

CHAPTER 1

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Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." . . . So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

*"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken."*

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

(Genesis 2:18, 21-25)

June 5, 1982—this was the day my wife, LaVon, and I were married. It was one week after my high school graduation. We had had one session of premarital counseling. We both came from households that had experienced divorce. We definitely were not prepared for marriage.

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I recall one family member announcing to me the day before the wedding that our marriage “would never last,” and I remember having the sinking feeling that perhaps this person was right.

Following our wedding, LaVon and I loaded up a rental trailer with our “garage sale” furniture and wedding presents and moved five hours away to begin college and our new life together. On the way the muffler fell off the car—it felt a bit like an omen. Since we had a total of \$200 in our bank account, that mishap was particularly disconcerting! Later that day we unloaded the trailer and settled into our little apartment with mixed feelings of excitement and fear.

In the years since, LaVon and I have had our ups and downs—times of falling in and falling out of love. We have faced temptations, tragedies, and challenges to our marriage. And we have grown up; we are not the same people we were in 1982. But through the years, and despite the challenges, our love has grown deeper than we ever imagined. It is, after our faith, the richest part of our lives.

My aim in writing this book is to help you discover some of the keys to developing a healthy, satisfying, and successful marriage. I will draw upon insights gleaned from surveys of over two thousand single and married persons in my congregation; experiences shared by couples I interviewed in preparation for this book, including a very special group of people who have been married for more than fifty years; and reflections based upon fifteen years of counseling individuals and couples. I will incorporate some of the insights from excellent books by others who have written on the subject. I will also share some of my own personal experiences in marriage. But finally, and most importantly, in each chapter I will lift up insights from the Bible and resources

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from the Christian faith that are both practical and helpful as you seek to make love last a lifetime.

I have written this book not only for married couples but also for singles who anticipate being married at some time in their lives. If you are single, this book can equip and prepare you to have a successful relationship. If you are married, this book is aimed at helping you grow in your relationship with your spouse so that you can experience all that God intends marriage to be.

Love, marriage, and sex are issues that are important to God, as evidenced by the fact that the Bible has so much to say about them. One of the first stories in the Bible is about marriage and the relationship between a man and a woman—a story we will examine in this chapter. Throughout the Law of Moses, issues of marriage and sexuality come up again and again. One entire book of the Bible is devoted to romantic love: The Song of Solomon, also known as The Song of Songs. The prophets and the writers of Proverbs address the topics of love, marriage, and sex on numerous occasions.

Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding, likens himself to a bridegroom, uses marriage as the theme of a parable, and offers a wide variety of teachings that are directly applicable to marriage. The apostle Paul calls marriage a “mystery” that portrays the love of Christ for the church. Paul frequently addresses issues of how men and women are meant to relate to each other, and he even writes frankly about matters of sexual intimacy within marriage. Throughout Scripture, God’s relationship first with Israel and then with the church is likened to a husband’s relationship with his bride.

It is not only appropriate, it is incumbent upon the church to address these issues. The Bible has answers to our ques-

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tions about healthy and lasting relationships. We need to get that message out! If the church is not doing its job in teaching about love, marriage, and sex, where will people go to learn about these things? Television? Hollywood? Romance novels? Women's and men's magazines? The church's silence on these issues is at least in part to blame for the state of marriage in our society. Divorce continues to be a likely prospect for many who marry; and, among those who do not get divorced, many fail to experience the joy God intended people to have in marriage.

Finally, an underlying premise of this book is that love, marriage, and sex are all God's idea. God designed us and designed these things as gifts to us. Only in exploring biblical perspectives on these issues can we hope to experience the blessings that these three gifts—love, marriage, and sex—are meant to hold for us. God created us to have successful relationships with others, and the Scriptures offer us guidance regarding God's plan for this part of our lives.

As we begin this journey together, we will seek to learn all that we can about relationships between men and women. We will have the benefit of learning from others, exploring research, and analyzing the results of nearly 2,500 surveys filled out and returned by men and women in my congregation. In addition, I encourage you to open your Bible and listen for its truths. Read for yourself the passages of Scripture listed at the beginning of the chapters in this book and meditate on what they say to you. Carefully read and reflect on the questions and suggestions at the end of each chapter. Whether you are a deeply committed Christian or just someone who wants to have better relationships, this study could mark the beginning of discoveries that could change your life.

Why Is Marriage So Hard?

Let's begin by recognizing that having a successful relationship with a member of the opposite sex is not easy! The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Center for Health Statistics recently released divorce statistics based upon a national study of 10,847 women. The study revealed that 43 percent of all marriages end in separation or divorce within the first 15 years.¹ Another sign of the challenge of building a successful relationship is the age at which people are marrying, which has risen dramatically in the last decade.² In addition, the number of persons living together outside marriage rose by 72 percent in the 1990s,³ indicative, in many cases, of the fear of committing to marriage without trying things out first.

Clearly there is a challenge to making love last a lifetime. One of the factors in this struggle is that men and women are quite different. We see the world differently, hear things differently, and approach life differently.

Not long ago I conducted a lighthearted and informal survey of my staff. I e-mailed them and invited the women to tell me about their frustrations with men, and I invited the men to tell me about their frustrations with women. Soon the e-mails were flying into my office. Here is a bit of what the women said:

The Top 10 Things Men Do That Frustrate Women

10. Men think they know everything and treat women as if they don't know anything.
9. Sports!

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8. Men lack creativity when buying gifts; they need to be given hints, and then they don't get the hints!
7. Men never clean up after themselves.
6. Men don't follow instructions.
5. Men are always "ready for action."
4. Men don't notice when things need to be done.
3. Men can never find anything, even when it's right in front of their face.
2. Men belch and then smile as if it were a great treat for all those around them.

And the number-one thing these women said was frustrating about men:

1. MEN DON'T LISTEN!!!

Now, there are men among my staff; but most of them refused to respond—which may have had something to do with men's inability to follow instructions, as noted above! While I had seventy responses from women, I had only sixteen from men. One man wrote, "Nothing frustrates me about women," but then he went on to list several things that would frustrate him if anything did frustrate him! Here is a summary of the men's responses:

The Top 10 Things Women Do That Frustrate Men

10. Women need to talk about everything!
9. Women think they know what you're thinking.
8. Women think you should know what they're thinking!
7. Women focus on the minutia and miss the big picture.
6. Shoes!

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5. Women are utterly indecisive.
4. Women are terrible drivers.
3. Women say, “This sale saved us so much money,” when, had there not been a sale, they wouldn’t have spent any money!
2. Gossip, gossip, gossip.

And the number-one thing about women that drives men crazy:

1. The assumptions and stereotypes women have about men.

Of course, most of the men were careful to say that none of these things was true of their own wives or significant others!

Although my survey was in no way definitive, it clearly indicated that both men and women have their issues. These issues arise from the fact that God created us to be very different from each other, and not just anatomically. Our brains are different. Our biochemistry is different. Our ways of seeing the world are different. The title of John Gray’s best-selling book expresses it well: *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*.

Learning how to cope with and appreciate these differences goes a long way toward improving relationships. But there is one other reality that exacerbates the problems raised by our differences: our human condition.

By nature we desperately want to be loved and to be in relationship with others; but we also struggle with our own selfishness, self-centeredness, pettiness, and hardheartedness. We struggle with temptation, and we wrestle with our own desires. These are spiritual issues, and they are common to us all.

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That is why we cannot have the very best in our marriages or relationships without including spiritual perspectives. We need the wisdom of God as found in the Bible. So, as we begin our study, let's turn to the biblical account of the very first wedding, the story of Adam and Eve as told beginning in the second chapter of Genesis.

A Brief Look at God's Big Idea

We discover in Genesis that God has created the first human being, in the form of a man. The story of Creation is told in a wonderful, simple, childlike way. God creates the man and places him in the midst of paradise, providing for him all the most wonderful things to eat and drink and the most amazing things to see. God is even personally present to Adam.

Yet God, watching this human being over time, notices that the man has a need that even God cannot fulfill. The man is alone. So, the story goes, God creates all the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. But even though the garden is now filled with creatures and activity and noise, the man is still alone, the only one of his kind. So God determines to make for him a companion and helper so he will not be alone.

Now, God could do that simply by replicating the man. Certainly God could devise some form of nonsexual reproduction for populating the world with people. But can you imagine a world inhabited only by men? There would be no minds to read. We would all speak in grunts and incomplete sentences. There would be bratwursts and burgers and beer, baseball and basketball and football all year long. The concept of making one's bed would

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be unheard of. And we would have disposable clothes—wear them until they stand up by themselves and then throw them away!

But God decides that is not such a good idea. Instead, God determines that the man needs a woman, a creature very much the same as man and yet mysteriously, mad-deningly, wonderfully different. So God creates the new and improved model of the human being: a woman! When God brings the woman to him, the man says, “This at last is what I’ve been longing for; she is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone.” Then the two embrace and become one flesh, and marriage is born. And they are naked, but there is no shame in this.

Now let’s examine the four key lessons that this story has to offer us about the relationship between men and women, lessons we will study in more detail in future chapters.

1. *God* created men and women to be different. *God* designed those differences. As such they are a gift, not a curse. They are to be valued and understood, not hated and despised. Somehow our differences are essential to God’s plan.

2. Men and women *need* each other. I do not mean that we all need to be married. In fact, the New Testament says that the highest calling and the preferred lifestyle for a Christian is singleness in which one is free to devote one’s whole life and time to service for Christ. But even in singleness we need the opposite sex. We need friendships with members of the opposite sex. We need their help. We need the uniqueness and giftedness of the opposite sex. That is why, in my denomination, we welcome male and female pastors—because in the

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pastoral ministry, as elsewhere, we are incomplete until both men and women are represented. It is also the reason we need more women in politics and business and why we are blessed when men go into the fields of nursing and education alongside women.

3. Sex and sexuality were meant to be beautiful. They were designed by God as a good part of creation. We see this in the last line of our Scripture passage: “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.”

4. Finally, and most importantly, note that the union of a man and woman—marriage—was designed by God as the solution to a problem. The problem was that the first human was alone and needed companionship, and he was unable to live as God intended without a partner. God designed Adam and Eve to be helpers and companions for each other . . . which leads us to the most important point for you to remember, and the basic idea behind this book.

Marriage Is a Calling From God

One deep, spiritual truth on this topic is so important that it cannot be overemphasized. In fact, it forms the premise of this entire book: Marriage is a *calling* from God. God designed marriage as a way of meeting the basic needs of human beings—needs for companionship and help. The basic orientation of marriage is serving, giving, and sacrificing.

Choosing to marry is choosing to answer a calling from God toward the person you are marrying, although you may not always feel like answering that call. To the degree that you remain focused on this mission, you will find joy

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and meaning in your marriage, even when things are not perfect.

I felt a calling from God to be a pastor. I studied, prepared, and finally was ordained by my bishop. There are days when I get frustrated with my job. There are times I do not enjoy it (not many, but a few). I have had thoughts, on occasion, about doing something else. But then I remember my calling; it was God who called me to this work. This was part of God's purpose for my life. My ministry is an act of faithfulness and obedience to God.

And so it is with marriage. Marriage is not simply the next step after falling in love. Marriage is serious business. It is a calling from God—a lifelong mission of service and caring and ministry to another human being—seeking to be, on God's behalf, a companion and helper to another.

When I married LaVon, I accepted God's call to love her, minister to her, and care for her in Christ's name until that day when God calls her, or me, to heaven. There are times when pursuing this calling is rich and rewarding. There are other times when for one or the other of us this calling is maddening, frustrating, and challenging. It is at those times in particular that it is helpful for us to remember that marriage is a calling, a mission from God.

Throughout this book, I will be sharing information with you about marriage, about the Scriptures, about relationships. But information alone is not enough. You need to play your part. I encourage you to make the effort to strengthen those relationships that are most meaningful to you. Ask God to help. You cannot do it alone.

Great marriages do not just happen; they require discipline, sacrifice, and effort. The best marriages are found only when we discover God's purposes, plans, and principles as

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they relate to the relationship between a man and a woman. It is the discovery of these ideas that opens the door to the kind of love that lasts a lifetime.

¹See <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/releases/01news/firstmarr.htm>

²US Census Bureau; see <http://www.census.gov>

³See <http://latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-082001cohabit.story>

Personal Reflection

Individuals

- Read one-to-two chapters of the Song of Solomon each day this week, asking yourself the following questions: What are the various characters feeling in this chapter? What do they do that fosters their love? How can we learn from their example?
- Find one or more ways to affirm and celebrate the differences of your spouse—or, if single, someone special of the opposite sex—for example, do something he or she likes to do; look for the positive side of something you ordinarily consider negative or irritating; offer genuine praise for one of his or her differences; and so forth).
- List all the reasons you need and appreciate your spouse—or, if single, someone special of the opposite sex. Give thanks to God for these gifts *each day this week*.

Couples

- Talk together about those irritations that can build up, leading to resentment and conflict. Agree up front to speak the truth in love and listen to each other without debating or becoming defensive. Commit to pray about these things throughout the week, asking God to change your hearts and attitudes. End by sharing the lists you compiled of the reasons you need and appreciate each other.