

Practical. A conversation starter. A guide. *Marriage Conflict* will teach you how and when to forgive your spouse, how to navigate in-law relationships, how to avoid trying to fix your spouse, and a plethora of other important marriage-related lessons. Through a series of specific, concise, and thoughtful reflections, you will inevitably grow in your communication with your spouse. The format is simple: read, discuss, reflect, and act. You'll love it.

—**Michael Keller**, Lead Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Lincoln Square, New York

In this brief and rich devotional, Steve has given you a set of virtues that can redeem the micro moments that shape the macro state of your marriage. It is biblical, filled with grace, and highly practical. Just what you want and need to strengthen the most important relationship in your life. I would encourage anyone who wants a revived marriage to read and apply the messages of this devotional.

—**Tim S. Lane**, President, Institute for Pastoral Care; Author, *Unstuck: A Nine-Step Journey to Change that Lasts*

Every couple that walks down the aisle faces marriage conflicts, but few of us have the resources to resolve them. In this refreshingly honest and uniquely practical devotional, Steve offers us practical tools for communicating with truth, love, and wisdom. I recommend reading and working through it at least once a year with your spouse. It will bring joy, laughter, and the peace of God to your marriage.

—**Rebekah Lyons**, Author, *Rhythms of Renewal: Trading Stress and Anxiety for a Life of Peace and Purpose* and *You are Free: Be Who You Already Are*

Of all the marriage books I've read, this one has swiftly risen to the top. Writing as both an experienced marriage counselor and

a “marriage practitioner” alongside his lovely wife, Abby, Steve gives valuable wisdom for couples, and from every imaginable angle, to ensure that they can navigate even the hardest parts of marital communication with love. As funny as it sounds, I can’t recommend *Marriage Conflict* enough for those who wish to master conflict in their marriages.

—**Scott Sauls**, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville; Author, *Jesus Outside the Lines* and *A Gentle Answer*

The first sentence of the intro—that’s when I wanted in. I knew I would catch a richer vision for Christlike communication with my wife. After having read it, I realize that I have plenty of reasons to ask for forgiveness from her. I’ve grown up a bit. Hopefully I’ve become a better husband. Steve’s writing is thoughtful, engaging, and biblically rich. My married counselees will love this.

—**Ed Welch**, Counselor and Faculty Member, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation; Author, *When People Are Big and God Is Small*

M A R R I A G E
C O N F L I C T

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

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M A R R I A G E
C O N F L I C T

TALKING AS
TEAMMATES

STEVE HOPPE



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This devotional contains several stories and illustrations, many of which come from marriage counseling sessions. All names and identifying details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

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To my best friend, Abby

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A Word to Couples Reading This Book Together

A STRUGGLING COUPLE decides to take a much-needed Caribbean vacation to rest, relax, and revive their marriage. On the second day, they go scuba diving. As they explore the wonder of God's underwater creation, they see a small wooden box partially covered by a mound of sand on the ocean floor. They dig it up, haul it back to the boat, and open it. To their amazement, it's filled with gold coins. They've found a bona fide treasure chest!

The devotional in your hands is like this couples' treasure chest, only better. It is filled not with *material* riches but with *spiritual* riches. Steve has written a power-packed, heart-convicting, Scripture-saturated, hope-filled devotional for any husband and wife wanting to transform the way that they engage in conflict. By starting with the heart and working outward, this book helps couples

- who are newly married and lack the skills they need to tackle the trials of marriage,
- who have been together for years but have never learned how to communicate well,
- who are living in verbal war zones,
- who want a clear list of dos and don'ts when conflict arises,
- who are discouraged and don't know where else to turn,
- who want to take a "pretty good" marriage and make it stronger,
- who want to train other couples to lovingly engage in conflict,
- who are marriage counselors,
- who need marriage counseling,
- who are not yet married but want to thrive once they do tie the knot,

- who love Jesus and simply want to speak to others in a way that honors him.

If any of these descriptors fit you, then turn the page and start reading. Work through this devotional, day by day, for the coming month.

The beauty of this devotional is that each day offers stand-alone wisdom—individual gold coins—for working through marriage conflict. As you skimmed through the table of contents, I trust that some days stood out more than others. Maybe the two of you are particularly prone to avoiding conflict, exaggerating, or overly correcting each other, for example. After working through the whole devotional, go back to these particular readings and work through them a few more times. You will want to absorb the wisdom, grace, and truth in them.

You don't need to look for a hidden treasure to find riches for your marriage. This devotional is the treasure that you need. Riches abound in its pages. I promise that you'll be blessed, encouraged, and challenged by it. I was. And every couple I've given this devotional to has come back stronger in their communication and more rooted in their faith.

That's enough from me. Now it's time to let Steve speak for himself. Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

INTRODUCTION

A Matter of Life and Death

“YOU’RE GONNA BURN IN HELL for what you just said. You’re a LIAR. You’re a HYPOCRITE. You’re TRASH, and you’ll ALWAYS BE TRASH.”

John shouted these words at his wife Melissa at the tail end of our last marriage counseling session together. He violently slapped the couch, pointed his finger in her face, and stomped his foot as he screamed. When he finished his tirade, he stormed out of the room, slammed the door, and left the building. Without his wife.

That same week I counseled Bill and Sarah—a struggling yet softhearted couple. During the middle of our session, things started getting heated. In an effort to change the relational temperature of the room, I paused the conversation and asked a question: “What do you love about each other?”

Bill looked at me with cynical eyes. He went along with the exercise anyway. “Well . . . [long pause] . . . she’s beautiful, she’s kind . . .”

I stopped him. “No, say it *to her*. And dig deep. No trite clichés. Go.”

He turned and faced Sarah, looked into her eyes, and spoke from his heart.

“You’re beautiful. But you’re not only physically beautiful—your *soul* is beautiful. You genuinely care about people—your family, your friends, strangers at Starbucks . . . *everybody*. You’re a reflection of Jesus—a far better one than I am. You’re a passionate and patient mom. You tirelessly take care of our home. You push me to work hard, encourage me when I succeed, and consistently point me to Christ. In the end, you make me a better person. You’re my best friend. I love you.”

A tear trickled down Sarah's cheek.

Next it was her turn. She collected herself, turned to Bill, and spoke.

"Bill, you're a man after God's own heart. You love him more than anything else in the world. Your character shows it. You're a selfless husband and a far better parent than I am. You endlessly sacrifice for our children. You help them with their homework. You coach their sports teams. You take time every day to teach them about Jesus. You do way more than my father ever did for me. Plus, you're humble, gentle, and funny. You make me laugh constantly. You're my best friend. I love you."

A matching tear fell down Bill's cheek.

Two couples. Two radically different communication dynamics. In the first scene, John was murdering Melissa.

Wait, *murdering*?

Yes. He was metaphorically killing her. Proverbs 18:21 says that "death and life are in the power of the tongue." This means that our words have the power to figuratively slay our spouses or rejuvenate their souls. John was doing the former. He was tearing out Melissa's heart and leaving her in my counseling office to die.

Bill and Sarah, however, were doing the latter. They were offering each other life. Their words were encouraging, edifying, and energizing. After our little exercise, their hearts were revived—beating harder for each other and, more importantly, for Christ.

Sadly, like John and Melissa, when we engage in conflict as married couples, many of us are slowly killing each other with our words rather than infusing life. Abby and I were certainly guilty of this during our first five years of marriage. We interrupted, insulted, and intentionally irritated each other. We were experts at boasting, belittling, and blame-shifting. We focused on the specks in each other's eyes and ignored the logs in our own (Matt. 7:3–5). We murdered each other over and over again with our words.

But at the half-decade mark, we turned a corner. Thanks to a season of robust self-reflection, radical repentance, and regular

marriage counseling (thanks, Ed Welch), we threw down our weapons and began talking as teammates instead of opponents. Our words lost their biting edge. We started listening with intention, complimenting with sincerity, and pointing each other to Jesus as we spoke. We made the decision to offer life—not death—with our words.

My hope is that you will experience a similar shift in your marriage as you read this devotional. I want you to communicate through conflict in a way that will breathe life into each other's hearts. I want you to throw down your weapons and become God's messengers to each other. Spirit-filled messengers.

I want your *entire relationship* to change.

The format of this devotional is straightforward. It consists of thirty-one daily readings containing the following three components:

- a short Bible passage
- a discussion of how the passage addresses a topic related to communication and conflict resolution in marriage
- a set of questions and exercises to spur contemplation and conversation

The goal is to take one month to read this devotional together. Get separate copies. Take notes in the margins. Dig deep into the material on your own and then dig deep together. Think. Meditate. Pray as you read. Talk regularly about what you're reading. Consider holding semi-regular date nights to discuss the readings. Challenge each other. Don't pretend to have it all together. Be honest about yourself and your marriage. You won't benefit from this book unless you're willing to get real.

What if your spouse is unwilling to join you in reading this devotional? Should you read it anyway? Absolutely. You can't control anybody but yourself. And God wants you to handle conflict with your spouse in a healthy and holy manner.

What if you are not a Christian? What if you don't believe in God? What if you think that the Bible is just a piece of historical fiction? Should you still read this devotional? Once again, yes. I trust that your marriage will still benefit tremendously if you dive into its content and apply its principles.

But this devotional isn't for everybody. Who is it *not* for?

- *A spouse looking for quick fixes.* The purpose of this book is not to provide you with rapid-fire solutions to all your unique marriage problems. Instead, its purpose is to teach you gospel-centered principles to help you navigate through these problems in productive and life-giving ways.
- *A spouse playing the blame game.* If you're reading this devotional to prove that your spouse is the reason for your marriage struggles, this devotional isn't for you. The goal here is to work on you, your relationship with God, and your relationship with your spouse—not to shine a spotlight on your spouse's sins and shortcomings.
- *A spouse committed to isolation.* Marriage is meant to be lived out in the context of community—specifically the community of your local church. You will need trusted brothers and sisters in Christ to hold you accountable, encourage you, and challenge you as you work through this devotional. If you want to isolate yourself, this book isn't for you.
- *A spouse being abused.* If you are being abused by your spouse, your first priorities should include removing yourself from the abusive situation, telling the proper authorities, and getting the help that you need. This devotional can wait.

Who, then, is this devotional for?

Everybody else.

Your marriage is the most important human relationship in your life. The stakes are high. You have the ability to carry your spouse to the top of the world or to drive them into the ground

with your words. With that said, I can't think of a better way to get started than by praying for both of you as you learn how to communicate together in the midst of conflict in a gracious and God-glorifying manner . . .

Lord Jesus, may you bless this couple as they read this devotional together. May it lead them to experience healthy and holy communication during the challenging times of marriage. May you draw them closer to each other and closer to you over these thirty-one days. And may you receive all the glory, honor, and praise as you do this.

In Jesus's name I pray. Amen.

MARRIAGE CONFLICT
STARTING POINTS

DAY 1

Dig to the Root

“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matt. 12:34)

“WE HATE EACH OTHER.”

When I asked Bob and Susan what brought them to counseling, this was their response. They were twelve years into their marriage and had been fighting ruthlessly for the last two. Susan referred to them as “ticking time bombs ready to explode.” Their anger had escalated to the point that they were ready to file for divorce. They needed help. Stat.

After one session with the couple, however, I realized that anger wasn’t the root of their problem. It was just a symptom. We needed to dig deeper into their hearts if we were going to save their marriage.

Jesus tells us why. In Matthew 12:34, he says that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” In Matthew 15:19, he says that our thoughts and actions also flow from our hearts. If we are going to change the way that we relate to our spouses, we must start there. We must do the hard work of *heart* work. We must uncover the lies that we believe about God, ourselves, the world, and the devil. We must identify the idols that we are worshipping—the things, people, and feelings that we are functionally elevating above God in value, importance, power, and authority over our lives. We must unearth the sins underneath our sins. We must dig to the roots if we are going to change the fruit.

What was at the root of Bob and Susan’s anger? Pride.

I’ll start with Susan. Two years prior, Bob had lost his job as a high-level Wall Street executive. When he lost his job, Susan lost something as well. She lost face. She lost the ability to impress her Manhattan friends with her husband’s growing list of professional

accomplishments. She lost the opportunity to wow people with the expensive clothes, jewelry, and purses that his old salary had afforded her. She lost her identity as the wife of a corporate superstar. Her ego was deflated, and her rage was her way of punishing Bob for metaphorically letting the air out.

Bob's anger was also rooted in pride. Growing up, he wasn't popular. He wasn't good-looking. He didn't have girlfriends. He didn't have guy friends. He was a nobody. But when he graduated from college and entered the business world, everything changed. His exceptional intelligence and business savvy propelled him up the corporate ladder. People started paying attention to him. He had status and dignity. His career gave him pride. When he lost his job, he lost this pride. In his eyes, he was a nobody once again. This made him angry, and he was taking his anger out on Susan.

Bob and Susan had hearts rooted in pride. That's why they were angry.

Where is *your* heart rooted?

Reflect as a Couple: Have the two of you been using surface-level treatments to address your marriage problems instead of digging into the unhealthy heart conditions underneath them?

Reflect by Yourself: Recall your most recent fight with your spouse. What in your heart was driving your unholy words or behaviors?

Act: When marriage conflict arises and our hearts are rooted in anything but Jesus, we are doomed. Hatred replaces love. Anger replaces compassion. Harshness replaces gentleness. And the list goes on. Confess to each other how you have been rooting your hearts in things other than Christ. Pray together that he would take your hearts and root them in himself.

DAY 2

Check Your Tone

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Gal. 5:22–23)

“LISTEN, MEREDITH . . . I’m sorry. I’m a bad husband and a bad father. I work too much. I travel too much. I don’t spend enough time with the kids. I don’t spend enough time with your family. I slack on chores. I don’t give you the attention that you deserve. I’m really sorry.”

After six years of a roller-coaster marriage and three months of separation, this was Scott’s apology to his wife. Seems like a decent one, right?

Now read it again, but imagine Scott’s tone as angry, agitated, and annoyed—lacking a hint of true regret, remorse, or repentance. Imagine that he wasn’t really sorry. Imagine him apologizing only to avoid being a middle-aged divorcee and a weekend-only dad. That’s how he sounded. His words said “Sorry.” His tone said “Not sorry.” And he couldn’t mask it.

Not surprisingly, Meredith wasn’t fooled. She called his bluff. And when she did, he predictably exploded on her in a fit of rage.

In yesterday’s devotional, we learned that our words flow from our hearts. But the story of Meredith and Scott shows that the *tone* of our words also flows from our hearts—and our tone can be just as deadly or life-giving as our words. Sweet words coupled with a harsh tone can kill. Challenging words coupled with a gentle tone can bring life.

How can your tone become holy? You must be filled with the Holy Spirit. If you are filled with the Spirit, your speech will be laced with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). Out of the abundance of your heart you will speak Christlike, Spirit-filled, fruitful words. You will sound like Jesus.

How do you know if your tone is holy? How can you be sure that your words sound Christlike? Don't ask yourself. Why not? You're probably tone-deaf. Scott certainly was. He thought that he sounded gentle and sincere. He didn't. He sounded bitter because in his heart he *was* bitter. So instead of asking *yourself* if your tone is holy, ask two other people. First, ask your spouse. Trust me—they can hear your tone with crystal clarity. Second, ask God. Ask him to shine a light on your heart to expose any impurity that is causing you to speak with an unloving tone.

Words matter. But tone matters too.

Maybe more.

Reflect as a Couple: What are the most common ungodly tones that you hear in each other's voices? Tones of condescension? Mockery? Irritation? Impatience? Anger? Passive aggressiveness? How do these tones make you feel when you are on the receiving end?

Reflect by Yourself: Which specific fruits of the Spirit do you typically lack when you speak to your spouse in the midst of conflict? Will you pray for them right now?

Act: When conflict arises and you verbally wound each other, confess to each other both your hurtful words *and your hurtful tones*. Ask for forgiveness from each other and from God. Trust that, if you are Christians, you are forgiven by God because of Christ's death on the cross (1 John 1:9).

DAY 3

Hydrate Frequently

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." (John 4:10)

"YOU NEED TO go do a quiet time, Steve."

This gentle rebuke from Abby means that I need to spend time with God because I'm worshipping some idol, believing some lie, or telling myself some godless narrative and as a result speaking to her like a self-righteous jerk. In other words, my heart is as hard as a rock and needs hydration ASAP.

What form of hydration does it need? Living water. What's that? We find out in the gospel of John. Jesus introduces this enigmatic beverage when he strikes up a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well and asks her for a drink. With Jews and Samaritans being relative enemies at the time, she's caught off guard by his request. She asks him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (John 4:9). Instead of answering her question directly, Jesus shifts the conversation away from physical water and offers her living water. Later on, we discover that this living water is the life-giving, soul-satisfying, thirst-quenching Holy Spirit given to all who place their faith in Christ (John 7:38–39).

We must hydrate ourselves with living water—we must be filled with the Holy Spirit—if our communication is to produce life instead of death when we are in marriage conflict. But how do we drink living water? What practical steps can we take to be filled with the Spirit? Here is a list of things that you can do as a couple to drink living water together:

- Read and discuss the Bible.
- Pray daily.
- Spend Christ-focused time with other Christians.
- Attend and volunteer in a solid Bible-teaching church.
- Serve your community outside the church.
- Partake in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- Talk about Jesus with those who don't share your beliefs.
- Give generously.

The more living water you consume, the healthier the roots of your heart will be. And the holier your communication will be when conflict arises.

Reflect as a Couple: Are you drinking living water as individuals and as a couple? Is your communication thriving in the midst of conflict as a result? Or are you functionally rejecting Christ by refusing to drink this water? How is this negatively impacting your communication?

Reflect by Yourself: What in your heart is keeping you from drinking living water with your spouse? Busyness? Laziness? Fear? Discomfort? Something else?

Act: Based on today's bulleted list of ways to regularly drink living water as a couple, develop a robust plan of how you will do so moving forward. Get as practical as possible.