks, "What's wrong?" "Nothing."

So let me give you an answer for the next time your spouse asks you that question: "Something." Of course, that means you'll have to do some work. You'll have to examine yourself, and ask why you're angry, hurt, afraid, or frustrated.

You may wonder: "What if I can't say it right?" or "What if we can't resolve it?" or "What if I look foolish and childish?" Know what? You are foolish and childish. So am I. Welcome to the human race. The Bible calls this sin. And no one knows you're troubled by it better than the person you married.





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The danger in not responding and not closing off the little exits is that they can, sometimes unnoticeably, become a way of life. Consider these situations.

You're pouring all your energy into work. It's become such an ingrained habit you and your spouse don't even fight about it anymore. The truth is, you cherish your work more than your marriage.

You talk more deeply about your marriage with a few trusted friends than you do with your spouse. Although you blame him for this, it enables you to focus on his faults and not have to look at your own. You pursue intimacy outside of your marriage more often than in it.

You drift into patterns of mishandled sexuality, entertaining lustful desires by watching adult movies on business trips. You often justify this by dwelling on her faults and resenting her, but inside you know something is deeply wrong.

You escape into romance novels or fantasize about what it would be like to have another spouse. Your heart is more devoted to a fantasy spouse than to the one to whom you gave your promise.

Perhaps you retreat after dinner into a hobby or watch TV by yourself in the den. Perhaps you try to anesthetize pain by drinking too much or by shopping and spending too much money. You immerse yourself in a combination of resentment and self-pity.

The illusion is that you think you're honoring your promise. You reason with yourself: "I didn't take a big exit. I'm not having an affair. I didn't walk out the door. I'm still here. I'm keeping my vow."





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Are you? You didn't stand in front of your spouse, with friends, family, and God as your witnesses, and promise: "My body will stay in the same house as yours" or "I will try to avoid having sex with someone else."

You vowed, "With this ring, I thee wed. With all that I have and all that I am, I thee endow. I take you to be my lawfully wedded spouse, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live."

Honoring your promise may be easy for you, a source of joy. But maybe you've been taking small exits and honoring your promise is difficult right now. Perhaps somewhere along the line you've taken a big exit. Whatever the circumstance, there is healing with God. We all stand as sinners in need of his grace.

You can honor your vow today. Reach over and take the hand of the person you love; put an arm around a shoulder. Take a moment to say, "I want to honor my promise. I remember the vow I took years ago, and I'm serious about it." If you commit to closing exits, you can have an amazing gift: someone who knows you, faults included, and loves you. Marriage can be that.

Jesus summarized his whole curriculum for human relationships in one command, "Love each other" (John 15:17). This is not rocket science. It's a command for every one of us, and it's do-able. Start with the person you're married to. You promised.

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Reflect

- *The author writes, "Every time you see people take a big exit—you can count on this—they have taken many small exits to lead up to it. They engaged in activities that eroded oneness. They withheld words and actions that would have strengthened oneness." Make a list of activities that erode oneness, whether big or small (unforgiveness, bitterness, lack of communication). Do you tend toward any of these small exits in your relationship? How might you find ways of closing off those exit doors before your marriage?*
- *How can you, as a married couple, close off exits while still allowing each other space to be individuals?*
- *Thinking back of your families of origin, which little exits did you grow up watching your parents take? How can you take steps to be extra careful in those areas you may be more prone to imitating?*



Great Expectations



Make sure they are grounded in reality.

By Tim Gardner

“I never expected this. Mark just isn't the man I married.” “Joan” sat expressionless as she stoically described her relationship.

“While we were dating, he was everything I wanted. He was fun, caring. We could talk for hours. Now he works late every day and gets home just in time to play with our daughter a few minutes before her bedtime. Then he watches TV. He never takes me out, never helps around the house, and only touches me when he wants sex (which we haven't had for six months). I don't love him anymore. I want out.”



Preparing for Your Marriage

Great Expectations

It's an unhappy story, but a familiar one. Couples who once stood before God promising, "Till death do us part" now sit in a counselor's office, complaining that their mate "isn't doing their part." The passions once fueled by visions of "happily ever after" are gradually extinguished with each failed expectation. Eventually, one of them decides, "Since my spouse can't, or won't, meet my needs, I'll just move on to someone who will."

Call it what you want—disappointment, disillusionment or despair—failed expectations can bring partners to the point of wanting to chuck it all. And it raises a serious question: *Why doesn't marriage fulfill all our dreams?*

Dream a Littler Dream?

Like many unhappy spouses, Joan had legitimate concerns—she should be getting more attention from her husband. But her greater problem was that her expectations of marriage were unrealistic. Ironically, the overwhelming popularity of marriage may in some ways explain the high level of marital breakdown.

"The higher the expectations of marriage ... the greater the number of divorces," writes Margaret Talbot in *The New Republic*. It is this "quest for an ideal marriage" that has, in her opinion, made divorce more acceptable. In other words, if your marriage isn't everything you expected, you should get a divorce and try, try again.





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But what about those of us who reject divorce as a viable solution to a dissatisfying marriage? Should we simply lower our standards and resign ourselves to live in an unhappy marriage? No, we shouldn't. It's nonsense to say that God's gift of marriage is great, but, "Hey, don't expect too much." As followers of Christ, we shouldn't settle for bad or even mediocre marriages. We need exceedingly high aspirations.

So what are we missing? The article in *The New Republic* talked about the problem of unfulfilled expectations as if all expectations have equal merit. That's a fallacy. There are certain expectations that marriage and a spouse can never fulfill. Those are the dangerous ones.

"The belief in a happily-ever-after marriage is one of the most widely held, destructive marriage myths. But it's only the tip of the marital-myth iceberg," say Les and Leslie Parrott, directors of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University. "Every difficult marriage is plagued by misconceptions about what marriage should be."

In Joan's case, the misconceptions were her belief that she and Mark would always feel they were in love, that romance would never die, that sex would always set off fireworks, and that everything would just get better. Her dreams were so lofty they guaranteed failure.

At nearly every wedding, a man marries the woman he believes will be the ideal wife, and a woman marries what she thinks is an ideal husband. Then, as the pages of the calendar turn, each mate senses the other is changing. Soon they realize their spouse is no longer the person they thought they married—and they feel





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cheated. What actually happened, though, is that they discovered the real person they married—the one who always lived behind the fantasy. And that unsettling discovery can actually be good for a marriage.

How Passion Plays Out

When Amy and I married, I expected we'd end each busy day by falling asleep in each other's arms. But Amy is more comfortable falling asleep while I keep my arms to myself. I also assumed I could meet all of my wife's friendship needs once we'd moved away from her hometown friends and family. I was surprised, and somewhat hurt, to find she still had such a strong need for those other people. But these reality checks gave me a clearer focus on who Amy really is, and it pushed us to greater intimacy.

So the bad news of failed expectations is really good news. By moving from unrealistic ideals to attainable ones, you're set free from trying to achieve the fantasy of marital bliss. You can replace the fairy tale with something better: a real marriage that cherishes two real people.

When couples say "we're just not in love anymore," what they're really saying is they don't *feel* in love. They mistakenly limit love to its emotional aspects. The truth is much more freeing. Even when feelings come and go, a couple can still be "in love." In the words of the late C.S. Lewis: "Being in love is something you *do*."

One of my premarital expectations has definitely been fulfilled: I expected Amy and I to have some mammoth fights. More than once my lovely wife has looked at me and said in a voice I don't remember from our dating days, "I love





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you, but I really don't like you right now." I've expressed the same feeling now and then. We may fight, but always within our promise to each other—a promise that "No matter how I feel, I am committed to love you for the rest of my life, and, by God's grace, I will."

Couples who see their expectations come true are the ones who understand that love, far more than being what you feel, is what you do. That means being committed to serve when you don't feel like serving, to listen when you don't feel like listening, and to love when you don't feel very loving.

God cares about passionate feelings, but those feelings won't last uninterrupted, and they can't form a basis for marriage. In some ways I'm glad the feelings of heart-pounding, palm-sweating love haven't gone on nonstop. I remember fidgeting in my office shortly after our honeymoon, getting nothing done because I just wanted to go home to Amy. The days of fidgeting are gone, but I'm thankful those early passionate feelings have returned—over and over, in both new and familiar ways. I'm much more in love with Amy now, but it's a love resulting from our commitment.

Higher Hopes

God didn't design your spouse to be the one person who perfectly completes you and fulfills your every desire. He provided a lifelong companion to meet your needs for intimacy and sexual expression in an undemanding, mutually enjoyable atmosphere. Like a stamp and an envelope, or a violin and a bow, you are individuals—but together you become more. You become one. That's an achievable expectation.





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In ten years of marriage, Amy and I have sorted out most of our early expectations, seeing which ones we still need to pursue, which need to be tossed out, and which have already become reality. Though we may not fall asleep in each other's arms, our physical intimacy has surpassed anything we ever planned. And now I'm thankful that Amy has cultivated so many outside friendships; these people enrich our lives.

Along the way, we've been able to identify healthy expectations that are worth pursuing. You can expect marriage to be fun. You can expect yourself to be faithful, and your spouse to be faithful to you. You can expect to be loved without conditions. You can expect your spouse to be someone you grow with as you fulfill the tasks God gives. You can expect—often through plenty of hard work—to resolve conflict, to accept and enjoy personality differences, and to maintain an active sex life. You can expect to work together to develop a strong sense of shared beliefs, values and priorities on parenting, money, in-laws and roles. Finally, you can expect your marriage to honor God.

These are the great expectations of marriage. Studies show that couples with the most vital marriages have very high, yet very realistic, expectations. Research also shows that the ideals aren't nearly as important as the sincere commitment to fulfill them.

Marriage can be "till death do us part," but "happily-ever-after" only happens to couples who are willing to do what it takes to turn their ideals into reality. It's not enough to make the commitment on the day when you stand before friends, family and God and marry. It's getting up every morning for the rest of your lives determined to make your best expectations come true.





Preparing for Your Marriage

Great Expectations

Do You Expect Too Much?

RESPONSE SCALE

0 = Don't know 1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree
3 = Agree 4 = Strongly agree

- _____ 1. My partner can and will meet all of my needs.
- _____ 2. Our current problems can all be resolved by spending more time together.
- _____ 3. If we commit to it, I believe my mate and I can overcome any problem or struggle.
- _____ 4. My partner and I want exactly the same things from our marriage.
- _____ 5. With mutual willingness to teach and learn, our sex life will get better with each passing year.
- _____ 6. I believe I will always feel in love with my mate.
- _____ 7. My partner and I fully understand each other.
- _____ 8. My mate can and should be my best friend.
- _____ 9. I expect romantic feelings in our marriage to come and go, largely controlled by our own actions.
- _____ 10. My partner is everything I've ever dreamed a spouse should be.
- _____ 11. I don't believe there will ever be any serious problems in our relationship.
- _____ 12. My partner and I have resolved all the issues from our pasts that could affect our relationship.
- _____ 13. I believe marriage is a gift from God and that overall it will be a very enjoyable experience.





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- _____ 14. I believe our sexual relationship will always be wonderful and free from conflict.
- _____ 15. Being involved in a church will keep us from having serious marital struggles.

Total Score _____

WHAT YOUR SCORE MEANS

0-30 You're wearing dark glasses. Either your view of marriage is somewhat negative, or you are uncertain on a number of marital issues. Seek counsel from a pastor or a wise, older friend who has a healthy, fun marriage.

31-40 Your glasses are clear. You have a fairly realistic expectation of marriage. But seek outside input regarding any areas in which you answered "don't know."

41-50 Your glasses have a rose tint to them. You are very optimistic about marriage, but tend to minimize problems and differences. Find a mentor who will bring realism yet not destroy your excitement.

51-60 Your glasses are completely rose colored. You are heading toward a major relationship crisis due to failed expectations. Please seek help from an experienced pastor or Christian counselor. T.G.

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Reflect

- *What is the difference between healthy and unhealthy expectations? Why is it important to understand this difference before you are married?*
- *As you prepare for your marriage, what expectations that you would like to see are healthy, and realistic? How will you work toward fulfilling those? What expectations, whether big or small, do you have that are unhealthy and should be let go of? Be specific (we'll never argue, he'll always put his dirty laundry in the hamper, etc.).*
- *The author writes, "Studies show that couples with the most vital marriages have very high, yet very realistic, expectations." How can you have high expectations and a vital marriage? What could this look for your marriage?*



It's a Guy Thing



How your gender differences
can build a stronger marriage.

By Leslie Parrott

Nestled in a cozy cabin along the rugged Oregon coast, I pulled a blanket tight across my shoulders. Just a few feet away, behind a bolted bathroom door, my husband of one week was struggling valiantly with a severe case of 24-hour flu.

I knew that if Les really loved me, he would allow me to offer him comfort and sympathy. After all, I wanted to support him the way I expected him to support me. Instead, I was literally locked out of his suffering and feeling terribly dejected.



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The next day, Les was restored to health and my doubts about our love for each other vanished. We now poured our energy into romantic honeymoon fun—riding horses along the beach, picnicking on the sand dunes, candlelight dinners. That is until the tables turned. This time, I was the one who awoke in the middle of the night with a burning fever. I groaned with the agony of an upset stomach—desperate for comfort—only to find that Les had tiptoed into another room, leaving me to suffer alone.

I didn't blame Les for passing the virus on to me, but I wanted to accuse him of not acting like a husband. After all, he wasn't there to hold my hand or hear my cries. My doubts about our marriage resurfaced.

Give Me Some Space

Was this the course of married life? Moving from agony to bliss and back again? Surely I had missed an important lesson in my premarital studies. Looking back on it, I must admit that I did. It took me most of our first year to see that this marital yo-yo was due in great part to my lack of understanding a fundamental difference between men and women.

I married Les, in part, because his strengths made up for my weaknesses. When I was discouraged, he was optimistic. When I was shy, he was bold. Being with him gave me a sense of completeness. But it took a dark night on our honeymoon to reveal that our differences could actually leave me feeling more confused than completed. I didn't realize that the differences I thought were strictly between Les and me were actually shared by most other couples.





Preparing for Your Marriage

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There is a predictable difference between the sexes, and without this knowledge I had evaluated my husband's behavior according to my feminine standards. Admittedly, you'll always find exceptions. But research and experience generally point to this fundamental yet powerful distinction: in times of stress, men need more space while women desire closeness.

According to John Gray in *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (HarperCollins), men, when faced with stress, become increasingly "focused and withdrawn" while women become increasingly "overwhelmed and emotionally involved." Men typically don't want to talk about their pressures or be held and comforted until they have first had time to themselves. Under pressure, they set out on a quest for space, while in similar circumstances a woman craves the reassurance of relational security.

Our honeymoon was my first real encounter with this fundamental difference. At the time it couldn't have been more baffling, but today it makes perfect sense. As a man, Les wanted space to "conquer" his illness. Once he achieved health, he was free to reconnect with me. For me, however, illness in either of us was another opportunity to strengthen our emotional bond; a chance to offer tenderness and support. That night on our honeymoon, as I lay moaning, Les gave me the gift of space not because he didn't care about me, but because he cared so much. In contrast, I interpreted his style of caring as cruelty.





Preparing for Your Marriage

It's a Guy Thing

The Love Barometer

Understanding the different ways men and women cope with stress was a major breakthrough for us. But it didn't completely bridge our gender gap. There was yet another fundamental difference we had to discover.

During our fourth or fifth month of marriage, I began wondering why Les wasn't as romantic as he used to be. Before we got married he planned exciting evenings, kissed me at stoplights, saved ticket stubs from our dates and even wrote tender love poems. But once we were married, his romantic side waned. It wasn't that he stopped his romantic ways altogether, but something was distinctly different. "Am I doing something wrong?" I wondered. "Is Les having doubts about our marriage?"

As it turned out, I wasn't the only one who thought things had changed. From Les's perspective, I was more happy-go-lucky before we crossed the threshold. And he was right. Back then, I felt good about our relationship and optimistic about the future. But soon after we married, I became more concerned about "our relationship." Without realizing it, I had relied on Les's romantic gestures to serve as a love barometer. As those outward demonstrations of love diminished, I mistakenly believed his love was disappearing.

I wanted to talk about it and process our feelings together. Not so with Les. My compulsion to talk about our marriage made him feel anxious, like he was failing as a husband. Les just wanted to get on with living as husband and wife.





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It's a Guy Thing

The truth is that neither of us had really changed. The goal (marriage) that made Les especially romantic was met, so he felt that romance purely for the sake of romance—which I still valued—was no longer a priority. He had shifted his energies to building a stable home with a secure future. He couldn't have been happier with our new life together.

After a dozen years of marriage and after counseling hundreds of newlywed couples, I now realize that these "changes" weren't unique to us. The turbulence we experienced stemmed from the fact that men focus on achievement while women focus on experience.

Les, like the majority of men, focuses on future goals. He justifies a present activity by what it will accomplish in the future. He asks, "What good can this produce?" He likes words such as "progress" and "useful." He can be very patient doing romantic little things as long as they ultimately prove productive.

On the other hand, as a woman I focus on the feelings and activities of the present—for their own sake. I don't need a goal; it's enough to simply enjoy the moment. I read a book simply to experience the story, to allow it to change me. When Les reads a book, he is constantly gathering information for future projects. I like words like "connected" and "relational." I can be very patient doing romantic little things simply because doing them has its own value.





Preparing for Your Marriage

It's a Guy Thing

Flash-Card Romance

It took some time for us to learn of our gender differences—that men typically focus on autonomy and achievement while women tend to focus on connection and experience. And it has taken us even longer to value and appreciate those differences. And yet those differences, if heeded and accounted for, can become the source of greater intimacy.

On our one-year anniversary, Les and I returned to the same stretch of Oregon coast—this time minus the flu. And it was then that I began to give up my desire to eliminate our differences.

It was Les's idea that we pack a picnic lunch and drive three hours or so up the coast. This could be fun, I thought. We'll have time to talk as we drive and we can share the romance of the lazy day. But Les, now in graduate school, had a different idea. He brought along a taped lecture to listen to on our drive and a pack of flash cards so I could quiz him for his next exam. I felt a familiar sense of desperation. But a big part of cultivating love and intimacy is learning to accept and respect each other's differences, so I decided to take on this challenge.

Realizing that Les was one week into a stressful summer school course, I decided to get involved instead of trying to divert his attention from this uncompleted task. To my great surprise, sharing in his learning opened both of our spirits. By the time we reached our destination, I wasn't resenting Les for not being as romantic as he used to be. Instead, I was inspired by his strength of determination and vision for our shared future.





Preparing for Your Marriage

It's a Guy Thing

Recognizing a couple of fundamental differences between men and women allowed Les and me to avoid an ongoing battle between the sexes. In ways we never could have predicted, our differences—once appreciated and accepted on both sides—have made life better for each of us.

Leslie Parrott, Ed.D., is a marriage and family therapist and co-director of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University. She and her husband, Les, are co-authors of several books, including Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts and Becoming Soul Mates (both published by Zondervan).

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Reflect

- *Which of the fundamental differences between men and women have you experienced in your relationship? Have these created tensions? How?*
- *How do your different strengths and weaknesses compliment each other? Give examples of your experiences.*
- *How can you remind one another of your gender differences when things get tense? What safeguards can you put into place that will help you to be patient and understanding, especially when you feel like you don't understand one another?*



The Boomerang Effect



Befriending another couple might be the best thing you can do for your marriage.

By Ron R. Lee

Les and Leslie Parrott don't sit still for long. There's just too much to do.

The Parrotts met when they were teenagers and got married between college and graduate school. Les earned a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and Leslie an Ed.D. in marriage and family therapy. With their advanced degrees in hand, the Parrotts accepted teaching positions at Seattle Pacific University. But would they be satisfied with the settled life of academia?

Hardly.



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They realized colleges and universities weren't doing much to help students prepare for the most demanding responsibility most people ever face—that of being a wife or husband. So they created an elective called "Relationships" and listed it in the course catalogue. When registration closed, they had to hunt up a larger classroom. They expected 25 students, and ended up with 250.

After the overwhelming success of that initial course, the Parrotts were convinced their students needed more. So they created a two-day seminar for engaged couples and those seriously considering marriage. Hence, the *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts* program was born. Les and Leslie travel around the country presenting the seminar, which is also available on video.

Then there's the Center for Relationship Development, which the Parrotts co-direct and which serves as their base of operation for teaching, counseling and developing educational programs. It's also where they do some of the research for their books. Writing together, and individually, they have more than ten titles to their credit, including *Becoming Soul Mates*; *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*; *Questions Couples Ask*; *High-Maintenance Relationships*; and their latest project, *Mentoring Engaged and Newlywed Couples*, a curriculum to help couples become marriage mentors.

The Parrotts would like to see a national network of marriage mentors develop. They envision colleges, churches and concerned couples across the country pairing newlyweds with couples who have been married ten





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The Boomerang Effect

years or longer. Newly married couples benefit by having access to couples that have already been through many of the things the newlyweds are just now encountering. But young couples aren't the only ones who benefit: The mentors get a lot out of it as well.

Les and Leslie call this the "boomerang effect," and here's how it works.

When you two were newlyweds, you got to know an older couple that became a big part of your lives.

How have mentors improved your marriage?

Les: Actually, two different couples have served as our mentors. The first, Dennis and Lucy Guernsey, we met while we were in grad school. Sadly, Dennis died last fall, and losing him has left a big hole in our lives. He and Lucy were teachers and writers, so they were more tuned in to what Leslie and I do professionally. That was a great help to us. And then there is our pastor and his wife, Tharon and Barbara Daniels, who have helped us more in the area of our spiritual lives.

Leslie: The Guernseys did share a lot of practical reality with us on writing and working together. But it wasn't just professional mentoring—it was a comprehensive and earthy relationship. Lucy is the kind of person who is willing to help me learn anything.

You didn't mention your parents as mentors. Is it better to look outside your family when seeking a mentor?

Les: Parents can provide valuable insight. But there's something different about spending time with couples who are not related to you. They can shoot straight





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The Boomerang Effect

with you and not feel they have anything to gain or lose, like your parents might.

How do your mentors approach the task of mentoring?

Les: It has never been a structured thing where we get together to work on specific issues. Instead, we go out to dinner and have a good time.

Leslie: But it's not all celebration, either. They let us be with them when they're down, and sometimes they come wanting to learn something from us. It's a two-way relationship.

Les: They are vulnerable with us, which is part of effective mentoring. They don't pretend to be a perfect couple. There have been many times when we've sat together in a car and prayed for a half hour about our marriages and everything else in our lives.

You mentioned that your own mentoring experience has been a two-way proposition. The mentors learn something from spending time with a younger couple.

Les: Absolutely. It's what we call the "boomerang effect." The mentors benefit greatly from the mentoring relationship. Last year, when Dennis was diagnosed with brain cancer, Leslie and I were one of the first couples he and Lucy contacted. That night we went to their home, and we talked for a long time and prayed together. They knew we would be available to support them when they were struggling.

Have there been times when you two hit a brick wall and went to your mentors for specific guidance?

Leslie: There was one really big one. A few years ago, I got a devastating phone call from my parents saying they were going to get a divorce. I had no idea they were even considering such a thing.





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The Boomerang Effect

The day I got the call, Les and I were on vacation with Tharon and Barbara Daniels, our other mentor couple. Looking back on it, I realize it was God's greatest sustaining gift to me that they were with us in that moment. They ministered to us that week, and they've done a lot since then to keep us spiritually whole. They don't give us advice unless we ask for it, but they do ask good questions, and then just listen.

Les: There have been other times when we needed help in our professional lives. At one point, we realized our schedules were out of control because we didn't know how to turn down invitations to speak. During some meals with Dennis and Lucy, they gently taught us how to say no. In fact, Dennis talked about the "ministry of saying no." You almost have to experience this yourself to really learn the lesson. But somebody else who has already learned the lesson can help speed your learning curve.

Leslie: The Guernseys had an uncanny ability to bring up issues that we were struggling with. Sometimes we didn't even realize how tender a particular issue was until they put their finger on it.

Les: A little over a year ago, they asked us, "What are you doing to nurture your marriage?" And we didn't have an answer. Here we are, marriage experts, but we weren't doing anything intentional to nurture our own relationship. So we set a goal for the year, and it was one of the wisest things we've ever done.

Have there been other big issues you've wrestled with, and felt like you needed specific guidance on?

Leslie: Sometimes you discuss overwhelming emotional issues with your spouse, but still feel like you're at a loss.





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Those are the times when mentors have been a real gift to me.

A recent example is my concern about my mom's health problems and her long-term care. Les and I live half a continent away from my mom, which makes me feel really helpless. It's also scary, because we don't know how to balance the needs of our marriage with my mom's needs. And Les and I don't always agree on the best course to follow. So I needed some outside perspective.

I was talking with Lucy, and I realized that our way of life at this phase of our marriage—with full-time work at the university and travel almost every weekend—was barely consistent enough, or "homey" enough, to even care for our cat, much less my mom. Lucy helped me see that I was afraid of how my mom's increased need for care, combined with our ministry commitments, might impact our marriage. But it didn't feel loving for me to say that.

Les: We still don't have all the answers, but we have made a commitment to travel frequently to the Midwest to be with Leslie's mom. And we are actively seeking solutions for the future. The most important change is that we are working on discovering the answers together, instead of Leslie working on it independently. And our mentors have helped us do that.





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You have talked in the past about your interest in seeing a nationwide network of mentor couples develop. However, you said that when you invite people to become mentors, many are reluctant to get involved. What are some of the main reasons?

Les: Let me say at the outset that not everybody is cut out to be a marriage mentor. For example, some couples might want to be mentors for the wrong reason—to salvage what little marriage they have left. Or one spouse might be really motivated, but the other mate isn't. That's not going to work. It has to be a team effort.

Leslie: But it's true that people are reluctant to become mentors. The biggest reason is that they don't feel qualified, because their marriages aren't perfect. They wonder what they have to offer newly married couples.

But mentors don't have to be experts. In fact, we try to help couples see that their story is what really does the teaching. The young couple being mentored won't have the exact same relational issues, but they still gain insight from hearing the mentors' story.

I remember the first time Dennis and Lucy told us about a huge argument they had when Lucy threw her ring down and drove away and didn't come back for a week. As I listened, I thought, "Okay, so it took them a long time to learn how to resolve their anger." It was comforting to hear about their experience.

What's the primary benefit of hearing the mentor couple's story?

Les: It instills hope in the younger couple when they realize that everyone has problems; and their mentors are proof that problems can be overcome.





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Leslie: It also gets the young couple out of isolation. For example, the young marrieds tend to be in a separate Sunday school class—so they're not often in community with anyone from another generation. They don't experience the richness of older couples that have walked these roads ahead of them.

What kinds of things happen in the lives of the mentor couples that they didn't expect?

Leslie: A lot of times, wives and husbands don't have a chance to work together in any role other than as parents, so it's a refreshing change for them to work on something as a team. Sometimes they're surprised at how well they work together, and how much they enjoy it. Also, they're surprised as they hear their spouse answering the young couple's questions—how much meaning their spouse has gained from their marriage.

It's almost like when you overhear someone paying you a compliment. That can feel even better than getting direct affirmation.

What are some other benefits?

Les: Whenever you transcend the borders of your own marriage to give something to somebody else, it cultivates the sense of being soul mates.

Leslie: And it restores optimism in the mentor couple. We kind of get cynical over time, and we forget what it's like to dream. It's interesting how mentoring ignites a new optimism in the mentor couple. It also rekindles a sense of romance to see this young couple—so deeply in love, and with all their idealism still intact.





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Much of your work is devoted to pre-marital counseling. What's more important: pre-marital preparation or mentoring young couples after they get married?

Les: Pre-marriage counseling is vital to increase a couple's chances for success. But it's after couples cross the threshold that they start to realize they really do need some help. It's kind of like learning to use a computer. Someone might show you how to set up a spreadsheet. But if you don't have a need for spreadsheets, you'll just tune out. But pretty soon, you're in a new job and you really do need spread sheets. That's when you're ready to learn. Marriage mentoring comes along when the needs have become obvious to the young couples.

To receive additional information about marriage mentoring, contact Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott at the Center for Relationship Development, Seattle Pacific University, 3307 Third Avenue West, Seattle, Washington 98119.

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Reflect

- *How have mentors impacted your relationship? What positive changes have come about with the guidance of a godly couple? How will you seek out a mentoring couple after you are married?*
- *What are your fears about opening yourselves up to mentors on an ongoing basis after marriage?*
- *Are there any big issues you are dealing with right now, as a couple, that you need guidance on? What are these issues? What couple could you confide in for help?*



Stop the Money Madness



Through the years, you'll clash over cash—whether you have a lot or a little.

By Beverly J. Burch

It has been called "the last taboo." No matter how open we've become about other areas of our lives, money continues to be treated with an evasiveness that would do our Victorian ancestors proud.

Actually, you may not want to discuss personal finances at your next dinner party. But it's essential that you and your spouse learn healthy ways to talk about money. And while the size of your bank account is significant, it's the *meaning* you assign to money that makes the biggest impact on your marriage—for good or for ill.



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Early Years: From Me to We

While running errands after work, Jill noticed a great sale on bath furnishings. She picked out a colorful shower curtain with coordinating towels and accessories. She couldn't wait to show Greg! He wouldn't believe it.

Jill was right. He *didn't* believe it. How could she spend all that money when they already had a perfectly good shower curtain and several sets of towels they received as wedding gifts just six months earlier?

Within minutes, they were in the middle of another heated argument over finances, each trying to make the other "see reason." It wasn't their first money conflict. Jill objected to what Greg spent on golf outings. He objected to her buying a new dress for an office party. And on and on.

Family therapist Chloe Madanes, of Washington, D.C., says marriage may be the first relationship we encounter that is based on collaboration rather than on competing individual preferences.

Greg and Jill didn't know how to forge a new identity as a married couple without forfeiting their individual identities. Their arguments grew not from fear that they couldn't afford specific purchases, but from fear that they couldn't afford to give in to each other's spending preferences.

Another factor that affects how couples develop a sense of money-oneness is understanding how their concept of money was shaped by the family they grew up in. Jill and Greg both came from families that viewed money as a symbol of success and autonomy. But now that they





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were married, spending what they wanted, when they wanted, was creating a tug-of-war. Other spouses may end up clashing because they came from families with contrasting financial cultures. A woman who grew up equating money with security might marry a man from a family of spenders who expressed love through buying expensive gifts. In either case, our own financial style feels right because it reflects attitudes and values that are familiar.

Moving from individual to shared control of finances can feel threatening to newlyweds who are still learning to trust one another in other areas of life. Because money is concrete and quantifiable, it can become the focus of conflicts that are really about something more intangible. For instance, a newlywed might not feel comfortable accusing his or her mate of self-centeredness. So it's easier to criticize excessive spending instead.

Greg and Jill became so distressed by their constant fights over money that they went to a counselor. With her help, they finally voiced the real fears behind their money arguments. Although each was afraid of the other's perceived power, they agreed that neither of them wanted to lord it over the other. Once they realized they weren't in danger of being controlled, they began to relax and trust one another.

Their money conflicts didn't cease altogether. But after they learned to verbalize their feelings—and to respect and trust each other—they were much better equipped to find a mutually satisfying solution when they did clash over finances.





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Middle Years: Dividing a Shrinking Pie

As couples move into their middle years, no longer does the question "mine or yours?" drive disagreements over money. Instead, the questions multiply as the couple's responsibilities mount: "Who gets what? How much? When? And *how* are we going to manage it?"

Although some middle-years marriages are jolted by crisis, most simply begin to sag under the weight of accumulating responsibilities and the simultaneous shrinking of available time and money. After 15 years of marriage, Jim and Sue feel stretched to the limit and see few good options that would improve their situation. When they had their first child, they agreed that one parent should be at home most of the time. Since Sue's job as a dental hygienist was more conducive to part-time hours, she naturally assumed that role. They still believe their decision was the right one, but financially it looked a lot easier on paper.

Jim feels the weight of responsibility for providing for his wife and three children. Preschool, soccer, a math tutor—who knew kids would cost so much? Although they do save a little, he fears it isn't enough to provide for his kids' future college tuition or for a comfortable retirement. Should he work longer hours? It wouldn't mean more money, but it might put him in line for a promotion. He envies Sue. Not only does she get more time with the kids, she doesn't have the burden of everyone's financial well-being depending on her income.

Sue can't help but notice Jim's fatigue and frustration. It concerns her that he worries so much about money, and she wonders if she should increase her hours at





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work. But she has always wanted to be a mother, not a dental hygienist. And she wonders if Jim would view her working longer hours as a lack of confidence in his ability to provide. Would the increase in her income be worth the additional time spent away from home? And what about childcare expenses?

Not knowing the answers, she settles for trying to cut spending, but still feels she's to blame for the financial pressures. Sue envies Jim. His role as primary provider is so clear-cut; he doesn't have to figure out how to divide up his life—and end up feeling guilty no matter what decision he makes.

Jim and Sue are actually making their struggle more difficult because they haven't let each other in on their thoughts and worries. They don't often argue, but they have unwittingly allowed their financial pressures to create distance between them. Although they have moved from competing to complementary roles, they need to share more than the family "business" if their marriage is to remain strong. Their reluctance to share their concerns openly puts them at risk of becoming resentful. And they also lose the benefit of putting two heads together when it comes to making decisions.

A breakthrough for Jim and Sue came late one evening while they were watching the news. A short spot on people taking on second jobs to pay off credit cards caught Sue's attention. She casually mentioned that Jim's availability to the family was worth the sacrifices they had to make in other areas. At that moment, he realized Sue didn't expect him to be a "super provider."





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The following week when Jim found himself wrestling with a tough financial decision, he bounced an idea off Sue. He welcomed her input on how to increase their income without adding to their childcare costs. Contrary to what she had feared, Jim was far from threatened by her suggestions—he really seemed to appreciate them.

Over time, Jim and Sue became more comfortable talking through their concerns. And they were continually surprised at the ideas their combined creativity and perspective generated. While they still faced the financial pressures unique to their season of life, for once they began to feel they could handle them—if they stuck together as a team.

Later Years: Contentment or Resentment?

As couples move into their later years, they begin to see how their previous financial choices have affected their current options. As retirement approaches, the most important financial question becomes "How are we going to live with our fixed income?" Resentments that weren't resolved in earlier years now begin to surface. At this stage, conflicts over money usually take the form of blame for decisions long past the possibility of change.

Throughout most of their marriage, Frank and Mary were comfortably well-off. While they weren't aggressive about saving, they do have enough to meet their basic living expenses during their retirement years. However, now that they're on a fixed income, they continually snipe at each other. Mary knows when it started: about a year ago when they realized that they could not afford to join two other couples on a vacation in Mexico.





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Frank previously prided himself on earning enough money to enable Mary to spend freely. Now secretly ashamed that he no longer has his earning power, he blames their current limitations on those years of Mary's spending. Mary used to feel loved and worthwhile when she could spend whatever she wanted. Now secretly missing that former ego boost, she blames Frank for not having invested more of their income.

Frank and Mary need to take joint responsibility for earlier financial decisions and stop thinking that blame will somehow remedy their current situation. They also need to resist comparing themselves with others who have more and instead focus on what they do have.

It's true Frank and Mary may not bask in the sun of Cancun, but they have albums full of wonderful family vacation photos. They have warm memories of the joy on their children's faces at receiving special birthday and Christmas gifts. And in their children's adult lives they see the fruits of earlier investments in music lessons and sports activities.

A negative focus on the past can impede a couple's ability to work together on current financial decisions. Should they keep their home or exchange it for the more social setting of a condo or retirement community? How much of their income do they want for themselves, and how much do they hope to leave to their children or to charitable causes? Unless they can let go of resentment and blame, they won't be able to move on peacefully and productively with the rest of their lives.





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Marital Investment Tips

Learning to listen to and respect your mate's money perspective is one way to invest in a valuable commodity—your marriage. Here are five ways to avoid the places where many couples flounder.

Without self-criticism or self-justification, identify your own relationship with money. What does money mean to you? Does it make you feel powerful, anxious, guilty, loved, responsible or secure? What assumptions and values about money did you develop while you were growing up?

Avoid labeling your spouse's attitudes as right or wrong. Try to understand one another's money history. Listen for the hurts, fears, wishes and hopes that get funneled into money. Try to empathize rather than criticize. Honoring each other's needs can help you respectfully negotiate your financial decisions. Remember, respect breeds trust.

Learn from each other. Temporarily suspend your own beliefs and see what your spouse has to teach you. A saver can learn a new kind of security when stretched by a spouse who exchanges money for present enjoyment, or who finds satisfaction in giving.

Together, list your priorities. What is valuable to you? Identify the top priorities you share and what this means for your budget. In my husband's family, the adventure of traveling around the United States was a high priority, and their budget was geared toward that. They did without some things, but family gatherings today are enlivened by stories of being "chased down a mountain by a snowstorm" and the potholes on the old Alaska Highway.





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Get sound advice. Some conflicts over money come from simply not being aware of your options. Ask someone you trust to refer you to a qualified financial advisor who will respect your particular priorities.

Beverly J. Burch, M.A., is a psychotherapist practicing in the Chicago area, where she lives with her husband and two daughters.

This article first appeared in the Spring 1997 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

Reflect

- *What is your view on money? Are you a spender or a saver? What is your fiancé(e)'s view of money? What about your families' views? Be honest and open with one another.*
- *Money is said to be the #1 issue that married couples argue about. Why do you think this issue creates so much tension? What healthy patterns regarding money can you set in place now to help you in your early years of marriage?*
- *In the section titled, "Marital Investment Tips," which tip would you consider a strength in your relationship? Which would you consider to be a weakness? How can you continue to grow in your strengths, while seeking to strengthen your weaknesses?*



Additional Resources



Communication: Key to Your Marriage, Revised and Updated Edition by H. Norman Wright (Gospel Light, 2000; \$9.99) Does it sometimes seem that you and your spouse are speaking different languages? Wright's bestselling book helps you really understand one another. Now updated and revised, it's packed with practical advice for reducing marital conflict, managing anger, building your partner's self-esteem, and more. Ideal for engaged and married couples, as well as pastors and counselors.

Getting Ready for the Wedding: All You Need to Know Before You Say I Do by Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan, 1998; \$7.99) How do we know when we're ready for marriage? What's the secret to having a great engagement? How can we get married without drowning in debt? Where better to turn for answers than those who have gone before—experts in the areas of marriage, relationships, and finance, who know from experience what it takes to make the days leading up to the wedding (and the years that follow) a success.



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Growing Together: Building a Marriage that Lasts

(DVD and Study Guide) by Walter Wangerin, Jr.

(Paraclete Press, 2003; \$45.99) Whether newly married or celebrating a 50th wedding anniversary, couples often question whether their relationship is strong, lasting, and fulfilling. In this book, Walter Wangerin, Jr. gives a practical and thought-provoking perspective on helping couples craft a loving and enduring marriage. Through sharing honestly from his own marital journey, Wangerin enlightens and challenges married couples and gives them ways to achieve a relationship that grows and lasts. Has a running time of 75 minutes and includes a study guide.

The Healthy Marriage Handbook by the editors of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (Broadman & Holman, 1999; \$11.99) Get all your relationship questions answered by the top Christian experts—without spending a dime for an appointment! Hybels, Swindoll, Yancey, and the Parrotts are just a few of the trusted authors who've pooled their wisdom to offer advice on communication, your sex life, parenting, finances, intimacy, resolving conflict, and more.

Preparing for Marriage by Dennis Rainey (Gospel Light, 1997; \$11.99) Congratulations on your engagement! As you dive into the ocean of details concerning the wedding don't forget to spend time *Preparing for Marriage*. In this incredibly helpful book, Dennis Rainey will guide you through six sessions and five special projects that will help you to lay a solid foundation for a Christian marriage. His and Her copies are a must!





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Preparing for Marriage God's Way by Dr. Wayne Mack (Hensley Publishing, 2001; \$12.99) What's the best wedding gift couples can give themselves? A solid foundation for a satisfying, God-honoring union. Designed to be used by individual couples or groups, Mack's marriage manual helps you discover your prospective spouse's unknown personality traits, cope with different backgrounds, resolve conflicts, deal with in-laws, understand God's role in a happy marriage.

Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts by Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan, 1995; \$14.99) More than two million couples will marry this year and nearly half will eventually divorce. The Parrotts say that husbands and wives need to identify their marital stumbling blocks before they trip over them. This encouraging guide asks engaged and newlywed couples seven important questions that will help uncover and deal with potential problems-and give their marriage the best possible beginning.

Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts, Revised, Unabridged CD: Seven Questions to Ask Before and After You Marry (Compact Disc) by Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan, 2006; \$14.99) This best-selling resource for engaged and newlywed couples is now expanded and updated after ten years of feedback and research! Relationship experts Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott offer seven time-tested questions to help couples uncover the most important misbeliefs of marriage, learn to communicate with instant understanding, discover the secret to reducing and resolving conflict, master the skills of money management, get their sex life off to a





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great start, understand three essential ingredients to lasting love and discover the importance of becoming "soul mates," Unabridged, four hours.

A Simple Wedding: A Faith-Filled Guide to Enjoying a Stress-Free Wedding by Sharon Hanby-Robie (Guideposts Books, 2007; \$12.99) Let professional design expert Sharon Hanby-Robie help you create the wedding celebration of your dreams. Find out how to invite God's blessing over your preparations, create a theme that reflects your personal style, revisit old traditions to create new ones of your own, make your hardest decisions by thinking ten years down the road, and more.

Walking Together: Building a Marriage in a Fallen World by Jack and Cynthia Heald (Nav Press, 2000; \$5.99) Sharing their own stories and advice from over 40 years of marriage, the Healds explore 12 biblical ways to strengthen and improve your marriage, including ministering to each other, building together, honoring each other, gracious communication, honesty, lifelong commitment, and more. Great for learning together in a group or as an individual couple.



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