



ASK THE
CHRISTIAN
COUNSELOR



BUILD A STRONGER MARRIAGE

THE PATH TO ONENESS

BOB LEPINE

INTRODUCTION

WHY WE'RE HERE: A REASON FOR HOPE

Let's take a minute to talk about why you're reading this book.

Maybe a pastor or a counselor or a friend suggested you read it. Maybe you picked it up on your own. In either case, you're probably here because something is wrong in your marriage—the relationship you thought would be an ongoing source of joy and love and hope in your life. Now, all that seems far away. Hope has vanished. You're not sure where to find it.

Maybe you and your spouse have drifted slowly toward isolation. You can point to no event that marks where things started to go wrong. It happened gradually. You tell your friends, "We just grew apart."

That slow drift to isolation is a seedbed for resentment. Along the way, husbands and wives look at one another and think, *Why aren't you trying anymore? Why don't you care about me? About us? You promised to love me. What happened?*

The hurt and resentment grow steadily, whether you realize it's happening or not. And one day, you look at each other and think, *There's nothing left here. We're too far gone. I don't see a way back.*

Or maybe you've been on a rough road that led to alienation. You can easily point to the factors that drove the wedge between you. The angry outbursts. The contempt. The criticism. The sarcasm. The emotional abuse.

Maybe specific events led to the division. Financial mistakes. Deep disagreements about how to deal with the kids. Medical issues. An affair. Whatever it was, this is not where you hoped you would be. But you're here. And you're frustrated. Bitter. Resentful.

Maybe you're hanging onto a strand of hope that your relationship can be restored. You've done everything you can think of to try to fix things. But you're hoping maybe someone can point you to something you haven't tried yet, some way to repair the damage and rebuild what is broken.

Or maybe at this point you're thinking you just want all the pain to end. You'll read this book, but honestly, you don't expect anything to change. The patterns in your marriage have hardened. Your heart is cold. You'll read the book because someone said you should or because you want to be able to say you tried everything. But in your mind, your marriage has been over for a long time now, and it's time to move ahead.

That's where my friends Henry and Samantha¹ were early in their marriage. The good-looking, fun-loving college boy Samantha fell for quickly became an angry husband who got angrier when he drank. The night early in their marriage when he became tense and angry during a heated argument left her shaken and ready to get out.

But before she saw a lawyer and filed the paperwork for a divorce, Samantha used her husband's transgressions as justification for her own infidelity. As far as she was concerned, the legal decree was a formality. She was already gone.

Henry and Samantha had both grown up going to church. They had a framework that told them a marriage—even one as badly damaged as theirs was—shouldn't be abandoned without trying to get some help.

Henry took the first step and went to see a counselor. He fully expected that after he outlined his grievances the

counselor would see he had no option but to cut things off. He was surprised when the counselor turned the tables on him and forced him to confront his own issues.

And that's exactly what Henry did. He recognized his mistakes and failures as a husband. He saw his issues and began addressing them. He didn't know whether his marriage could be saved, but he was willing to do his part to try.

Samantha started to notice a change in her husband, and she didn't like it. It frustrated her that things that used to trigger his anger weren't setting him off the way they used to. She needed him to continue to be the bad guy in their relationship, so she could more easily justify ending their marriage. Henry wasn't cooperating.

Reluctantly, Samantha went to see the same counselor. Like Henry, she was sure once the counselor heard her side of things he would agree that divorce was the right option. After she laid out her case, she told the counselor that as far as she was concerned the marriage was dead.

She didn't expect his first question. "You said you're a Christian, right? So you believe that God was powerful enough to raise his Son from death to life. But you don't think God can bring your broken marriage back to life?"

That's what this book is all about. We're going to go together on a journey to examine what it will take for your marriage to be restored.

I love the way the Bible talks about God in Isaiah 61. It describes him as a God who comforts those who mourn. A God who can make something beautiful from a pile of ashes. A God who pours out "the oil of gladness" on those who are mourning and gives them a "garment of praise instead of a faint spirit" (Isaiah 61:2-3).

In almost three decades of talking to couples whose marriages were done, I've heard story after story of how God worked in the hearts of the husbands and wives to bring something new and beautiful from the ruins of

their relationship. I know it's possible, even in the worst of situations.

Just last night I sat with a couple married almost two decades. They were both at a point where they were ready to reach out for help with the anger issues, the substance abuse issues, the parenting challenges, the health issues, and the financial pressures. The stress in their relationship is real. They were ashamed of the way they had hurt each other. Something has to change, they told me.

We talked for a while. I prayed for them. We discussed the right next steps for both of them. And we made plans to meet again in a few weeks to continue the process of unpacking the accumulated hurts and aches from their years together.

Today, I sent them this text message:

I wanted to follow up with both of you this morning and let you know how grateful to God I was for your candor, your transparency and your courage in getting together with me last night. I have hope for what God is going to do in your lives and in your marriage and family as you begin to engage and dig a bit deeper into the issues we talked about. In the midst of the stress and discouragement you're facing, know that God is indeed your ever-present help in times of need. He is your rock and your fortress. Cling to Jesus. Hold fast to him. In your weakness, he will become strong. I'm praying for you both today.

I have hope for your marriage too. I don't know your circumstances. But I know the God who brings light into darkness and can raise the dead. He is the One who can repair whatever damage has been done. He can make all things new.

Let me share what I hope this book will do. My goal is to point you to the most common pressure points in marriage.

I fully expect that some of what I address here will not apply to you or your relationship. But I also expect that as you read this, there will be times when you nod your head, highlight a paragraph, and think, *Yep, that's us*. If I can help you see the issues in your marriage more clearly, we're making progress. As Charles Kettering, the one-time head of innovation at General Motors reportedly said, "A problem well defined is a problem half solved."

I also hope you have someone who can walk together with you and your spouse as you read this book. A pastor, a counselor, or a spiritually mature mentor couple will be able to help you apply principles from this book to the specific concerns you are facing in your marriage.

And finally, as you work through this book, I want to urge you to resist the temptation to focus on your spouse's issues or flaws. Jesus warns us against the hypocrisy of addressing the specks we see in our spouse without first looking at the bigger issues present in our own lives (Matthew 7:3–5). The only person you can change is you. So instead of reading this book and hoping it will fix what is wrong with your mate, read it asking God to show you what needs to be addressed in your own life.

Follow the path with me. Let's see together what God is going to do.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR REAL CHANGE

Each chapter in this book will have a simple assignment for you to complete before you move on to the next chapter. You will be tempted to skip these projects. Don't. This is a vital part of the process that can bring healing to your broken marriage. I'd suggest you write down your answers to these questions in a journal or a notebook.

On paper, write down five issues that have led you to become alienated from each other in your marriage. Be specific. Don't list communication issues and finances. List

events or conflicts that have pushed you away from your spouse.

Pray a simple prayer. Look back at the list and say, “God, will you help me see the ways in which I have contributed to the issues that have divided us?” Then write down what comes to mind.

When you’re done, look back at the list and pray a second prayer: “God, is there anything I’ve missed?” Read these verses out loud.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!

(Psalm 139:23–24)

Take a minute and be still. Then write down anything else that comes to mind about whatever you’ve contributed to the issues in your marriage.

You will find yourself wanting to write what seems like a bigger and more important list: all the ways your spouse has damaged your relationship. But that’s not the assignment. Focus only on the part you’ve played.

Pray a final prayer: “God, I confess that I have played a part in our marriage being what it is right now. I confess the things I’ve done. And I confess the things I should have done that I haven’t done. Please forgive me for not being the husband or wife I should have been. Help me, by your Spirit, to be the kind of husband or wife I ought to be. I ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.”

Chapter 1

MARRIED FOR THE WRONG REASONS

Let's go all the way back to where your relationship began. We'll heed the advice of Fräulein Maria who, while she was still their governess, told the von Trapp children, "Let's start at the very beginning. A very good place to start."

Some of the issues you are facing in your marriage today can be traced back to cracks in the foundation. Specifically, you probably had some pretty superficial motivations at work that led you to the altar. Most of us did.

You also had subconscious expectations about what marriage was going to be like and about how your spouse would act or behave.

And you likely had a shallow and flawed understanding of the real purpose for marriage.

These three foundational issues—motivations for marriage, expectations of marriage, and understanding of the purpose for marriage—can lead to deep disappointments later.

Let's think first about your motivations for getting married. We'll come back to your expectations about marriage and your understanding of the purpose for marriage in upcoming chapters.

Think for a minute about why you walked down whatever aisle you walked down, looked each other in the eye,

and at the appropriate time said with a smile, “I do.” As best you can determine, what was motivating you to take this life-altering step and pledge your love to one another for a lifetime?

I can tell you what it was for me. It was time.

Mary Ann and I dated for almost four years before I proposed. She was a year ahead of me in college, and when she graduated, she was ready to move into the next phase of life. For her, that meant going to work as a nurse in a local hospital while I finished my senior year. Because we had been a couple all through college, it seemed only right to her that once I graduated the next phase for our relationship would begin as well.

My plan throughout college was to go to law school after graduation. In my mind, the idea of beginning graduate school and starting life as a married couple simultaneously seemed ambitious. For Mary Ann, the idea of continuing to date for some undetermined amount of time wasn’t an option. We were either going to move toward marriage, or she was ready to move on.

I knew I loved Mary Ann. I thought she was “the one” (although something in the back of my mind kept asking, *How can you be sure until you’ve done a little more comparison shopping?*). And two popular songs kept echoing in my head. One was the Beatles song that kept repeating the line “You’re gonna lose that girl (yes, yes you’re gonna lose that girl).” The other was a song from England Dan and John Ford Coley that declared “It’s sad to belong to someone else when the right one comes along.”

At the end of the day, the Beatles won. I proposed because I didn’t want our relationship to be over. I didn’t want to go all the way back to trying to build a new relationship with someone else.

The most common answer couples give to the question “Why did you get married?” is some version of “We were

in love.” For most, there was some kind of emotional connection that moved them from attraction to bonding, from being interested in each other to making a commitment to one another.

Emotional attraction and bonding may be the most common reason couples become man and wife, but it’s far from the only reason.

Maybe one reason you said “I do” was that you were tired of your mom asking you over and over again, “Are you dating anyone yet?”

Maybe you expected marriage to be the cure for loneliness.

Maybe you wanted to have children and raise them in a two-parent family, and you could hear the biological clock ticking.

Maybe you thought, *This person may be my last chance for love.*

Or maybe you thought, as many couples do, that marriage was the right next step. You can’t just date or live together in a semi-defined relationship forever. You get to a point where it’s time to either get married or break up.

In addition, all kinds of superficial motivations lead people to the altar.

- “He makes me laugh.”
- “She comes from money.”
- “He’s good with kids.”
- “She’s gorgeous!”
- “We both love [fill in the blank here—food, music, hiking, going to museums, etc.]”
- “He looks great in jeans!”
- “She’s really popular.”

Any of those dynamics may have been part of what drew you to each other. Attraction and emotional connection

aren't wrong. But if you expect those factors to be the glue that holds a marriage together for better or for worse, you're in big trouble.

Stop for a minute. Can you think back to two or three primary motivations that led you to marriage? Before we move on, grab your journal, your notebook, or a plain piece of paper and write down what nudged you toward the altar.

Here's why it can be helpful to revisit our motivations for marriage: *Behind every motivation is a hidden expectation.*

You thought getting married would fix something or solve something or fill in something that was missing. You thought that getting married would mean you'd never be lonely again. Or that you'd always feel safe. Or that your spouse would always desire you or want to be with you. Or that marriage would somehow complete you.

Whatever it was that motivated you to get married quickly became an expectation you had about marriage. We'll look at that next.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR REAL CHANGE

Look back at your list of the motivations that moved you toward marriage. While in hindsight some of these motivations may have been superficial, they were part of what God used to bring you together as a couple. The bigger issue now is the extent to which these motivations may still be at work in how you view the value of your marriage. Are there still subconscious motivations that are part of how you measure your marriage? Take a few minutes to explore in writing the motivations that continue to affect the way you view your marriage. Then evaluate them.