

12 QUESTIONS TO MAKE
A LASTING MARRIAGE

DATING
WITH
DISCERNMENT

SAM A.
ANDREADES

“This is a brilliant book!”

— Rosaria Butterfield

In addition to two complete chapters, this Sample includes the introductions to Parts 1, 2, and 3, effectively presenting an overview of the entire book. Enjoy!

DATING WITH DISCERNMENT

12 QUESTIONS TO MAKE
A LASTING MARRIAGE

Sam A. Andreades

To Veronica and Enoch,
in whom I have the utmost confidence.
I hope that you can enjoy this phase
on your way to a wise decision.

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“**This is a brilliant book!** Much like he did in *enGendered*, Sam A. Andreades has found the sweet spot in reading both Scripture and culture simultaneously to anticipate, articulate, and answer the questions that young people (and their parents) are now asking. He then directs them on how to live faithfully and proactively in the creation ordinance in a post-Obergefell world, where everything from sexual difference to biblical marriage is vexed with Orwellian confusion and despised by those with cultural capital. I especially loved how he opens the book with ‘How to Break Up’ and then directly confronts the pros and cons (and sometimes necessities) of online dating services. The writing style is both informal and compelling, and Sam’s pastor’s heart (and the tire-treads on that heart) are evident throughout.”

Rosaria Butterfield, Author, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

“Sam Andreades offers **provocative and profoundly insightful advice** for men and women about dating. This book is sure to make its readers think and rethink how they go about seeking a spouse.”

Dr. Joel R. Beeke, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

“Sam has done it again! He has taken his pioneering, countercultural work on gender in his last book, *enGendered*, and applied it here for the church to one of her most misunderstood topics: dating. The Church in America is between a rock and a hard place with regard to this topic. On the one hand, she struggles to disciple

people in an overly sexualized culture which views relationships as disposable and transactional. On the other hand, the Church is still grappling with the damage of past teaching on dating that was unbiblical, reactionary, and legalistic. Between that Scylla and Charybdis, Sam offers this **refreshing and super-practical** book—from teaching on how to break up with someone to twelve questions for knowing if you are Mr. Right or if your date is Mr. Wrong. I will be mass-distributing it in my church!”

Geoff Bradford, Senior Pastor of Christ the King Presbyterian Church, Raleigh, and Philadelphia church-planter

“As a Pastor, it breaks my heart to see, on the one hand, so many marriages fail and then, on the other, to see marriages never take place as people are finding it increasingly difficult to find a suitable spouse. Even though online dating promises an abundance of ‘matches,’ I hear story after story of how difficult it is to date successfully. I’m deeply thankful for Dr. Andreades, a reliable guide in assisting men and women to navigate the complexities of dating in our present cultural context. The author **skillfully avoids legalism while at the same time providing an abundance of practical help** that is deeply rooted in Scripture in general, and in a theology of gender in specific. I highly recommend this important book and would love to see the book have a massive impact.”

Darin Pesnell, Senior Lead Pastor of Iron Works Church, Phoenixville, and Head of the Iron Works Church Planting Network

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Part I

Before You Leave the House

Parts II and III of this book give you twelve questions to evaluate your dating relationship, to make the dangerous decision: *Is this one THE one that I should marry?* But before we leave the house for our first date, we need some principles to date well. Part I is about readying you for the romantic road. If you are anxious to get right to the questions, go on ahead to Part II. But if you want to review the dating process itself, let's first get a few things straight.

Chapter 1, "How to Break Up: Bearing Necessary Detours," advises on the first principle of dating: do not enter a dating relationship without a path to exit it. Break-ups are a necessary aspect of dating, and you need to be able to do them gracefully. So it is worth assuring yourself with "the date who always shows up." This first relationship, which underlies all relationships, helps you consider your disengagement plan.

Chapter 2, "How to Get a Good Date: Guard the Gold," explains the second critical principle of dating: knowing the great treasure that God has created in you. This knowledge allows you to "guard the gold" of your body and soul. Only when you guard the gold can you enter the quest with a chance at success.

Chapter 3, "How to Date Wisely: An Enduring

Approach,” surveys the trouble that marriage is in today and takes us on a trek to discover what to do about it as daters. The problem is not dating itself. Neglect of trustworthy advisors, suspect marriage-preparation methods, and our misconceptions about what happens in dating all contribute to the failure to make lasting unions. The Bible points the way forward for us: its counter-cultural counsel, highlighting gender in romantic relationships, supplies the approach to making marvelous marriages from the beginning.

You know, the Bible really is great. It seems magically put together to help us in every phase of life. It entertains us as children in Sunday School with its delightful stories, all the while pulling us toward goodness. As we grow, it puts up boundaries where we need them, and promises hope when we are despairing. When we become teenagers, the book of Ecclesiastes walks with us through existential crisis. When we marry, the Song of Solomon reassures us that our flaming passions are right and fitting. (As a young single man, I couldn't even read the Song of Solomon—it was a source of temptation to me. But when I got married, it sure became relevant.) I could go on and on, how the Psalms meet and guide our emotions, how the letters of Paul cultivate our intellect in the right directions, how Judges lets our sense of adventure soar, how we can have a psychedelic experience in the pages of Revelation, even without doing any drugs. And, of course, how through it all we are guided to salvation through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It should not surprise us then that the Bible is also there for us as we date.

Chapter 4, “An Ancient Secret,” explains this biblical approach. The questions of Parts II–III are based on the deep principles of intergendered relationship found in our origins. The first romantic comedy (of Adam and Eve) teaches us how men and women *together* display the image of God. Knowing why we date and why we get married gives us the wisdom and the confidence to ask the questions we should ask of our dates and ourselves.

So before you shiver at the sound of the doorbell, before you grit your teeth and make the phone call, even before you nervously hit <Enter> on the dating app profile, let’s begin with the end.

One

How to Break Up: Bearing Necessary Detours

*“The problem is all inside your head,” she said to me
“The answer is easy if you take it logically
I’d like to help you in your struggle to be free
There must be fifty ways to leave your lover.”*
— Paul Simon¹

*My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, have
given your pledge for a stranger, if you are snared in the
words of your mouth, caught in the words of your mouth,
then do this, my son, and save yourself, for you have come
into the hand of your neighbor: go, hasten, and plead
urgently with your neighbor. Give your eyes no sleep and
your eyelids no slumber; save yourself like a gazelle from
the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the hand of
the fowler.*
— Solomon, son of David, king of Israel^a

An Essential Angling Skill (Especially Online)

Come on! How to break up? What an awful way to start a book about successful dating. Can’t I at least put this at the end—you know, where you might not have to read it?

Sorry, I cannot. I do not want to discourage you, but I have some disappointing news for you up front. The time may come when you need to say *goodbye* to the one

a. Pro 6:1-5.

you are dating. After all your hard work in joining, it may still end in a parting. As difficult as this is, you must be able to do it. If you are not able to end a dating relationship, you should never start one.

We all have the dream of finding Mr. or Mrs. “Right” right away, that the first crush will be the last, that the first doorbell ring will ring the final wedding bells. But that is often not the story the Lord gives us—and this is His mercy. Therefore, as you go in, you must be prepared to go out.

If you are using an online service to meet someone, this is especially pertinent. Dating apps and online services aren’t wrong to use, but you need to go in with your eyes open to the features of the medium. Online dating services seem wonderful because they offer such a large pool of eligible candidates, so much larger than what you are finding in your boring old hometown or your cheerless church confines. But be prepared. Since you are starting without any context whatsoever, you will probably be breaking up more times before getting married. A relationship begun online is starting from scratch, with no life, no church, and no family background. Without the benefit of families living in community, or a church where we see personalities tested, you need to work harder to get to know the other person.

So, online dating actually makes the principles of this book more important. No online profiling asks you the questions that you will get here. Maybe they cannot. These questions can only really be answered by spending time doing things with one another in person.

“Deloris,” a young woman in my congregation, came to me troubled about her boyfriend, “Russ.” (Like all the names used in this book except for some of my own family, Deloris and Russ are pseudonyms. But their story is real.) They seemed supremely compatible—or at least so she thought. But they had been going together for several years with no movement forward. Deloris was a delightful person, the kind who never seemed to run out of energy. She was pretty. She had a strong grasp of the kind of theology on which one could set up a life. Her hands were always serving others. From what she told me, Russ had a lot of good qualities too. Deloris was so good at making other parts of her life work out. There was no reason this part should not be working also. Why wasn’t it? Russ just wasn’t asking.

This situation may sound like a cliché, but it doesn’t feel like a cliché if you are living it. When we met, I did not have to say much to Deloris. She basically counseled herself in front of me. Russ was not going to close the deal. All these years had made the point; he just wasn’t. It was time to “cut bait.” Cutting bait is an angling expression of obscure origin that has come to mean giving up on the current effort in order to move on. In fishing terms, sometimes you can neither land the fish nor remove the hook. So you must cut the line and let you both go your separate ways (The freed fish usually extracts the hook on its own within a few days and goes on with his fish life.²) This was what Deloris needed to do. And she did. I was relieved. I told her that if there was a future with him, he’d be back. But it would have to be a different relationship with different parameters.

Of course, how long you have been seeing someone makes a big difference in how you feel about breaking up. If you have totaled two dates with the person, ending it is less painful than if you have been together for two years or—God forbid—ten. The latter breaking up feels harder than the sooner just breaking it off, but this chapter applies to both. Whether two weeks or two years, the way to get through the discomfort in a way that is bearable, even helpful, is to always have another lover in the wings.

The Date Who Always Shows Up

Before the day you say *I do*, you always have to be able to say, *I don't*. In your heart, you must be able to not date, even if you really want to. You may think, *Easy to say, but I am desperate*. You may feel, as Bruce Springsteen sung in his breakthrough album, standing in front of the porch screen door pleading to Mary, “Don’t turn me home again; I just can’t face myself alone again.” God gives us different life aids to help in such a situation. Having a loving church and a supportive family are balms to your dread of loneliness. But the primary way you become able to lose a lover is by having Christ as your lover. He offers Himself to us as single people just this way.

Thus, this book in your hands turns out to be a book primarily useful for Christians. It is not just the emphasis on the Bible. I have found Christians to have great raw materials to make the dangerous decision well and embark on a wonderful marriage. If you, kind reader, are not a believer, you may well be offended at what I have to say in this book. (Come to think of it, even if you are a believer,

you may well be offended at what I have to say.) But, of course, dear non-Christian, you are welcome to read and take any advice herein you find helpful. And perhaps, without a faith commitment to Jesus Christ, some of it can be useful for you. But you'll notice at certain points that the motivation and the goal of marriage for Christians is necessarily very Christ-oriented. Just saying.

At the Last Supper, Jesus is at His most tender with His disciples—and us.^a The church has rightly interpreted these eleven apostles to stand for all of Jesus's followers as they receive the Lord's pledges of love, prayers for coherence, confirmations of comfort, and promises of power. In fact, Jesus even prays, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word."^b That would be us.

So it is particularly significant how Jesus opens this discourse to His church. He starts with what is best taken as the language of nuptial engagement.³ In that first-century Jewish culture, a newly married couple would begin life together in an extension to the groom's father's house.⁴ Unless the groom had his own house, his proposal meant going and building an addition onto the family home in which he and his new bride could live.⁵ After this preparation of rooms, on the night of the wedding procession, the groom would return and take the bride to his father's house, their new home.⁶ Earlier in this Gospel, John the Baptist evoked this picture of Jesus as the returning Jewish fiancé to get His bride.^c Not long before this supper, Jesus

a. Joh 14-17.

b. Joh 17:20.

c. Joh 3:29.

also told stories about this cultural feature, identifying Himself as the departing and returning bridegroom.^{a 7}

This background makes sense of Jesus's imagery at the beginning of His speech. He says to them (and us):

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.^b

Given what a bridegroom had to do to prepare a life for his intended, this is basically a marriage proposal, appropriate words to speak to one's bride-to-be during a betrothal. According to rabbinic law, the promises of the evening betrothal ceremony were serious business. The groom enumerated in detail what he was going to do for her.⁸ Jesus said His words on the evening before He was going to pay the *mohar*, or bridal price, with His blood. Here, in this moment, the people of Christ become the bride of Christ.^c In Jewish custom of that time, several years might separate the betrothal from the marriage as the groom prepared the rooms.⁹ We are now living in that time of waiting before Christ's second coming, His return to get us for the "marriage" of heavenly union with Him.^d

In the midst of this promise's beautiful imagery, we should not miss what Jesus is saying in His third sentence.

a. Mat 25:1-10.

b. Joh 14:1-3 (NIVO).

c. As imaged also in Mat 9:15; Mar 2:19-20; 2Co 11:2.

d. Rev 19:6-9.

He does not say, “If there weren’t these rooms to be prepared for us, I wouldn’t be telling you that there were.” That kind of statement would make sense to say, and it would be honorable to say: “I am not making a false promise.” But this proposer rather says something even more honorable. He says, “If it were *not* so, I *would have* told you.” In other words, His intentions would have come out much sooner along the way. Jesus is telling them, and us, that He wouldn’t have allowed us to think that we were really getting engaged with God Himself if there were no engagement coming. He would have taken care for our feelings. Simply put, He has not just been leading us on. This will not end in bitter tears of disappointment for us. That is why He tells them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Instead, let your hopes soar.

Especially if we are single, we should see in Jesus’s words an invitation to live out our relationship with God in engagement terms. It may be uncomfortable to think about Jesus speaking this way to a group of guys in a closed room. But Jesus is ever one to be free with His metaphors.¹⁰ Soon after, he takes to calling them orphans.^a Just as God is a Father to orphans and a Husband to widows,^b so also He is a Fiancé to single folks.^c If you allow Him to be that, He is enough for you. If He is your ultimate date, you can date well. If He is not, you are liable to lack the inner strength to treat your dates as they need to be, or to be treated by them as you need to be.

If you crave love, there is no better place to find it,

a. Joh 14:18.

b. Deu 10:18; Psa 10:14; Psa 10:18; Psa 68:5; Psa 146:9; Jer 49:11; Hos 14:3.

c. Hos 2:19-20.

guy or girl—no gender distinction here. For man and woman in the bride of Christ, you find an answer to your loneliness in how He loves us. In fact, the reason you are currently single is to learn to receive this love of God. And if you do, you will be miles ahead in the dating game. Miles ahead in life, for that matter.

Cutting Bait for the Right Catch

You may not be able, for any number of reasons, to achieve a happy future with a particular someone. Differences in age, culture, education, or background present problems that can be overcome, but one shouldn't be naïve about the obstacles. Other more serious problems may bring you to a breakup. On several occasions I have had to advise daters to cut bait like Deloris did. Sometimes it was because the girl he was dating could not forgive and had no interest in learning how. Sometimes it was because the guy she was dating clearly would not take responsibility where he needed to. Sometimes one was just being strung along by the other. When too many of the answers to this book's questions come up as *no*, you need to be able to do it before it becomes a whole category of harder to let go. In these cases, having Christ as your first heart-throb will spare you an SUV of tears.

* * *

Joy was a young woman on the adventure of living in New York City. She had her head on basically straight, but she also had a thing for guitar players. It wasn't entirely rational. She liked the guitar herself, so she espe-

cially liked guys who played the guitar. And thus followed a string of relationships that weren't so great. While living in the city, she became a Christian. I remember when she came to the point of saying, "No more guitar players!" She made up her mind. She was through with dating that kind of guy. That was the old her.

Of course, I don't think that she meant to insult guitar players. For Joy, it was really a deeper decision of giving up her need to be with someone, anyone. Christ's love had filled her heart to the point that she was able to envision herself alone, rather than herself with someone who was wrong for her. Each person, man and woman, must reach a similar point to date well. Why is this so important first? Can't you just want Jesus and a date equally at the same time? And, you know, let God purify your motives as time goes on? Believe me, there will be plenty of God purifying your motives as time goes on, but you will save yourself a dishwasher full of despair by getting this right beforehand. You must be ready to not be married so you can have a good marriage.

Seven Steps to Doing a Good Breakup

So, when you need to, here is how you do it.

1. *Break up with bravery.* You may not be breaking up because of a lack of chemistry between you. Maybe there is great chemistry. But you have come to realize that chemistry is not what makes a marriage.^a I have chemistry

a. Pro 31:30.

with a lot of women. But that doesn't mean that we could co-build a home.

* * *

Carter sat in conversation with Charlene with a sober look on his face. It was difficult, what he had to do, but he was sure he had to do it. What made it all the more difficult was that Carter had had two previous serious relationships that didn't work out. He now looked back on them with regret. As he told it to me, when they hit some conflict, he was not mature enough then to know how to address it. He felt that he let those women get away. Carter was also in his thirties now and feeling a pang when he saw his peers already in marriages with growing families.

Even more trying for the breakup were the great things about this woman. I knew Char. She was a committed follower of Christ and a very beautiful girl. She was clearly willing to move forward. She had wanted them to talk about engagement at their three-month dating mark. They had conducted their relationship with honor. But now, seven months in, Carter ended their engagement, choosing to face the ways the relationship was not working rather than just letting things move to marriage by momentum.

I felt sad for them at the time. We all want our friends' romances to work out. But I also remember admiring Carter's courage in doing this, because I knew how he wanted to be married. Sometimes our friends' romances shouldn't work out. This was one of those times.

2. *Talk in person.* This might seem obvious now, away from the roar of battle, but never underestimate how

cowardly we can be. You do not break up with someone by phone, email or—God forbid—text.

* * *

Hakeem sat in the back seat of the Humvee, on maneuvers out in the woods of Michigan, staring at his phone. He was feeling more alone than ever as he read the words over and over. The text just said, “I don’t think this will work out.” And that was it. She was breaking things off. He couldn’t respond. He couldn’t talk to the guys he was with, as he didn’t know them well. He couldn’t contribute to her decision or learn from it. That was just it.

As with all situations in life, Jesus calls you to treat a person as you wish you would be treated if the situation were reversed.^a How can you show your soon to be ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend respect that is due them as image-bearers of God?^b Have the painful meeting, if at all possible, face to face. If you are so long-distance that this is impractical, still do it in some way that shows the person that he or she is important.

3. *Honor the other with gratitude.* Unless you just found out that she was stealing from you, or that he was deliberately using you to get a job with your father (or something more awful), there are probably many things you can list that you appreciate about the other person. After all, you wanted to date, didn’t you? These are good for that person to hear. I went through several breakups—initiating, receiving, and mutual—before I dated the woman I married. Some of them were not pretty. But by the time of

a. Luk 6:31.

b. Gen 5:1-2.

the last ended romance, I had made this the centerpiece of a parting of ways. It made a big difference. Again, wouldn't you want to hear about your strengths as well as your weaknesses to be able to move forward with hope?

4. *Be direct.* Yes, you should be honest about the "why."^a You can certainly speak in humility, acknowledging that this is only your view, that you are limited in how you see things, and that you could be wrong. But *it is* your view. Whatever you do, do not drop out of contact without explanation (aka ghosting). If you have been ghosted, you know how wrong it feels. Don't leave this step of directness out because all breakups are actually a step of discipleship. Though difficult, you can both walk away from this experience having grown a good deal wiser about yourselves. You are doing both of you an important service. Whether you are on the initiating side, the receiving side, or it is mutual, let it happen.

5. *Deliver a vision of hope.* My wife, no stranger to breakups (not with me, fortunately), wisely advises including a vision of a brighter future for the other person. It is not insincere to express hope for his life, or to describe your faith in God about her, if you really do believe that there is a better plan for both your lives.

The Bible's story of Paul and Barnabas is not about a romantic relationship, but it shows the same principle at work. At one point, the apostle Paul and Barnabas break up their close church-planting partnership.^b Their disagreement is so sharp, they had to part ways. But their

a. Pro 27:6.

b. Acts 15:36-40.

resolution, of divvying up the churches they planted and visiting them separately,^a expresses hope for each other in the service of their Lord. Five or six years later, Barnabas comes up in one of Paul's letters.¹¹ It is clear from how Paul lumps Barnabas and himself together that Paul considered the man a "partner" in the work.^b Paul thereby expresses hope for his brother even though they no longer worked together. Spend some time living in that dream of hope for the other person before the conversation.

* * *

Stella and Austin dated for a couple months, but it was not going to work. She was country and he was rock-and-roll. He planned restaurant dates while she wanted to walk through a field without their shoes on. So they broke up. A few months afterward, when Austin checked on how she was doing, Stella mentioned a friend whom she thought might really enjoy meeting him. It was a nice thought, but Austin was shocked when Stella walked into the club on 13th Street where he was DJ'ing with said friend, Nova, in tow. From there, the sparks just flew. Today Austin and Nova are happily married, living with three children on an urban street. Stella herself has her own growing family. They go camping a lot. I have heard more than one story like this of how an ex-boyfriend's or ex-girlfriend's introduction worked out. Sometimes the feelings are difficult after a friend you introduced does indeed start dating your ex, but you have done a great deed in delivering a vision of hope for the other person.

a. Acts 15:39-40.

b. 1Co 9:6.

6. End it with definiteness. The disentangling imagery of Proverbs 6:1–5 that opened this chapter describes breakup situations well: Flee like a gazelle. Escape like a bird from the hand of the fowler. Purpose not to be in contact with this “neighbor” in any way for X number of months. The ease of the familiar can be your enemy here. A breakup is a breakup. Even if some changes occur that later might revive the possibility of reuniting, you should not entertain that thought now. Do not continue engaging with the other’s social media content (digital orbiting) or allow popping up again after a time without notice (submarining). Delete the contact information.

The one-time couple above, Austin and Stella, made a wise rule of six months without contact. It truly helped clean the slate. If one of you wants to “just stay friends,” you should be extra clear about limiting contact. The most merciful incision is made with a sharp knife.

7. Take time to heal. Maybe this breakup is not a big deal to you, or maybe you are devastated. But at the very least, it is a disappointment. Scripture nails the description of this situation with the words, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick.”^a So your sick heart needs some time to heal. Give yourself that time to feel the pain of this deferred hope. Let your heart grieve.

These steps don’t cover all of your individual circumstances, but at least get these right. Then return to the arms of your Savior, your promised bridegroom, and let Him be your portion.^b And recognize that the best decisions of

a. Pro 13:12.

b. Lam 3:24.

our lives are usually the most painful. They make a way for great things in the future.

The story of you is not over. It wasn't over for Joy. Remember her back in New York, swearing off guitar players? Soon after making that resolution, Joy met Bruno, an entirely different class of guy. She found out how, very often, breakup events become a doorway to a much better match. These two have now been happily wed for many years. And, by the way, Bruno, the husband that has made Joy so happy, is also a very good guitar player.

Two

How to Get a Good Date: Guard the Gold

Han Solo: Look, Your Worshipfulness, let's get one thing straight. I take orders from just one person: me
Princess Leia Organa: It's a wonder you're still alive.
— George Lucas¹²

'Tis safest in matrimony to begin with a little aversion.
— Richard Brinsley Sheridan¹³

An Impossible Dream

Albert was shy. He developed a crush on Allyson, who had him seeing hearts in the clouds. But he didn't know if she could imagine him up there in the clouds with her. Mrs. D, as she was known, was a tour-de-force of a language teacher. He didn't know how it came up, but Albert found himself talking to Mrs. D about this girl. When he shared his affections for Allyson with Mrs. D, her response was forceful. She cut to the quick: "Do you like her? You gotta ask her out!" Mrs. D insisted. "You have to do it now." Well, Mrs. D's confidence spilled off onto Albert. *Yeah!*, he thought, *Maybe Allyson is just waiting to say yes to me.* Not knowing what awaited him, he asked her. And he was rejected. Allyson actually appeared afraid of him. Albert tried to salvage the conversation. "Can I

just call you?” he asked, pitifully. “Okay,” she said, “but just as a friend.” He was devastated.

When the news got back to Mrs. D, her attitude shocked Albert. “Oh well,” she said. “Time to move on to another one.” *Another one? What other one could there be?* But the judgment had been made. The gavel had landed. Allyson had delivered the decision of the universe: Albert was a reject.

This is a very funny story to me because, just a few years later, Albert was being chased—almost literally—by a number of women. I wish I could show you the pictures of the women who would have given anything to belong to him. What changed? Nothing, really. It was just a different setting, different people, different circumstances. Albert ended up with none of these willing maidens. He surprised his friends with another woman entirely, and today he has a large happy family with her.

The girls at first did not recognize Albert’s value. So he didn’t either. But it is not just Albert. When I started to try to date, I found myself obsessing over different women at different times. Four of them, when I asked, turned me down flat: Madilyne, Lynda, Robyn, and then Blanche. I got an absolute no. There wasn’t even a pause in their voices. These crushes turned out to be crushing. As single people, we all doubt whether someone could actually love us. It drives a lot of what we do. My parents may love me, and that helps, but they kind of have to. My friends may like to hang around me, but that is just being friends. If I am popular or garner a large online following or accumulate a captive audience, I can get mass affection.

They may even clap. But those people do not really know me. And if they did, could they actually love me? *Me?*

The Marty Syndrome

I do not know how confident you are as a person. But I do know that you carry around inside you an underlying shame. It's been there ever since... well, way back, when the human race made a decision to close its heart to the greatest love of all. More precisely, Adam, someone who perfectly and accurately represented you, made that decision,^a and you and I followed suit.^b Ever since then, we have doubted if we could be loved.^c And the single life accentuates this doubt: the doubt that somebody worth something could see me and want me. This is why some single people do not want to date, and do not even want to try to meet someone. Dating spotlights the question: *Could I actually be loved?* For some who really doubt themselves, it is easier to not even raise the question. Deep down, they think that they already know the answer.

I call this the Marty Syndrome. I derive the term from a 1955 movie called *Marty*,¹⁴ written by Paddy Chayefsky. The way dating highlights this self-doubt has never been better captured than in this utterly natural story of an unmarried Brooklyn butcher. Well-meaning neighborhood matriarchs keep asking him when he is going to marry. Guy friends keep telling him tempting stories of seducing women and promoting porn to him. (It is the

a. Gen 3:6.

b. Rom 5:12; 1Co 15:22.

c. Gen 3:7-10.

1950s, so it is soft porn, but it is the same thing.) Dances put on to help single people meet each other feel like beauty contests. These scenes display the worst parts of dating. The undue importance of what your friends think. The awkward first moments and missteps of a relationship. The insecurity. The rejection. The butcher (played wonderfully by Ernest Borgnine), alternates between trying to address his loneliness by going out to meet people, and just being fed up with the whole business.

The picture won Best Screenplay, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Movie for that year. It is one of only two American films ever to win both the Cannes Film Festival and the Palme d'Or international prizes. Why the success on such a mundane topic? Because it discloses something about ourselves we all know is true. Our sin-shame makes it hard to imagine that we are valuable enough to love. It is worth watching if you are starting to date, as it also affords a comparative peek into dating customs of the American 1950s. Even without seeing the movie, though, if you are a single person who is getting older, you know just what I am talking about.

Our condition of shame also accounts for the intoxication of falling in love. Do you wonder why lovers can be so smitten? Why do their sandwiches sit on their plates half-eaten? Why do they neglect their cherished friends and long-held hobbies? Why do they forget to feed the cat? They cannot concentrate on their work anymore. They are not much good for parties. They even abandon you on the basketball court, one shy of a playable game. Why? Because that doubt about whether anyone of value

could love them is, for a moment, dispelled. Nothing compares to that feeling. Other sensations pale. It is a form of being drunk.

I wish this experience for you. I cannot guarantee it, but I can guarantee something else. The answer to the haunting question is *yes*: You are worthy of love. You are worth being wanted. I know that this is true about you. I can tell, even though I haven't met you, because the Father created you. Because the Holy Spirit is testifying it to you repeatedly. And because, if you can receive it, Jesus Christ went to the cross for you.

The Treasure You Are

How do you know if a girl really likes you? There is what your friends say, or her friends say, but there could be other things going on there. Really, how do you know that a guy really does want you? There are myriad women's magazine articles giving you the signs: certain phrases he uses or a glimmer in how he looks at you. But then some of those might turn out to be a guy's indigestion. Really, how do you know if you are, in fact, loved? It is when he gets jealous. It is when her skin turns a tad greenish with envy over your involvement with other women or pursuits.

* * *

Rebekah walked around for a few days stewing. She realized that she was angry with Troy, her long-distance boyfriend. They had been dating for several months. But Troy posted a picture of himself with a friend, a girl, on

Instagram. He commented on the post about the good time they were having hanging out. Troy had known this other friend a long time, and there was nothing untoward going on, but Rebekah was bothered by Troy's post. It led to an argument, making it abundantly clear that Troy had her heart.

Certainly, there is a bad kind of controlling jealousy, but God says, rather bluntly, that jealousy is part of who He is. He calls Himself a jealous God^a and flat-out advertises that *His name is Jealous*.^b God's jealousy for His people comes out of a commitment to them called a covenant.^c Jesus poetically referenced that commitment, as we saw in the previous chapter, when He "proposed" to His followers. If you belong to the Lord, this "very flame of the Lord"^d burns for you and what is best for you.

Like Rebekah to Troy, God shows you this jealousy in the gospel of Jesus Christ to convince you of the treasure you are. Christ's sacrifice for you is God's jealous flame. When a holy God feels that way about you, it dispels the doubt of your lovability. You get a sense of the holiness of your person, to which no one should have easy access. When you know God's treasuring, you are ready to date in a way that guards the gold. If you don't, dating can do you deep damage.

a. Deu 6:15.

b. Exo 34:14.

c. Exo 34:10.

d. Sos 8:6.

How to Do Yourself Deep Damage

Ellie, a girl I was once dating, mentioned to me nonchalantly, “I’d definitely want to live with someone first before we got married. Otherwise how could I tell if I was compatible with him?” I know what Ellie was thinking. Trying out that part of marriage with someone before making a commitment seems to make sense because marriage is such a big deal. Why not experiment by living together first? Why not avoid harming people by a marriage plus a divorce? Still, I thought, does Ellie not realize the pain coming her way? We broke up soon afterward. We were just heading in very different directions.

Sex outside of marriage, what used to be called fornication, is now called hooking up and cohabitation. Living and sleeping together outside a marital covenant is a way of not guarding the gold. It deeply damages both parties. So social statistics consistently say, and so they are just as consistently ignored. Back in the 1990s, studies clearly showed the failure of cohabitation to prepare for marriage, or even achieve personal satisfaction.¹⁵ Even so, cohabitation in America doubled from 1990 to 2008, rising then to over six million households.¹⁶ By 2010, it was well-known that cohabitation is not only less stable than marriage, it is less stable than *re-marriage* (marrying another after a divorce). Only 13 percent of cohabitations remain intact after five years, compared with 77 percent of re-marriages.¹⁷ And a recent assessment in *Psychology Today* highlighted research showing that people with more sexual encounters or more experience living with

a partner are measurably less likely to have quality marriages later on.¹⁸ Cohabiting couples are more likely, on average, to experience infidelity and domestic violence than married couples.¹⁹ Children in a cohabiting household are more likely to have run-ins with the law, fail in school, do drugs, and experience depression. Even more disturbing, “children in cohabiting step-families are 98 percent more likely to be physically abused, 130 percent more likely to be sexually abused, and 64 percent more likely to be emotionally abused, compared with children in married step-families.”²⁰ In short, this defective practice leaves ravaged human souls along a trail of tears.

Why is this so? Sex is a great thing,^a even a holy thing,^b and so can be greatly misused.^c When we take sex out of marriage, we misuse it. The prophet Jeremiah was a brass-tacks kind of guy. He once remarked, “You go after other gods to your own harm.”^d Jeremiah was saying that when people follow other gods, not doing life as the true God says to, it damages them. Sinning—that is, disregarding how God tells us to live—not only offends God, which is bad enough; it also wrecks our lives.^e The apostle Paul explains that kind of self-harm when saying that the fornicator not only sins against another but also dishonors his own body.^f That is why it awakens God’s jealousy and He forbids it. These prophets warn against this abuse of the gift of sex because of the ruin it brings to us, to which the statistics and the Scriptures testify.

a. Pro 30:18-19.

b. 1Co 7:1-5; Heb 13:4.

c. Pro 30:20.

d. Jer 7:6.

e. Deu 10:13.

f. 1Th 4:3-6.

When the Past Comes Back

Treyvon could not hide his dismay from Zahra. After many years, God had finally restored him to godly manhood. And after so many failed relationships, he considered it the Lord's great mercy to have such a wonderful, devout, beautiful wife in Zahra. They had been married for over a year, but each time they made love, Treyvon told me, he was plagued with regret. His experience with multiple partners came back to him at just the wrong times, times he should only be sharing with Zahra. He deeply desired sex to be solely about Zahra now, but certain memories intruded into their relationship. I told him that better days were ahead, but I could not downplay the power of the past to invade one's bedroom in the present.

Sex is like Crazy Glue. It seems from the way it gets marketed like it should be neat and tidy to use. But every time you open the tube, you are liable to glue your fingers together. Getting them apart will not occur without skin loss. With sex, if you attach yourself to someone and then tear away, you leave a piece of yourself behind. Some of you is torn from you, and you enter the next relationship a little more ripped up and lacking. Yes, that is a graphic picture, but that is what is happening if you buy in to cohabitation. Again, Paul portrays multiple sexual experiences outside of marriage as a sin against your own body.^a Until you become cynical about it, you can tell that physical intimacy bonds you together like a powerful epoxy. People going through this the first time know it. After the second or third person, they just stop caring about it.

a. 1Co 6:15-18.

Even more tragic is the entire secular generation now being raised on hookup culture, which is kind of like anti-dating. The Christian church is not unaffected: most of those who identify as Christians and use dating websites are quite willing to have casual sex.²¹ Based on a debased view of sex as an evolutionary vestige of the need to propagate the species, hooking up is a quick road to self-destruction, even for the guys for whom casual hookups are supposed to be the great fantasy.²² The hookup culture exacerbates the trauma of singleness because it forces detachment. Instead of sex being a process of becoming vulnerable, it becomes the opposite: a process of distancing. During the hookup you must encrust your heart to protect it. It is a sickening parody of what lovemaking was meant to be. It teaches both of you how to lose hope that there is committed love. As the hookup generation grows up into polyamory, even more hopelessness will settle in. These cultural devolutions are throwing the gold overboard.

But this multiplying of sorrows does not have to be yours. Even if this is your past, it does not have to be your future. Instead, according to God, you are a treasure chest containing gold. Man or woman, there are things about you that He especially created for another's enjoyment. God takes delight in your gold Himself. Then, perhaps, He gives another to delight in your gold, someone He gives to remind you of Him. You cannot date well without knowing this. And when you do know this, you can form standards and brave the dating game.

Lining Up at the Starting Blocks

The opening Chapter of the book of Judges makes an important point about finding a marriage partner. To see that, we need to understand the point of the book. Judges shows us the downward spiral of society when godly, committed leadership is lacking in a nation. Because “in those days there was no king in Israel,”^a an initially victorious society goes steadily downhill. A lot of this devolution has to do with the women as well as the men, and the relationship between them. This means that the best guys, the best gals, and the best situations are found at the beginning of the book, when times are good. So, when we read about marriage-making occurring in Chapter one, we are seeing dating in an ideal time. And what we see there is mate-finding as something of a competition.

First, there is Achsah. In a righteous move her father, Caleb, sets up a quest to discover the best guy out there for her. It is just like the old fairy tales, only this happened in real life. The campaign to take the Promised Land has come to a halt because the city of Kiriath Sepher seems impossible to take. Caleb makes it known that the man who could lead a successful siege against that city would be the man for his daughter.^b It is a sword-in-the-stone maneuver to find the man with great leadership gifting for his daughter—and it succeeds. The eventual winner, Othniel,^c goes on to become the first^d and most powerful commander of Israel’s era of judges, a faithful leader of the

a. Jdg 17:6; Jdg 18:1; Jdg 19:1; Jdg 21:25.

b. Jdg 1:9–12.

c. Jdg 1:13.

d. Jdg 3:8–11.

people and an empire-defeater.²³ What is Caleb doing? He is helping his daughter to guard the gold.

Meanwhile, Othniel himself also welcomes this approach to mate-finding as a quest for the best girl for him. Apparently, she is quite a motivating prize. He responds to a problem requiring uncommon leadership. He goes out there, seeking the best girl that covenant, faithful leadership could win. He also is guarding the gold.

So it is not wrong to view dating as a quest for a prize. But it is a quest with many winners and no one grand prize. Thankfully, your heart is not a lock to which only one soul out there has the key. Rather, in cooperation with God's providence, you are looking for one worth enjoying your gold. Because finding a mate also depends upon God's gracious providence, I cannot guarantee that you will win a spouse. But if you play this game well, as we explore in chapter 11, you will not lose out on a prize.

The Various Glitters of Gold

Some men and women tend to shy away from the idea of finding a spouse as a competition. One big reason is that they fear that they will fail at it. Perhaps you do not feel like you can measure up in such a game. You feel you have a lengthy list of drawbacks. You have been at it too long. You were never confident at flirting. You do not come up with witty things to say.

Or perhaps you are not so great looking. Youth has a way of making almost all of us somewhat attractive, but let's say that looks are not your strong suit. You need

to know something: good looks are great, but they are over-rated.^a The degrading split-decision apps that invite us to swipe right to judge hot or not, to smash or pass, completely miss this. Beauty is certainly a good gift, and a powerful one for winning a mate,^b but it is not the only one.^c Go read the play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, or at least watch a movie like *Shrek* or *Shallow Hal*, to help yourself believe that this could be true. It is. God has distributed gifts amply to the people He makes.

The book of Proverbs was the training manual for the royal youth of the ancient Davidic Kingdom. The very section of Proverbs advising these Israelite young men of the royal court on women qualifies the ideal of beauty. The final passage of the book advises the youth on how to evaluate a woman for marriage, and its concluding two verses invite taking inventory of a feminine prospect. The author candidly acknowledges different qualities you could rank, such as beauty and charm.^d But how a woman relates to the Lord comes out on top. In the long run this makes the greatest difference in the quality of a man's life and even, truth be told, in how good their sex is.

Eleanor was lounging across a chair in the fellowship hall after church. She had just finished nursing and was relaxing while listening to the trials of Harper, a younger single woman. Harper was bemoaning how guys are so fixated on a woman's appearance. It put so much pressure on her. Eleanor startled the young woman with her

a. Pro 11:22.

b. Gen 29:17-18.

c. 1Pe 3:4.

d. Pro 31:30.

counsel: “Your uptightness is working against getting a guy,” she explained. “Look, I am sexier than you are.” Now, just to note, having a baby often changes a woman’s form. The demands of birthing and breastfeeding leave the body with a different shape. Eleanor had had a few babies already and had become somewhat chunky. Harper, on the other hand, had a noticeably youthful figure. But despite their relative bodies, Eleanor was right. Her confidence as a woman, her assurance of her gifts, did give her a superior sexuality, if I can put it that way. It is not all about looks.

You likely underestimate the attractions of your strengths. The trick to getting a good date is to find your best gifts and to flaunt them. What has the Lord given you to win a high-quality prize? You might be rejected by the first one you want. But that is not the end of the game.

One of the most romantic stories you may ever hear confronts us early on in the Bible, in the tale of a famous couple coming together. Their names were Boaz and Ruth. Ruth, a recent immigrant, was known to Boaz. She and her mother-in-law had come into hard times, and he had been kind to them. Ruth then came and rather forwardly offered herself to this man asleep on the threshing floor.^a The euphemism used by the author, that she “uncovered his feet,”^b is tricky to interpret. It could mean something much more than the feet. At the very least, it was a forward action. Boaz awakens and responds by blessing her: “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that

a. Rut 3:7-15.

b. Rut 3:7.

you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.”^a

This action and response tell us a few things. First, it tells us that Boaz was likely not that handsome. If he was, he wouldn't be commending Ruth for offering herself to him rather than some young handsome man. Second, it tells us that Ruth was probably very beautiful. Even after marrying and becoming a widow and lacking money and status, Boaz's words mean that she *could have* won another dashing, handsome or rich guy for herself. Third, it tells us that there was something else about Boaz, besides his looks, that won the beautiful Ruth. The rest of the book of Ruth tells us what it was: Boaz's covenant faithfulness and kindness to her mother-in-law and to her. If you haven't, you might want to read it.

Whatever you've got, I am going to teach you how to win this quest's prize. The task is not to find the only one person that you should be with. From our earthly perspective, we cannot know such a thing, and the Scriptures do not teach us to think that way. Rather, the quest before you is to win the best mate for you that you can. But you cannot even get out of the gate unless you are ready to enter the arena while guarding the gold.

Proverbs puts it this way: “He who finds a wife finds a good thing.”^b So let's go look.

a. Rut 3:10.

b. Pro 18:22.

Part II

Is This the One?

This is not a book for married people. While wedded folk may find some useful marriage principles herein, such people differ in one very big way: They are no longer contestants in this dating game. You are yet in the realm of decision. You need some different counsel. To care for your date and yourself, you should be determining, with steel nerves, whether you two should make that journey over the mountain of infatuation to the valleys beyond of living together. Or not. One thing you must never do is get married just to get married. The answer to poor marriage statistics is not to push more people into marriage. Nor is it to cohabitate or to put off the whole enterprise for ten years. Instead, the answer is for those dating to have high standards.

Part I explained that marriage begins way before the marriage with deciding whom to marry. Marriage begins with choosing well by dating well. The question in the title above does not mean that there is only one person out there that you could or should marry. But it does mean having standards by which to test a potential mate. This may seem cold or calculating to you. You might think, *Can't we just spend time together and see if it works?* What I am proposing is that you do two things: enjoy your time together *while* you are measuring this maybe-mate. We inevitably do this measuring anyway, don't we? The servant of Abraham had a test to find a bride

for Isaac.^a The mother of King Lemuel rates qualities in looking for a good wife.^b So let's have standards and be thoughtful about what exactly we are measuring.

But what standards? In some tribes of Borneo, even into the twentieth century, a man needed to behead an enemy to be eligible for marriage. I think we can pass on that one. Some people look for “love at first sight” or, the soft version of that principle, “I knew it from the first date.” That is nice when it happens. But it is not *the* sign that you should be together. We would be unwise to place too much weight on that first-date feeling.

Other standards may make finding a mate improbable—such as, he must make this amount of money or she must have these physical measurements. Instead, have wise standards and allow these other things to take their rightful place as preferences, perhaps even strong preferences, but not deal-breakers, things that you would like but not the determinants of moving forward with the relationship. Because money or measurements or magical moments (I know this is hard to believe) will not keep your marriage together.

Let's make use of your dates. Besides grabbing a good time, experiencing the euphoria of falling in love, and luxuriating in no longer having to stand alone at parties, let's make your dates count. Let's make sure your dates are moving you somewhere, toward the goal of sober commitment or affectionate parting with gratitude for lessons learned, as we saw in chapter 1.

The test I offer you is a mere twelve questions: six

a. Gen 24:1-27.

b. Pro 31:30.

for guys, six for gals. You will get three questions to ask about her or him and three questions to ask about yourself. Part II (chapters 5–7) focuses on the other person. Part III (chapters 8–10) focuses on you. Seems easy enough, right? The questions are phrased as “Can he/she/I do this thing: X?” That is simple, right? No big deal. I could have phrased the questions as, “Does he/she/I do this thing?” But instead, I ask it the first way because sometimes the ability is not there yet, but the potential is. And that may be enough.

Here, then, are three tests of your relationship:

The Asymmetry of Origin — If you are the guy, ask if she brings you rest, perhaps in a way you haven’t known before. Can her words, her deeds, or simply her presence be a home for you? If you are the woman, ask if he makes you secure in what he does, or if you think he could.

The Asymmetry of Order — As a woman, ask if he takes charge for your care and development. Is he able to step forward in responsibility for your sake? As a man, do you think she can honor you? Can she put you forward as a head? Is she ever able to surrender prerogative to you?

The Asymmetry of Intent — As a woman, you should ask if this man can lead in the mission you will have together. Can he find out why it is that God brought you together and what you should be doing for the Kingdom of heaven on earth? Likewise, as a man, you should ask if this woman has the divine spark to move your co-mission forward? Can she fit and empower what you see as God’s standout purposes?

Let’s look at how these questions work, to help you evaluate your date as you are dating. Ask the questions

that are going to matter in the long-term. Dating is a genderly quest. Guard the gold. Don't sell yourself short.

Part III

Am I the One?

It is good to see if your potential partner can perform the things from Part II for you. Can he or she fit you well? But marriage is a means of sanctification also. So, the testing going on is the testing of you too.

If you have read the previous questions for the opposite gender and nodded, saying to yourself, *Yes, I could do that for her,*” or *Oh yeah, I got that down for him easy,* you maybe can stop reading. If not, what follows might be the more important set of questions to ask as you date and think of marriage.

The questions are about whether you are ready. When Scott became a Christian at age twenty, he stopped fooling around and started thinking seriously about marriage. It seemed to be part of the package. Newly committed to a life of righteousness, he now wanted to do it God’s way. His younger brother Sean was a big part of his conversion and, when Scott saw Sean marry and begin raising two beautiful daughters, he wanted to emulate that. Well, Scott dated for the next ten years with nothing ever working out. By age thirty-one, he had begun to think, *Maybe marriage is not God’s plan for me.*

In a last-ditch effort on a Christian dating site, Scott met Sophia. This first date was different. He had a confidence at this point that propelled him. Because he liked her so much, he invited her to walk with him to one of

his favorite spots, a waterfall in the woods. This was an unusual request for a first date—Sophia had just met Scott in person. But this date was different for her also. There was something very mature about this man. She decided to risk that he wasn't an axe murderer and took the walk.

It just clicked. Each came home from the date thinking: *I've met the person I am going to marry*. In this case, they were right! Though Scott proceeded prudently and they got engaged six months later, that unusual first night convinced them that this one was the one. What really crystallized at that moment? You might want to call it love at first sight, but, actually, it was a love for which God had been preparing each of them for a very long time. Things had not worked out for Scott largely because the ways he had learned to behave before converting to Christ continued as a pattern for him for a long time. Sophia herself had just come off of a very long relationship terminating in a painful but instructive end. She had changed through all of that. On that night, Scott was now ready for a wiser Sophia. Sophia was now ready for a great Scott. Are you ready for the kind of match God wants for you?

I am going to help you ask yourself the questions to find out. How do you do in making her secure? Do you think you could? Or do you seem to be able to bring him to a place of rest by your words, your deeds, or simply your presence? And can you be that firstborn for her? Can you step forward in responsibility for her sake? Or can you put him forward as a head, to surrender prerogative to him as a potential husband? And do you think you can find the purpose from God that encompasses you

both? Or can you fit in that mission? Can you empower it? Can you practice these three asymmetries at all in your dating?

I bet you have been told many times that getting married will not solve all your problems. What you have been told is true. If you think that marriage will bring you only bliss, you are heading for trouble. It may not even solve all of your loneliness. But it is also true that God will use your marriage, if it is a good marriage, to bring you to glories you cannot even imagine now.

So, to get to a wedding day with the one who should be the one, let's go back once more, with a new focus, to the beginning.

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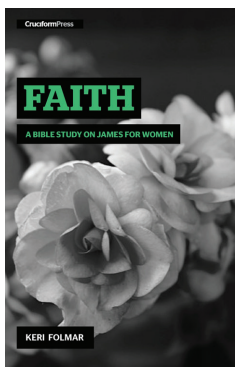
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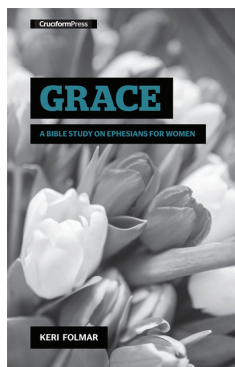
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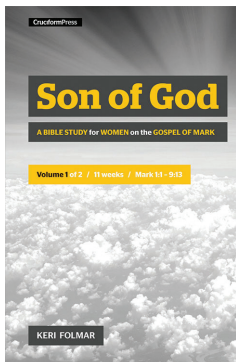
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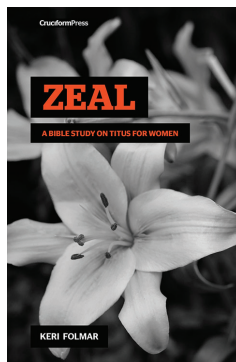


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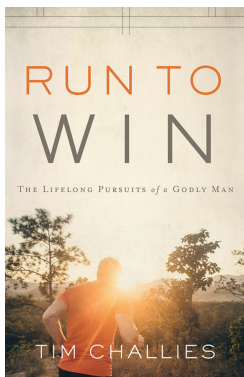
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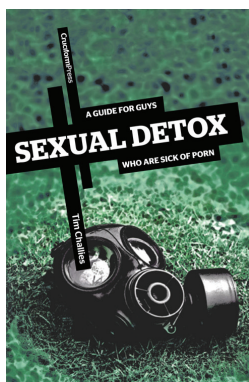
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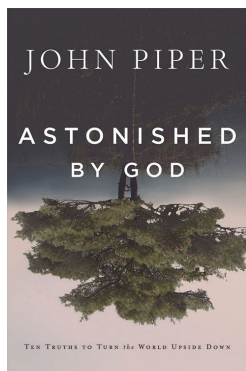
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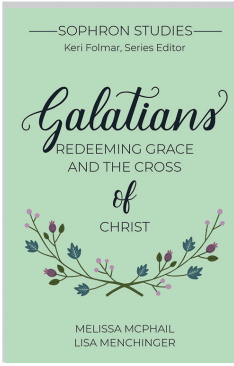
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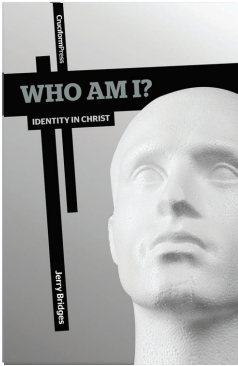


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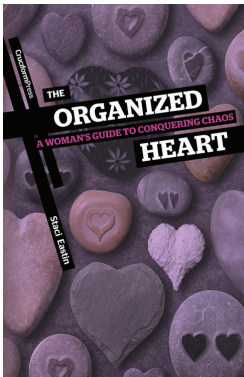


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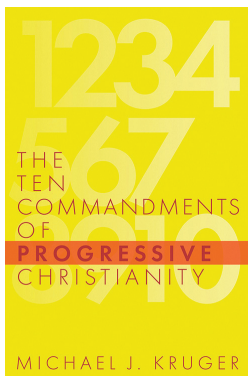


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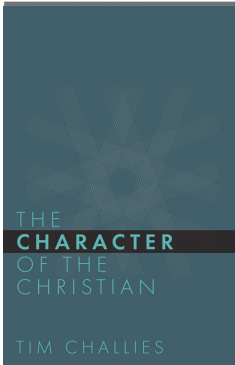


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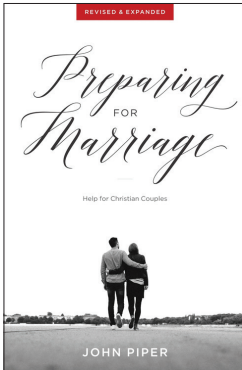


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