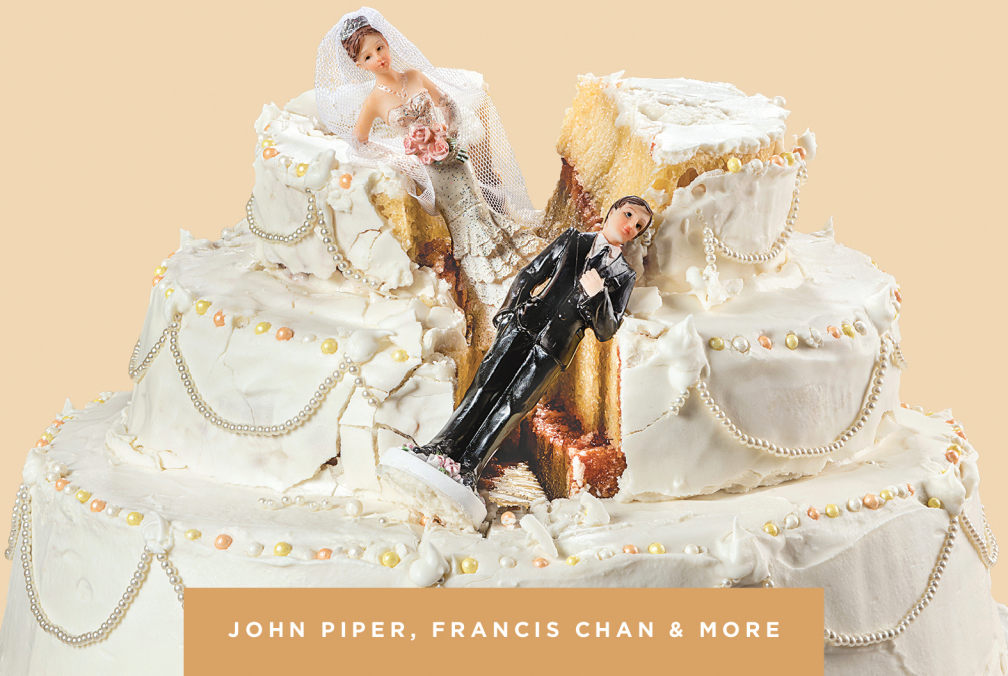


# Happily Ever After

FINDING GRACE IN THE

MESSES OF MARRIAGE

30 DEVOTIONS FOR COUPLES



JOHN PIPER, FRANCIS CHAN & MORE



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Messes of Marriage

30

DEVOTIONS

FOR

COUPLES

*Happily Ever After: Finding Grace in the Messes of Marriage*

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# Preface

*Once upon a time . . .*

Perhaps you felt like that's how *your* relationship was starting. You met and began talking, spending time together, learning about each other. You fell in love and were engaged. Maybe even the wedding planning and ceremony all went great. And many a couple—though not all—have had their joy-filled, storybook honeymoon.

But if you've been married longer than a week or two, you know how the hard realities of life in a fallen age can come crashing in. Marriage between sinners does have its messes—not just troubles outside your marriage to navigate together, but messes created *in* your marriage, by you and your spouse. You may have had your season of “once upon a time,” but soon you realize that *this* marriage, in *this* world, is not yet your “happily ever after.”

We want to help. We believe that God designed marriage not primarily as an obstacle, a trial to be endured though clenched teeth, but as a pointer and springboard to your greatest joy. Yes, rich joys can be tasted in this life, but the greatest joys are still to come. God didn't design marriage to be your storybook ending, but a fresh beginning, to help get you ready for the true “happily ever after” when together we see our great Bridegroom face to face.

You may have noticed that marriage is a hotly contested topic today. Not only are many forces aggressively trying to redefine its very essence, but the complexities of life in the twenty-first century add stresses and strains that push countless couples to the breaking point. It may be more important than ever to revisit what God has clearly revealed about marriage. If we're to have any strong hopes that marriage may actually help our journey through this fallen world—rather than make it all the more treacherous—we desperately need to know what the designer of marriage himself has to say about this unique and uniquely significant institution.

In the pages ahead, we have compiled thirty brief daily readings for you and your spouse to go through together. We've chosen these especially with newlywed and younger couples in mind, but the content is timeless and we hope many veteran couples, and even engaged couples, may find this material inspiring and appropriately challenging.

These pages understandably include much emphasis on the things that make marriage unique: the God-ordained context for sexual expression, the particular roles God has assigned to husbands and wives, and the particular challenges that typically crop up in a relationship of such multi-layered intimacy. And we've tried to cover a breadth of subjects—from sexuality, to husband-and-wife dynamics, to conflict resolution, to growing in holiness. Also, in several places we have tried to create a certain topical progression from one day to another where that seems beneficial.

That said, we recognize that no series of short devotionals can cover all the bases, and lay out all the implica-

tions, of the many profound passages of Scripture relating to marriage. After all, marriage is a special institution in God's kingdom, yet at the same time a means to the larger end of glorifying our Creator and Savior by putting the beauty of Christ and his church on display before a watching world. We would not want these brief readings to replace a larger, more thorough study of marriage, but serve as an inspiring and clarifying supplement. Of the many good marriage texts, we'd recommend John Piper's *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*, and also encourage you to browse [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org) for articles, sermons, and more.

In an effort to try to get you and your spouse moving in the direction of practical application, each devotional includes a small section called "Talk about It" to spark discussion and action ideas for you to enjoy with your partner.

May God be pleased to make these readings powerful in your marriage, as you seek to follow Jesus together and serve each other toward the great "happily ever after" that marriage is designed to anticipate.



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# 1

## The Goal of Marriage Is Not Marriage

FRANCIS CHAN

*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.*

*—1 Corinthians 9:24*

Because divorce runs so rampant even in the church, it makes sense that we tend to overcompensate by emphasizing marriage more than Scripture does. But by doing so, we may be hurting marriages rather than helping them.

Couples can all too easily become self-centered, rather than mission-focused. Singles who once radically served Jesus may now spend their days merely improving and enjoying their marriage. Other couples may quar-

rel incessantly and spend their days in counseling and despair. Either way, they become virtually worthless for kingdom purposes.

It doesn't have to be this way. This is why Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 7: "I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:35).

The goal is "undivided devotion to the Lord." Meditate on those words. Remember that the Bible is not a book about marriage; it is a book about God. The best thing we can do with our brief lives is to devote ourselves to him and his mission. This is the goal. And marriage can actually help us achieve this goal. That's why Paul encourages marriage for those who are tempted sexually. A healthy marriage helps to prevent temptations that would destroy our effectiveness. But remember that whether married or single, the goal is to be completely devoted to God. Marriage can be used as a means of improving our devotion to Jesus. Let's not get it backwards and think of him as the means of improving our marriages.

We don't have time to fight, nor to settle down. We are in pursuit of a prize (1 Cor. 9:24-27). We are trying to make as many disciples as possible (Matt. 28:18-20), at as much depth as possible. There will be plenty of time to celebrate after we cross the finish line. For now, we just keep running.

### Talk about It

Have you observed what seems to be an overemphasis on marriage in the church? Discuss with your spouse how

valuing marriage too highly will actually lead to hurting your marriage rather than helping it.



# 3

## Serpents, Seeds, and a Savior

NANCY DEMOSS WOLGEMUTH

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other  
beast of the field that the LORD God had made.  
He said to the woman, "Did God actually say,  
'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"*  
—Genesis 3:1

I landed in Genesis 3 seven weeks to the day after my recent marriage. We are still very much newlyweds. Very much in love. Still amazed at what God has brought to pass. Still in awe of the gift God has given us in each other. Still enthralled by and exploring the wonder of what it is to be "one flesh."

And already aware of the presence of the serpent in our marriage. An intruder who knows better than most what God intends for our marriage to be—one who despises the One who joined us together and hates the Story our marriage is meant to tell.

This villain, disguised in a cloak of light, posturing as a voice of reason and rightness, comes to me in unguarded moments. He comes to us in the sweet garden of our newfound love and plants in the soil of my mind seeds of doubt about things God has revealed to be true; conjures up fears that my Creator may not have my best interests at heart; beckons me to exalt my will over God's, to imagine that my way is superior to his, and to strike out independently of my God and my groom.

I recognize the serpent's subtle but nefarious influence:

- when being heard and understood matters more to me than listening and being understanding
- when being proven right is of greater concern to me than being humble
- when I assume the best about myself and less than the best about my precious Adam
- when I magnify my husband's shortcomings in my mind, while making allowances for (or being oblivious to) my own
- when I fancy being the kind of wife I have often challenged others to be, apart from a daily, moment-by-moment infusion of his supernatural, enabling grace
- when my needs and plans and priorities feel more pressing to me than those of my husband

- when being seen and known feels scary and confining
- when working at two-becoming-one seems like more effort than I want to give at the moment
- when I try to control my man or the outcome of a conversation or decision
- when I wrest the staff from my shepherd's hands

Genesis 3 reminds me that none of this should come as a surprise—that I am not the first bride to hear and to heed the serpent's siren, that his tactics were first tried on newlyweds, that he aims to separate what God has joined together.

It reminds me that pain and alienation and broken promises are the fruit of trusting the serpent rather than the One who made and married my mate and me.

It also reminds me that no sooner had that first bride succumbed to the serpent's sound than another seed was sown—sown by a God who pursued the wandering woman's heart with infinite mercy and grace, the seed of the gospel, of promises made and kept, promises of a bruised Seed who would one day rise up to crush the serpent's head.

It reminds me that my hope and the well-being of our marriage do not rest in my husband's strength or mine, or in our determined efforts to do this well. Our hope is in that holy Seed, wounded for us, who took our shame as his own, gave himself up for us, and clothed our nakedness with garments of his own righteousness, acquired by the shedding of his blood.

This Savior will enable us to hold fast to one another, to love each other deeply, selflessly, and faithfully, to live

as one flesh, to humbly, joyfully fulfill our God-given responsibilities in this marriage, to escape the serpent's entreaties, to walk together in the light with our Maker, to be forgiven when we fall, and to join him in overcoming the serpent's evil designs.

### Talk about It

Affirm your spouse for the ways he or she reflects God's good purposes for your marriage. What patterns of joyful obedience do you see? How, by God's grace, have you grown together?

## 5

# Sex Is for Believers

JOHN PIPER

*Everything created by God is good, and nothing is  
to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for  
it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.*

—1 Timothy 4:4–5

God designed the pleasures of sex for the enjoyment of Christians. We might lose sight of this, since Hollywood has ripped the curtains off the sacred marriage bed and turned a luxuriant, holy pleasure into a cheap spectator sport. We might be tempted to think that, since sex is so sinfully misused and so universally undermining to the all-satisfying beauty of Christ's holiness, maybe we Christians should have nothing to do with it.

Paul says the opposite. It is the world that has stolen what belongs to believers. Sex belongs to Christians. Because sex belongs to God. God created it “to be received

with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth" (1 Tim. 4:3).

If it is used by those who do not believe and know the truth, it is prostituted. They have exchanged the glory of God for images (Rom. 1:23). They have torn sex from its God-appointed place in the orbit of marriage. But they do not know what they are doing, and apart from God's intervening, saving grace, the price they will pay in this life and the next is incalculable.

The pleasures of sex are meant for believers. They are designed for their greatest expression by the children of God. He saves his richest gifts for his children. And as we enjoy his gift of sex, we say, by our covenant faithfulness to our spouse, that God is greater than sex. And the pleasures of sex are themselves an overflow of God's own goodness. This pleasure is less than what we will know fully in him at his right hand. And in it, we taste something of his very exquisiteness.

When the preciousness and pleasures of Christ are supreme, all dimensions of sex, including *experiencing* pleasure, *seeking* pleasure, *giving* pleasure, and *abstinence from* pleasure, will all find their biblical and Christ-exalting expression.

Everything God made is good. Everything is for the sake of worship and love. And this is true both in the feasting and the fasting. In the sexual union and in abstinence. Sex is made for the glory of Christ—for the Christ-exalting glory of covenant-keeping faithfulness in marriage, and for the glory of Christ-exalting chastity in singleness. It is always good. Sex is always an occasion to show that the Giver of sex is better than sex.

### Talk about It

Discuss the extent to which the world's view of sex has influenced your own. How should knowing that "sex is for believers" affect the way you think and feel about sex?



## 6

# Marital Intimacy Is More Than Sex

JOSH SQUIRES

*Above all, keep loving one another earnestly.*

*—1 Peter 4:8*

Usually when husbands and wives begin to feel disconnected from one another, the root issue is intimacy. One of the keys to reconnecting is understanding that intimacy is multi-faceted. In fact, there are at least five different types of intimacy. Only when we keep all five functioning can we have marriages that feel profoundly connected.

### 1. Spiritual Intimacy

This is the hub from which all other intimacy types emerge. If spiritual intimacy is high, the other types of intimacy will have some natural resiliency. Spiritual intimacy comes from being in God's word together, praying for one another, and worshiping together. The word of God is the nourishment of our souls (Matt. 4:4; Deut. 8:3). When we are on the same spiritual diet, we can expect to grow in similar ways and therefore grow together—not separately.

### 2. Recreational Intimacy

This bond is created and strengthened by sharing recreational activities, from crosswords to hang-gliding. This sort of intimacy tends to be highest early in the relationship when both spouses are willing to try things outside their comfort zone just to be in each other's presence. As presence becomes more the norm—and as life gets more complicated with jobs, kids, and more—opportunities for recreational activities plummet, and the cost can skyrocket. Nonetheless, God has made us to enjoy life's activities—especially with our spouses (Eccles. 9:9)—and our marriages need the ability to laugh and play together if they are to endure the times of tears and toil.

### 3. Intellectual Intimacy

Husbands and wives also connect by discussing shared topics of interest, whether casually or seriously. The cord of relationship is reinforced when you exercise mentally

with your spouse. Movies, politics, cooking—any subject of shared interest is fair game.

Similar to recreational intimacy, intellectual intimacy tends to be at its highest at the beginning of a relationship. As time passes, husbands and wives often assume they know how their spouse thinks on nearly every issue. While they may often be right, it's the details that matter, and there is almost always some new angle to explore. The rewards are well worth it.

#### 4. Physical Intimacy

This is what “intimacy” means to many people, but the subject here is not just sex. A hug, cuddling on the couch, and holding hands definitely count. In fact, one of the biggest complaints for wives is that the husband can take any physical touch as a sign that she wants sexual intimacy, when sometimes she just needs to cuddle.

Of all the types of intimacy, this one pays the biggest dividends for men. Men typically feel the most connected when physical intimacy (and especially sexual physical intimacy) is highest. This is no surprise, as God instructs man to delight in these activities with his wife (Prov. 5:18–19).

#### 5. Emotional Intimacy

Where intellectual intimacy discusses topics and is usually dominated by thoughts, emotional intimacy discusses experience and is usually dominated by feelings. Because men are typically more limited in their emotional vocabulary and less comfortable with emotionally laden speech

than their wives, we can misunderstand our wives when they speak. We imagine she wants an exchange of ideas, when what she really wants is someone to identify with her feelings.

Regardless of any limitations, men are called to shepherd their wives' hearts just as much as women are called to shepherd their husband's sexuality. Emotional intimacy is generally where women feel most connected. There is a reason that the first thing the then-sinless Adam did when he first saw Eve was not get her into bed; instead, he uttered the world's first love poem (Gen. 2:23).

### Good Cycles and Bad

When men feel disconnected, they often try to get physical intimacy via the route of recreational intimacy (let's do something fun together and maybe we will end up in bed). When women feel disconnected, they often try to get emotional intimacy via the route of intellectual intimacy (let's talk about something and maybe we will end up sharing our feelings).

Here couples can easily find themselves in cycles of isolation, as they focus more on getting than on giving. This is where the Christian commitment to love one another, even when it hurts (John 13:34–35; Gal. 5:13; 6:2; Eph. 4:2, 32; 1 Pet. 4:8–10), can help the couple move from cycles of isolation to cycles of intimacy as they lovingly put each other's needs before their own.

Pursuing connection with one another helps ground us in the intimate love of the one in whom our connection is eternal and unfailing: God himself.

### Talk about It

Do you identify with the typical patterns of pursuing intimacy (men: recreational in pursuit of sexual; women: intellectual in pursuit of emotional)? Discuss ways in which you feel loved, and ask how you can do a better job of communicating love to your spouse.



## 12

# Do You Expect Your Marriage to Be Easy?

ADRIEN SEGAL

*God shows his love for us in that while we  
were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

*—Romans 5:8*

When we get married, most of us believe deep down that while lots of marriages are really hard, ours will be different. Sure, there may be hard things here and there, but when we lock arms with our soul mate, the mountains will melt under our feet.

Adam seemed to feel this way—and it's understandable before the entrance of sin into the world. When he first saw the woman God had created to be his companion, he could not contain his joy: "This at last is bone of

my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). Somewhere deep inside, Adam appreciated that the woman, being formed by God from Adam's own flesh to be his helper, would meet needs of companionship, support, and pleasure like nothing else God had created. And she would, for God saw that it was "not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18), and in his compassion, God created the perfect mate for Adam.

Adam's expectations were as high as they could be on that first day, for he had not yet been corrupted by sin and seen its consequences. But his understandable, even righteous, naiveté did not keep him from the harsh realities to come. The pretty picture of friendship and intimacy tragically and violently falls apart in Genesis 3.

Did God make a mistake? Did he not see that this woman's weakness in judgment would lead mankind into destruction? Did he not see that the marriage between Adam and Eve would be harder than they could have ever imagined? They literally gave up paradise to struggle for every mouthful of food.

No marriage has ever been easy. The amazing thing is that we always seem to expect it will be for us.

### Love in a Land of Easy

Of course, marriage is not the problem. Sin is the problem. Sin makes every marriage hard.

Apparently, then, God didn't create marriage to make life easy. He created it to unfold beauty, depth, strength, and love that could never be discovered in a land of "easy." God created marriage to help us know what real love looks like.

## The Best Marriage and Worst Bride

We, the church, have the unspeakable privilege of being the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25; Rev. 19:7–9). In this marriage, we see love like Hosea’s—lavishly poured on the bride by her groom, even when she scorns him, reviles him, and seeks her pleasure in others (Hos. 2:14–23).

We see a love that never gives up, no matter how often the bride runs to lesser gods to seek joy that can only be found in the true Bridegroom (Rom. 8:38–39). We see that Groom’s breathtaking, unexplainable sacrificial love unto death in order to keep and preserve a bride—a bride who daily seems to consider that gift less important than the comparatively insignificant earthly needs she expects him to fill today (Rom. 5:8; Isa. 53:1–12).

This is not a pretty picture. But paradoxically, it is a stunningly beautiful one. The harder God is willing to fight to demonstrate his love, the more beautiful it becomes.

## Why God Gave You Marriage

Marriage—and all very hard things we experience in this life—are a means God has devised to help us drink deeply of the immeasurable glory of genuine love. We would never see this beauty and depth strolling down an easy road. Persistent, striving, overcoming effort fueled by the sustaining power of our Creator God ultimately yields deep joy and satisfaction that selfish, spoiling, “easy” love would never experience or display. The best picture we have of this is the cross. Praise God that Jesus didn’t expect his marriage to his bride to be easy. But because he

was faithful in the hardest, ugliest marriage ever, we may now enjoy pleasures forevermore.

In marriage, God calls you to display the love that God has shown you to the precious person made in his image that he has joined you to. God hasn't encouraged you to seek all your satisfaction from your spouse—only God can be the source of your satisfaction. But God has called you to show your spouse and others what *God's* love looks like. Not love between sinless people, but grace-filled, patient, and forgiving love. Love like Christ's. What a high and holy calling. Husbands and wives who understand this will find that the hardest things they endure together are indeed some of the most beautiful and sanctifying.

### Talk about It

Do you believe your marriage will “be different,” that others may have difficulty, but yours will be easy? Talk honestly about how your marriage is proving different than you expected.





Everyone wants to be happy. Our website was born and built for happiness. We want people everywhere to understand and embrace the truth that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. We've collected more than thirty years of John Piper's speaking and writing, including translations into more than forty languages. We also provide a daily stream of new written, audio, and video resources to help you find truth, purpose, and satisfaction that never end. And it's all available free of charge, thanks to the generosity of people who've been blessed by the ministry.

If you want more resources for true happiness, or if you want to learn more about our work at Desiring God, we invite you to visit us at [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org).

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