



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

WHAT IS
MARRIAGE:
A BIBLICAL
GUIDE TO LOVE
AND UNITY



BOB KAUFLIN

WHAT IS
MARRIAGE:
A BIBLICAL
GUIDE TO LOVE
AND UNITY



BOB KAUF LIN

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
PART I: WHAT IS MARRIAGE?.....	10
PART II: WHAT IS MARRIAGE FOR?	14
PART III: HOW DO I FIND A SPOUSE?	21
PART IV: THE DIFFERENCE THE GOSPEL MAKES.....	30
PART V: MARRIAGE FOR THE LONG HAUL	39
CONCLUSION.....	41
ENDNOTES.....	42

WHAT IS MARRIAGE



INTRODUCTION

I don't remember precisely when I met my wife, Julie. But one moment stands out.

It was Valentine's Day, 1972, during our senior year of high school. I gave her a handmade card that read, "Joy is not in things, it is in us...and especially in you."

It was a moving sentiment, meant to encourage a girl who seemed a little withdrawn. As the senior class president, choir accompanist, and a genuinely likable guy (in my own mind), I figured Julie would be honored to get a card from me. Just like the other 16 girls who got one.

Whether those girls were impressed, I'll never know. Julie, however, actually responded. She wrote me a long note to tell me she liked me. A lot. But I didn't intend my card to lead to a deeper relationship. At least not with Julie. So I started acting awkward around her and, at one point, wrote her a song called "You Go the Way You Wanna Go." I'll spare you the details, but the main point was, "I'm okay being your friend, but not your BOYfriend."

But Julie persisted and eventually wore me down, partly due to the fact that she made great brownies and had a car. That summer we began dating and in the fall I went to Temple University as she headed to work on a show horse farm.

A year later she applied to Temple and got in. We were still dating, but I had doubts about whether she was "the one." So that Thanksgiving I broke up with her, right after taking her to see the movie, *The Way We Were*. Classy, I know.

FIELD GUIDE

Over the next two years, most of our conversations consisted of me telling her to rejoice in the Lord (we had both become Christians by now) and to look for romance elsewhere. But in time, God used Julie to expose my deep and pervasive pride. I wanted her to be a 10 when I was about a 3. I began to see that no one had loved me like Julie, in spite of my constant rejection. No one was as faithful, encouraging, or generous to me. And when I was walking closely with the Lord it seemed clear that I was supposed to marry her.

So two years after we broke up, on Thanksgiving again, I asked Julie to marry me. Miraculously, she said yes. Over five decades later, I'm more grateful than ever that she did.

I start with that story to highlight the fact that God loves to take hopeless relationships and turn them into something for his glory. He's not intimidated nor surprised by our flaws, sins, weaknesses, and blindness. On the contrary, in his wise and sovereign hands they become the means by which he gets his work done. Just as there are no perfect couples, there are no irredeemable couples.

You might be single, recently married, or a few years in. Maybe you're enjoying the thrill of the honeymoon phase or just want to strengthen an already solid relationship. Or you could be starting to think that being husband and wife isn't all it's cracked up to be. Maybe you're desperately looking for hope wherever you can find it and wondering how long you can hold on.

Whatever situation you're in, I pray this field guide will give you fresh faith as a current or future spouse and cause you to marvel at God's wisdom and kindness in creating this relationship we call marriage in the Bible.

In our present cultural moment, marriage is under attack from every quarter. People are confused and in conflict about who can get married, how many people can be part of a marriage, and whether being married is even necessary or desirable. That confusion raises a basic question: what is marriage really? So we're going to look to the only authoritative, trustworthy, and eternal source: God's Word. These four Biblical truths will guide everything else we will say.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

Marriage Is God's

If human beings had invented marriage, we'd have the right to define it. But God established marriage, as Jesus said, "from the beginning of creation" (Mark 10:6). God himself presided over the first wedding. And from the earliest pages of Genesis we can see the purpose of marriage and the foundation of Biblical marriage as God designed it.

No external sources or footnotes are introduced in this section beyond Scripture references already present.

1. *Marriage is exclusively between two people.* God created the first couple in his image, "male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). He didn't start with a threesome or foursome. While marriages become communities with the addition of children, the marriage bond is uniquely between two people. This reflects the marriage between man and woman that Scripture consistently presents. The practice of polygamy not long after Adam and Eve (Gen. 4:19) only shows how pervasive sin had become in the human heart. This exclusivity and limitation is why God views adultery, premarital sex, and other forms of sexual activity apart from the covenant of marriage as illegitimate, destructive, and contrary to his design (Prov. 5:20–23; 6:29, 32; 7:21–27; 1 Cor. 7:2–5; 1 Thess. 4:3–7; Heb. 13:4).
2. *Marriage involves two members of the opposite sex.* The two people who form a marriage aren't identical. Marriage didn't start with two men or two women. God made Adam's rib "into a woman and brought her to the man" (Gen. 2:22). Men and women can have a deep, meaningful relationship with members of their own sex, but in God's eyes it can never be called a marriage. This foundational truth shapes the Christian marriage meaning revealed in Scripture.
3. *Marriage is God joining a couple for life.* When Jesus told the Pharisees that a husband and wife were one flesh (quoting Gen. 2:24), he went on to add: "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:9). God didn't join Adam and Eve for as long as they both were "in love," but for as long as they both were living. This lifelong union explains why Scripture speaks of marriage for life and addresses what does the Bible say about divorce with such seriousness.

FIELD GUIDE

4. *Marriage involves unique roles.* The different roles for men and women, and more specifically for husbands and wives, were established by God before the fall (Gen. 3:6). While Adam and Eve were both created in God's image and played equally important roles in fulfilling God's command to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28), they had unique responsibilities. These distinctions are essential to understanding Biblical marriage and the God-given order within marriage in the Bible.

God commanded Adam in Genesis 2:15 to work and keep the garden, but he didn't leave him to do it alone. God gave him Eve, a "helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). Some have suggested that because God himself is described at times as a "helper" (Ex. 18:4; Hos. 13:9), that term can be used interchangeably for men and women. But Adam is never referred to as Eve's helper and thus was given a unique leadership role. Adam was created first (Gen. 2:7), given responsibility to work and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15), named the animals and his wife (Gen. 2:20, 3:20), and was told to leave his father and mother, anticipating the day other men would have parents (Gen. 2:24). These patterns help clarify what is marriage according to God's original design.

Those distinctions are confirmed and clarified in the New Testament (Eph. 5:22–29; Col. 3:18–19; 1 Tim. 2:13; 1 Cor. 11:8–9; 1 Pet. 3:1–7). There is no difference between a husband's and wife's acceptance, equality, or worth before God, as Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:28. But the wife has the unique joy and responsibility to follow and support her husband just as the husband has the privilege of leading, loving, and providing for his wife. This ordered harmony between husband and wife lies at the heart of Biblical marriage and is consistently affirmed throughout marriage in the Bible.

Marriage Is Good

You may have grown up in a home with parents who fought incessantly. Maybe you bear the scars of the wreckage left behind by a nasty divorce. Or it's possible you just don't know many married people who are happy. The year Julie and I got married, my parents, her parents, and our pastor all went through a divorce. It didn't exactly build our faith for our new life together!

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

But God says, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD” (Prov. 18:22). These are not merely encouraging words but foundational Bible verses about marriage that reveal God’s heart. Marriage is a blessing and a sign of God’s favor. That’s why when the Lord saw Adam alone in the garden, he said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18). Adam didn’t seem to know he needed someone. But God knew. And he knows every man will benefit from the companionship, counsel, intimacy, and fruitfulness marriage brings. Whatever bad examples we may have seen or experienced in our lives, marriage is still good, because it was God’s idea and central to the purpose of marriage.

Marriage Is a Gift

When Jesus told the Pharisees that God forbade divorce except in the case of sexual immorality, his disciples were shocked. They thought Jesus was setting the standard too high. “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” But Jesus doubled down: “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given...Let the one who is able to receive this receive it” (Matt. 19:10–12; cf. 1 Cor. 7:7). These words help frame what does the Bible say about divorce within the larger goodness of God’s design.

The ability to flourish in marriage is a gift from God to those who are willing to receive it. It’s not something to be achieved or demanded. It can’t be earned or bargained for. At the same time, it’s not meant to be a burden, a nuisance, or something to fear. It’s a gracious gift from a wise, good, and loving Father who knows best what we need.

Marriage Is Glorious

If marriage truly is everything we’ve said thus far — God’s, good, and a gift — it follows that marriage is glorious. Of course, in our minds we might be replacing “is” with “should be.” Can we really say that marriage in itself is glorious? Absolutely. To see a man and a woman, each affected by the fall and their own sinfulness, walk out a lifelong covenant to serve, be devoted to, care for, support, sexually fulfill, love, and be faithful to each other is a marvel, a wonder, and truly glorious. This lived reality reflects the beauty of Godly marriage as Scripture intends.

FIELD GUIDE

But the ultimate and most spectacular reason marriage is glorious is found not in the marriage itself, but in what it represents. And that leads to the next question we'll explore: What is marriage for?

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Did any of this section help clarify for you what marriage is? Can you think of any married couples you know who faithfully display this kind of marriage?
2. Can you explain in your own words why marriage is God's, good, a gift, and glorious?

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

1

PART I: WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

We've briefly looked at four characteristics of marriage as portrayed in God's Word. But we've waited to talk about the *purpose* of marriage. What does it all mean? Why did God institute marriage in the first place?

To Display Christ's Relationship with the Church

We see signs throughout the Old Testament that marriage is a metaphor for God's relationship with his people. The prophet Isaiah encourages Israel by reminding them, "Your Maker is your husband" (Is. 54:5). In the book of Jeremiah, God scathingly refers to Israel's faithlessness as adultery and playing the whore (Jer. 3:8). Yet the prophet Hosea assures Israel that God will betroth them to himself forever (Hos. 2:19–20).

But it's not until we get to the New Testament that God fully reveals the "mystery" that was hidden until Christ came: Marriage points to the relationship between Jesus and his bride, the church.

As Paul writes, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:31–32).

When God wanted to communicate the intensity, depth, beauty, power, and unchanging nature of Christ's relationship with those he redeemed, he instituted marriage. No other relationship so fully mirrors God's ultimate purposes in the universe as the lifelong covenant between a husband and his wife. It's a living, breathing illustration of the Gospel of grace.

It's true that God describes his relationship with us in other ways: a father to his children (Is. 63:16), a master to his servant (Is. 49:3), a shepherd to

FIELD GUIDE

his flock (Ps. 23:1), a friend to a friend (John 15:15). But at the beginning of the Bible and at the very end, it's a bride and a groom.

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:2–4).

Here, at the end of history, we see the aim of history. God is finally dwelling with his people, and it's a husband and his bride — Jesus and the church — enjoying a perfect union forever.

Every wedding in this life, as magnificent as some might be, pales in comparison to the marriage supper of the Lamb yet to come (Rev. 19:9). Marriage represents a love so glorious, so enduring, so powerful, so joy-filled, it will take your breath away. And this becomes even clearer when we see it from God's perspective:

- At a wedding, we see two flawed individuals promising to love each other for as long as they live. God sees Jesus promising to love his people for eternity. This contrast helps us understand what is marriage from God's perspective.
- At a wedding, we see two individuals saying "I do," not knowing what lies ahead. God sees Jesus, before time began, saying "I do," knowing exactly what would come. This reflects the deeper Christian marriage meaning rooted in divine purpose rather than human certainty.
- At a wedding, we see a beautiful wedding and reception that will be over in a few hours. God sees an eternal banquet of joy, peace, and love, celebrating the union of Christ and his bride, made spotless through the atoning work of Christ (Rev. 19:9). These Bible verses about marriage lift our eyes beyond the ceremony to eternal realities.

This means marriage isn't ultimately about us. It can't be, because marriages in this life are temporary. Though lovers may promise eternal

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

devotion to one another, in the new heavens and earth, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matt. 22:30). Being husband and wife is about the privilege of displaying to a lost and watching world the faithfulness, holiness, passion, mercy, perseverance, and joy that characterize the eternal relationship between Jesus and those he died to save. This is the true purpose of marriage revealed throughout marriage in the Bible.

To Make Us More Like Christ

Given how glorious marriage is, it should be evident that none of us is up to the assignment! That was especially true in my case. I often look back on our wedding day and wonder what led me to think I was ready to get married. I was proud, self-centered, immature, lazy, and confused. Not to mention poor.

But in God’s kindness, he uses Biblical marriage to conform us to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29). We don’t stay the same person. Of course, God can change us when we’re single. But marriage in the Bible brings a new set of challenges that range from the silly (which way to hang the toilet paper, how to get somewhere, what determines “messy”), to the significant (where to live, what church to join, how to spend your money). Decisions once made on our own now involve another person. And that person happens to sleep in your bed!

God’s instructions to husband and wife in the New Testament show us what kind of change he’s after. Wives are to submit to and respect their husbands (Eph. 5:22, 33). Husbands are commanded to love their wives, to give themselves up for them, and to cherish them as their own bodies (Eph. 5:25, 28–29). Peter says wives are to be subject to their husbands and focus on an internal, rather than external, beauty (1 Pet. 3:1–3). He says husbands are to pursue understanding their wives (rather than assume they know what they’re thinking), and to view them as co-heirs of God’s grace (1 Pet. 3:7). These specific commands, often summarized under Ephesians 5 marriage, go against the grain of our sinful tendencies as men and women, and at the same time assure us that God wants to use our spouse to change us. Are you looking for opportunities to be less selfish, proud, angry, independent, domineering, and impatient? This is part of the purpose of marriage.

FIELD GUIDE

But confronting our sin isn't the only way God changes us in a Godly marriage. It also provides a context for modeling and experiencing firsthand the kind of love, mercy, and grace that Christ has shown us. In the context of companionship, forgiveness in marriage, encouragement, and kindness, God softens our hearts and deepens spiritual intimacy, wooing us by his Spirit into the likeness of Christ.

To Expand God's Kingdom

Up to this point, we haven't touched on how children fit into the Christian marriage meaning. But throughout Scripture, children are seen as a reward, a joy, and something for which we should pray (Ps. 113:9; 127:3; Gen. 25:21). Barrenness is described alternatively as a cause for grief or a sign of discipline (1 Sam. 1:6–7; Gen. 20:18). God brings husband and wife together so that they might be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth with other image-bearers who will bring him glory (Gen. 1:22, 28).

That doesn't mean a childless couple is sinning or outside of God's will. Some couples are unable to conceive. Others have chosen to delay having children for various reasons. One can't say that to be truly fulfilled, a husband and wife must bear children. But the family remains one of the surest and most fulfilling contexts for raising disciples who will be ambassadors for Christ as they grow older, reflecting the enduring vision of marriage for life.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Were any of the purposes of marriage in this chapter new to you? Are any of them particularly challenging to your understanding of what is marriage?
2. If you're married, how do you seek to display these purposes? If you're not yet married, how would you hope to display them?

2

PART II: WHAT IS MARRIAGE FOR?

It's likely that some people reading this field guide are single. So I want to talk about the season between friendship and engagement and how it relates to Biblical marriage. How does someone navigate that potentially awkward, tense, uncomfortable, anxiety-producing time? Does it have to be that confusing? Is there a Biblical process rooted in the purpose of marriage?

As my opening story made evident, I didn't have a clue what I was doing when Julie and I were dating. But after walking our six kids through weddings, and talking to hundreds of singles preparing for Christian marriage, it's a lot clearer than it used to be!

The Bible describes three basic relationships as adults: friends, engaged, and married. Each one involves a commitment that ultimately prepares us for husband and wife life.

- In friendship, we commit to serving the Lord and others.
- In engagement, we commit to marry someone.
- In marriage, we commit to fulfilling God's purposes as a husband or wife within marriage in the Bible.

It's tempting to create a new category between the first two. We even come up with unique names for it: dating, courtship, super-friendship, pre-discovery, having a special friend, and being intentionally involved.

Whatever we call it, it's not a new status with special privileges like physical intimacy—which Scripture reserves for Biblical marriage—or authority over one another's schedules. We're engaging in a new pursuit that will hopefully enable us to discern God's will while honoring God's boundaries

FIELD GUIDE

regarding premarital sex. Essentially, we remain friends who are committed to discovering whether or not this is the person we want to spend our lives with in a Godly marriage. Here are some principles that can guide us along the way of discovery.

Know What It Means to Be a Friend

God speaks specifically to what kinds of friendships glorify him, and those commands don't become irrelevant when we're exploring whether or not someone could be a future spouse within Christian marriage meaning. They become our foundation.

- “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24). Friends care about you specifically and personally.
- “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Prov. 17:17). Friends aren't fickle or fair-weather. They stick around during hard times.
- “A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends” (Prov. 16:28). Friends don't gossip or slander about each other.
- “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Prov. 27:6). Friends tell you the truth about yourself for your good.
- “Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel” (Prov. 27:9). Friendships are strengthened and sweetened by intentional conversation.

Romans 12:9–11 sheds more light on what God-honoring friendships look like and how they prepare us for Biblical marriage:

“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord” (Rom. 12:9–11).

In other words, the primary focus of a friendship is serving, not selfishness; encouraging, not enticing; preparing, not playing. Friendship is to be characterized by authenticity, Godliness, honor, zeal, and service—virtues

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

essential for a future husband and wife relationship. In fact, the more we aim to serve others, the more opportunities we find for relationships to develop.

But what happens when you meet someone you think could be a potential spouse? Before we even begin to ask whether he or she is *the one*, we need to ask ourselves, “Could I be *the one* for someone else?” If the answer is “no,” then you don’t even need to be thinking about what is marriage yet.

In his book *Single, Dating, Engaged, Married*, Ben Stuart describes those two approaches as the difference between a consumer mentality and a *companion* mentality. As a *consumer*, I think about what I want, what I’m looking for, and what will serve me. It’s a short-sighted, self-centered perspective that turns people into products. But people aren’t products. They’re human beings made in the image of God, worthy of the dignity reflected in Biblical marriage.

In contrast, a companion mentality realizes: I have something to contribute to the relationship, and it asks if I can contribute meaningfully to a life together with this person, not if they simply check all my boxes.

So let’s assume you’re in a position to start looking for a spouse. At some point, you find a person you’re attracted to. It may be their Godliness, their laugh, their appearance, their humility, or the way they serve. You like this person and want to be with them more, potentially discerning a future marriage covenant meaning grounded in Scripture.

What happens next looks different for men and women. Generally, men are the ones who initiate, and women are the ones who respond. But we’re going to look at six characteristics in this time of pursuit and exploration that will serve both genders as they prepare for Christian marriage advice in the next sections.

1. Pursue with Humility

It’s not uncommon for couples to be well into a relationship before they think about seeking counsel. Maybe we trust ourselves, don’t want others to tell us it’s a bad idea, or are excited that someone actually likes us. But

FIELD GUIDE

Scripture tells us that, “Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered” (Prov. 28:26).

The number of singles who have humbly sought counsel about a new relationship is dwarfed by those who pursued a relationship independently and ended up in self-centeredness, sadness, or sin. This kind of humility is foundational Christian marriage advice, even before marriage begins.

Ask your friends, parents, small-group leader, or pastor whether it’s wise to explore a relationship with this individual. Keep them up to date for accountability, encouragement, and prayer—practices that often grow into lifelong prayers for marriage. And make sure you’re asking people who will be brutally honest with you!

2. Pursue with Prayer

James promises, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). Exploring the potential of marrying someone requires a great deal of wisdom. But it’s important to distinguish between praying for wisdom and praying God would make a certain person your future spouse. I’ve known individuals in a relationship who only prayed it would lead to marriage. But that’s not praying for wisdom. It’s asking for a result. Humble prayer says we’re willing to hear from God as to whether or not a particular person could be our spouse in a Biblical marriage.

3. Pursue with Integrity

God tells us that, “Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out” (Prov. 10:9). Walking in integrity means being clear about what’s happening in your relationship.

A girl (or a guy) shouldn’t be wondering why you’re suddenly spending so much time together. There should be a conversation. The man should make it clear that he wants to find out whether God intends this relationship to lead to marriage and that he wants to pursue growing knowledge, not growing intimacy. And as a father of four girls, I can assure you that in most cases, it’s helpful to check in with the girls’ father to communicate your intentions. This kind of clarity helps prevent confusion later in conflict resolution marriage situations.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

As the relationship develops, talk about how things are going and what the next steps look like. Are you seeing each other too much? Too little? Talk about encouraging things, as well as any concerns. It can be helpful to allow for times without communication as well, to give each other space to process the relationship.

If any flags or checks arise, you should talk about them openly and honestly. You haven't committed to a lifelong relationship yet. If the concerns are serious—such as theological differences or lifestyle choices—and can't be resolved, you can end the relationship as friends. Scripture's warning about being unequally yoked (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14) is especially relevant here. "Whoever gives an honest answer kisses the lips" (Prov. 24:26).

4. Pursue with Purity

Confusion in the area of purity is one of the greatest hindrances to a God-glorifying time of discovery. But Scripture indicates that any type of sexual arousal between a man and woman is reserved for the covenant of marriage. This is why the Bible consistently warns against premarital sex. First Thessalonians 4:3–6 tells us we are not to walk in the passion of lust like unbelievers, that sinning in this area affects others, and that sexual purity is a serious matter in God's eyes. We're to put to death things like "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5). Paul tells Timothy to "treat...younger women like sisters, in all purity" (1 Tim. 5:1–2).

Establish clear guidelines and keep them. During our engagement, Julie and I aimed not to do anything that would arouse either one of us. That might mean something as innocent as holding hands. Sometimes just being near each other could be too much. How much more of a reason to take precaution and exercise self-control!

God doesn't want us to be deceived in this area. Arousing interactions affect us physically and are designed to lead to more of the same. God set it up that way to ensure ongoing sexual relations in marriage to populate the earth.

Proverbs is filled with warnings for those who don't take God's prohibition against sexual sin seriously. If you can sit next to each other in an

FIELD GUIDE

apartment alone at night for two hours and nothing happens, don't assume you're above the possibility of compromise. Being proud that you can handle a potentially tempting situation is often only a prelude to a situation when you can't (Prov. 16:18). God kindly warns us in Proverbs 6:27–28, “Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?”

When in doubt, pursue honoring Christ, not testing your limits.

And remember that while the blood of Christ assures our complete forgiveness for any and every sin, it also means we have been bought with a price—so glorify God in your body (1 Cor. 6:20).

5. Pursue with Intentionality

Exploring a relationship with a potential spouse involves more than hanging out together. Learn as much as you can about the other person to discern whether this is your future spouse. Now is the time to ask as many questions as you can think of, and then ask some more.

Are they a Christian? How well do they understand and apply the Gospel? What is their view of God's Word? How involved are they in their church? What do their friends say about them? How do they work through conflicts—skills that will later shape forgiveness in marriage? What are their goals, hobbies, and interests? How do they relate to their siblings? How do they view men's and women's roles? What is their health history? How do they work through sin, discouragement, and disappointment? What is the direction for their life?

And that's just to get you going. As your questions are answered, God will either confirm your attraction or lead you to end the relationship.

6. Pursue with Faith

I've often talked to single adults who wonder if a season of exploration will ever happen, or are fearful about their current relationship. But God is eager to guide us through this season and wants us to have faith that he will speak clearly as the relationship progresses.

And what is that faith directed towards? For a man, it means he believes God will confirm whether or not he's found the woman that he wants to

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

lead, care for, cherish, provide for, and protect for the rest of his life—a vision rooted in Ephesians 5 marriage teaching (Eph. 5:25–33; 1 Pet. 3:7; Prov. 5:15–19; Col. 3:19). For a woman, it means God will confirm whether or not she’s found the man she wants to serve, respect, love, honor, submit to, encourage, and support for the rest of her life (Eph. 5:22–24; 1 Pet. 3:1–6; Col. 3:18).

More questions should bring either confirmation or concerns. If it’s the latter, a couple can separate in faith, knowing God has spared them from a potentially difficult relationship and will continue to lead them in his perfect will.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. If you’re single, was any of this section helpfully corrective to how you’ve pursued a spouse? How has it reshaped your understanding of Christian marriage advice, and what might you do differently from here as you think about the purpose of marriage?
2. If you’re married, how might you encourage single people you know to pursue a spouse with humility, prayer, integrity, purity, intentionality, and faith—helping them prepare for a Godly marriage marked by wisdom and trust in the Lord?

3

PART III:
HOW DO I FIND
A SPOUSE?

It's been almost fifty years since Julie and I determined getting married would be God's will for us. One might ask how a marriage that started like ours could survive and even thrive through the challenges, sufferings, and unexpected obstacles every couple faces.

God has used various means to contribute to our growth over the years, including our involvement in our local church and the example and counsel of friends. But by far the most important factor has been the Gospel. The Gospel tells us that God created us to live in loving friendship with him. But we rejected him and deserve to be judged for our pride, self-centeredness, and rebellion. So God sent Jesus, his Son, to receive the punishment we deserved and reconcile us to himself forever. Those who believe that good news are confident they will one day meet God not as a judge who sentences them to eternal punishment, but as a Father who welcomes them into eternal joy.

A Biblical marriage is unlike any other marriage because the husband and wife have both experienced God's grace through the Gospel. They don't approach their relationship in their own strength, but benefit from what Jesus accomplished for them and in them through his life, death, and resurrection. This is the heart of Christian marriage meaning and the foundation of a Godly marriage.

But what does that look like? And what are the effects of forgetting or failing to apply the Gospel in our marriage?

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

To answer those questions, we're going to look at three specific ways the Gospel changes how we think about being a husband or a wife in marriage in the Bible.

The Gospel Changes Our Understanding of Our Identity

When we get married, many things about us change. We're in a new relationship, a new family, a new home, and in many ways, we have a new identity. We're no longer single; we're half of a "couple." You're a husband. You're a wife. This reflects the marriage covenant meaning that defines what is marriage according to Scripture.

But at its most foundational level, our identity remains the same. We are "in Christ."

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

In a similar way, Paul tells the Colossians:

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:2–4).

Christ is our life, whether we're single or married. Christ is our life if our spouse dies or if we go through a divorce, shaping even our understanding of the Biblical view of divorce. Without erasing our personality, temperament, history, or character traits, we have become a new person in Christ: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

But sometimes we think our identity is something other than Christ — like our past. We think of ourselves primarily as the person we've always been, a product of our family, experiences, personality, and culture. Certainly, our family background affects us. Suffering abuse while growing up, being raised by a single parent, or experiencing belittling as a child can shape

FIELD GUIDE

the way we relate to our spouse in different ways, influencing spiritual intimacy and our lived experience of Christian marriage advice.

But our past is not our identity. We can be influenced by our past. Our past can explain why we're tempted. Our past can cause us to have an affinity for those who grew up like we did. Our past can explain a lot of things. But our past is not who we are. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11:

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

The Gospel has the power to transform us in such a way that we are no longer ruled by the things we've been through.

Our past is not our identity: Christ is.

Another place we might look for our identity is our role as a wife or husband and wife. We view our role in the marriage as unique or even superior. But as we saw earlier, while the distinctions in the roles of husbands and wives are real, they reflect God's gracious design and don't determine our value before God (Gal. 3:28). This is central to a Biblical marriage and the true Christian marriage meaning.

One effect of rooting our identity in the Gospel is that it frees us from the sin of comparison. Many "communication" problems are in essence "competition" problems. We're not looking for a solution; we're looking for a win. We're competing *with* our spouse, rather than *for* our spouse. But Peter reminds us that husbands and wives together are heirs of "the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7), a truth that shapes healthy spiritual intimacy.

One couple wisely counseled us early in our marriage to "fight the problem, not each other." The "problem" might be sinful judgment, pride, anger, inaccurate information, a world trying to squeeze us into its mold, or the fear of man. We can wage that battle together as co-laborers, not competitors, because we are co-heirs with Christ. He gets the glory, we

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

get the benefits. This mindset is essential for true conflict resolution marriage.

Knowing that our identity is in Christ above anything else will enable us to approach life's problems, challenges, tests, and difficulties with peace, cooperation, and grace. But that doesn't mean we'll never sin against each other.

Which leads to a second effect the Gospel should have on our marriages:

The Gospel Changes Our Understanding of Forgiveness

Forgiveness can seem like one of the highest hurdles in marriage. You expect things to go well, to get along, and for your spouse to agree with you. You anticipate that they'll never sin. But they do.

And sometimes it's hard to forgive them. Worse, our unforgiveness feels justified. We feel sinned against. We feel righteous. We feel they deserve to be punished. That we have a right to hold their sins against them.

That's because when someone sins, an imbalance is created. Justice isn't being served. Someone owes a debt, and until that debt is paid, things can't be right.

So, we pursue different strategies to make things right.

Anger – We lash out with our words or punish through our countenance.

Isolation – We drift away or pull back emotionally and/or physically.

Self-pity – We think, “You don't really care about me.”

Indifference – We communicate, “I don't really care about you.”

Arguing – We push back through confrontation, forced logic, and strong words.

Score-keeping – We think we've earned the right to “win” this one.

None of those are ways God intends us to resolve conflict. But somehow, we move on. Someone mumbles a quick apology. You laugh it off. Or pretend it never happened. But nothing has really changed, and the situation was never resolved.

Only the Gospel can deal with unforgiveness in a thorough and lasting way. That's because God tells us to forgive others the way he has forgiven

FIELD GUIDE

us, establishing forgiveness in marriage as a defining mark of a Godly marriage.

...bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Col. 3:13).

In speaking of this forgiveness, pastor/theologian John Piper writes,

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith is at the very heart of what makes marriage work the way God designed it. Justification creates peace with God vertically, despite our sin. And when experienced horizontally, it creates shame-free peace between an imperfect man and an imperfect woman.¹

How can we experience the “shame-free peace” he talks about? We remember how the Lord has forgiven us.

- **Completely:** “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses” (Col. 2:13). God doesn’t forgive some of our sins. Or a few. Or most. He doesn’t forgive the minor, insignificant ones. He forgives all of them. So we can forgive all the sins of our spouse. This shapes true forgiveness in marriage within a Biblical marriage.
- **Finally:** “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:12). God doesn’t bring up the sins we’ve repented of. He doesn’t rub our faces in them. He doesn’t keep them in his pocket to bring out as a weapon in the heat of an argument. We’re finally forgiven, which protects the marriage for life God intends.
- **Wholeheartedly.** God doesn’t forgive us begrudgingly — wishing he didn’t have to. He doesn’t mutter, “I forgive you” in a half-hearted way. He doesn’t pretend that nothing really happened. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus, “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2). He forgives with all his heart and soul, rejoicing in the restored relationship, just like a father receiving his prodigal son (Luke 15:20).

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

- **Undeservedly:** God doesn't make us prove we're worthy of forgiveness, ask us to jump through hoops, or wait until we've shown we're really sorry. His forgiveness has nothing to do with us and everything to do with him. "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy" (Titus 3:5).

It's God's mercy, not our worthiness, that causes God to forgive us.

It's important at this point to say that we're speaking of forgiveness from the heart, not situations that involve abuse, injustice, or unrepentant ongoing sin that would necessitate consequences. And forgiveness is not the same thing as restored trust or a complete reconciliation. That might require more conversations and actions. This distinction is vital when considering the Biblical view of divorce and what does the Bible say about divorce.

But in most situations when we've been sinned against, God calls us to consider how great our sins against him have been and how he has forgiven us so we might be ready to forgive from the heart. Because in the light of that reality, everything changes. We realize we need forgiveness more than our spouse does. Our sins before God are greater than theirs. And Jesus has paid for the sins of both of us.

None of this means we can demand that our spouse forgive us. Often, it's hard for your spouse to forgive you because you haven't done a very good job confessing your sin.

A confession that leads to forgiveness and reconciliation isn't an accident. After every clear offense, I should aim to do at least four things:

1. **Name my sins.** Call them by Biblical names. "I was *proud, harsh, unkind, selfish.*" Not, "I was a little off, oversensitive, or made a mistake."
2. **Own my sins.** Don't excuse them, justify them, or blame someone else for them.
3. **Express sorrow for my sins.** Grieving what you did is a sign of the Spirit's conviction.

FIELD GUIDE

4. **Ask forgiveness for my sins.** “I apologize” isn’t nearly as meaningful as a simple, “Would you forgive me?” when you want to set things right.

That process can take 15 seconds or two hours, depending on the nature of the offense(s) and what we’re able to see in the moment. It might involve more than one conversation. At different times, you will be the spouse needing to forgive or ask for forgiveness. But for all of us, the Gospel speaks words of hope, comfort, humbling, and assurance, that we can forgive as we have been forgiven. This is at the heart of Christian marriage advice and the purpose of marriage as revealed in Scripture.

The Gospel Changes Our Understanding of Transformation

Sometimes patterns, sinful or otherwise, exist in a marriage that don’t seem to change. It could be as simple as always being late, not picking up clothes, being defensive, or driving badly. It could be more serious, like pornography, worldliness, or bitterness. Apart from the Gospel, change seems impossible. The best we can do is staple fruit to branches while our roots shrivel.

But God really has transformed us, and it’s the Gospel that enables that change to become reality in three ways.

1. *The Gospel gives us the proper motivation.* We aim now to please God. We don’t seek endless self-improvement so we can be proud of what a great husband and wife we are. That leads either to exhaustion or arrogance.

We don’t pursue change just to keep our spouse happy either. That’s a worthy goal, but it’s not ultimate. We can feel trapped, never measuring up to our spouse’s expectations.

Because Jesus died, we no longer live for ourselves, “but for him who for [our] sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:15). In other words, we’ve been freed to please God. As Peter tells us, Jesus “bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24). This motivation lies at the heart of the Christian marriage meaning and is reinforced throughout Bible verses about love.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

2. *The Gospel provides sufficient grace to change.* That grace comes from knowing that our sins and failures have been forgiven. Note how, after Peter encourages us to grow in Godly virtues, he explains what we need to remember in order to grow:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with Godliness, and Godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love... For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins (2 Pet. 1:5–7, 9).

Our growth in Godly virtues depends on remembering the forgiveness we've received through the Gospel. We're not on a never-ending treadmill of failing and asking forgiveness for the same sins, without hope of ever changing. We can change because we have been crucified with Christ, and we no longer live, but Christ lives in us. We have new direction, hopes, desires, and a new destiny. We really have been set free from the power and rule of sin. This lived reality is central to Biblical marriage and echoed in Ephesians 5 marriage.

3. *The Gospel provides strength to endure.* We can persevere because we know God is committed to conforming us to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29–30). God will be faithful to what he has determined to do. He won't leave us hanging.

Ultimately, this is God's battle to win, not ours. He is defending the work of his Son, proving that his once and for all sacrifice on the cross was sufficient to ransom a "people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and make them a kingdom and priests to God, so that they would one day reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:9–10).

God is infinitely more devoted to the strength of our marriages than we are.

So let's not take for granted the greatest hope and power God has given us. Let's not fail to run to the means he's given us in the Gospel for our identity, our forgiveness, and our transformation.

FIELD GUIDE

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How did this section challenge your own understanding of the Gospel and the way it ought to affect your life?
2. In what ways does the Gospel need to transform your marriage, or other relationships in your life?

4

PART IV:
THE DIFFERENCE
THE GOSPEL MAKES

We've looked at God's purpose of marriage, what he intends to accomplish through it, how to go from friendship to engagement with faith and peace, and the foundational role the Gospel plays in our Biblical marriage.

In this final section, we're going to talk about marriage for life—marriage for the long haul. One of the benefits of being married for multiple decades is being able to look back and recognize how God was always working in specific ways in each season to display the glory of Christ's relationship with the church, which lies at the heart of marriage in the Bible.

I've divided those seasons into the early years (1–7), the middle years (8–25), and the later years (26+). The divisions are somewhat arbitrary, with some overlap. The commands and promises of Scripture don't change, regardless of what season we're in. We always need to be submitted to God's Word, rooted in the Gospel, and empowered by God's Spirit in the context of the local church. And priorities in different seasons won't be absent in other seasons.

But as Julie and I have looked back over time, we've seen how aspects of our marriage in the early years contributed to growth in our later years. There has been a cumulative effect in our life together as husband and wife.

FIELD GUIDE

So we'll look at two priorities to focus on in each season that will help strengthen our marriages for the long haul and deepen our understanding of Christian marriage meaning.

The Early Years (1–7): Trust & Humility

The first priority in the early years is building trust. New spouses are often filled with fear and uncertainty. How will things work out? Do I really know my spouse as well as I think I do? Did I make the right decision? What's to say our marriage will last? Maybe you've asked yourself one or more of those questions. Where we go for answers reveals what we trust in, and that trust is essential for a Godly marriage.

The most important trust to develop is trust in God. The psalmist exhorts us, "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us" (Ps. 62:8). In our early years Julie and I had to trust that God had put us together, that he was sovereign, that divorce wasn't an option, and that in his book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for us, when as yet there was none of them (Ps. 139:16).

That kind of trust is cultivated and nurtured through spending time in God's Word and through prayers for marriage, meditating on promises like these:

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted (Job 42:2).

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38–39).

But another kind of trust to develop is horizontal: learning to trust each other.

Trust is something built over time in a marriage. We're getting to know one another. We're learning about our sin patterns, how we respond in crises, and our root convictions. We're finding out how well we know ourselves. This slow, relational work strengthens spiritual intimacy.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

In the early years, couples are either building trust or tearing it down. A husband is giving his wife confidence to believe him or persuading her that it's a foolish thing to do. I remember wanting to impress Julie by appearing to have it all together rather than acknowledging my limitations. I would tell her at times, "Just trust me on this." Not surprisingly, that didn't build her faith.

Here's the problem: Guys can think we're automatically worthy of respect and submission just because we're husbands. But that respect, that submission, that trust—can never be demanded. That doesn't take anything away from God's command to a wife to respect her husband, but a husband has to work at being trustworthy. This reflects the Biblical vision of Ephesians 5 marriage.

Chad and Emily Dixhoorn point that out when they write, "We are told one another's duties for the purpose of making their work a joy to them—just as Scripture puts it, in another context, for ministers and church members (Heb. 13:17)."²

So, rather than telling your wife, "Just trust me," a husband's priority is to work at becoming a man of his word, a man of integrity—a man, in other words, who can be trusted within a Biblical marriage.

Building trust requires focusing on a second area in your early years: humility.

Marriage brings you into constant contact with someone who thinks differently from you in numerous areas, which often leads to conflicts, confusion, bitterness, sinful judgment, and more. What we need in those moments is God's grace. And God tells us how to get it: "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Pet. 5:5).

Humility is the foundation for everything else God wants to do in us through our marriage. But what does humility actually look like? At least three things:

Self-disclosure. Humility involves recognizing your spouse doesn't have the spiritual gift of mind-reading. It shows itself in volunteering information

FIELD GUIDE

about how you feel, what you're thinking, where you're struggling, what you're anticipating, what you're planning, and where you're feeling weak or confused. "Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment" (Prov. 18:1).

Seeking input. "The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight" (Prov. 4:7). It's wise to talk with your spouse about significant things like whether or not to take a job, when to buy a house, when to have kids, or whether to pursue education. But it's no less wise to seek input in smaller decisions, like the best way to get somewhere, how to clean a room, the right way to paint, and how and where to store things. These everyday choices are often where humility—and love—are most clearly displayed in a Christian marriage advice lived out day by day.

Receiving input. Sometimes our spouse gives us feedback we didn't ask for. But no matter how that counsel is offered, we're wise to receive it. "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion" (Prov. 18:2). Humility means considering the perspective of our spouse and being open to the possibility that your perspective could be wrong, even when you're 99.9% sure it's not. That's what humility looks like in a Christian marriage advice context.

The Middle Years (8–25): Pursuit & Perseverance

In Gary and Betsy Ricucci's excellent book, Betsy writes: "We all know that the familiarity and daily routine of marriage can gradually transform passionate devotion into something more like comfortable toleration."³

The middle years hold great potential for comfortable toleration or uncomfortable bitterness. These are the years of growing obligations, increasing commitments, full schedules, job responsibilities, career advancement, and less free time. If you have children, those effects are multiplied. At times, it's all we can do to get through the day as husband and wife.

But our hearts are being shaped during these years, either toward the Lord and his purposes, or toward ourselves and our purposes. We're becoming

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

the married couple we're going to be through repeated patterns, habits, and practices that define marriage for life.

Couples who divorce after decades of marriage have separated in heart long before they separated in body. That's why Proverbs 4:23 instructs us: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." Another way of saying that is, "Love the right things." So, the two words to describe our priority during these years are pursuit and perseverance within Biblical marriage.

Let's consider pursuit first. While there are aspects of our lives we are always to pursue—our relationship with Christ, our church, and our family—I want to highlight three categories for husbands to pursue, drawn from Ephesians 5's marriage teaching and 1 Peter 3.

Pursue laying down your life

After our relationship with the Lord, our greatest pursuit during these years should be learning how to give up our preferences, comfort, and self-focus for our wives. We're still called to lead, protect, guide, and initiate with our wives. But we do those things out of a heart to lay down our lives, not insist on our own way. This is at the heart of Biblical marriage and reflects the purpose of marriage.

We want to practice thinking of our wife's cares, thoughts, feelings, hardships, struggles, and trials first—when we get home from work, on our day off, when something inconvenient happens. Rather than assuming, "She can take care of that," we want to act first.

We might fail consistently in this area. But by God's grace, we can continue to move toward laying down our lives for her and living out a Godly marriage.

Pursue growing in understanding

Peter tells us that husbands are to "live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7). Why? Because so often conflicts spring from a husband exerting all his energy to get his wife to understand *his* perspective instead of pursuing spiritual intimacy.

FIELD GUIDE

Living with your wife in an understanding way involves asking questions like:

- What has her day been like?
- What is she challenged by in my schedule?
- What does she dream about?
- What is she struggling with spiritually? Relationally?
- What is her capacity? What brings her rest?
- What brings joy to her life? What makes her sad?

At one point in our marriage, the only time I heard Julie was when she broke down in tears. That hardly qualified as living with her in an understanding way. Ask your wife sometime in the next week, in an unhurried moment, “What’s one aspect of your life that you think I don’t understand very well?” Then ask her questions about her response. Dig deeper. Pursue a growing understanding that strengthens marriage in the Bible as it is meant to be lived.

Pursue growing affection

Don’t believe that the fires of passion have to die down, or that the thrill of being married fades as the years go by! Christ’s love for the church never wavers, diminishes, loses its zeal, changes, or dies out—and marriage exists to reflect that reality according to what is marriage in God’s design.

Ephesians 5:29 says he “nourishes and cherishes” his bride. His love is ever fervent and passionate. And so should our love be for our wives in a Biblical marriage.

Our culture tells us that love is something we fall in and out of, largely dependent on how we feel and tied to whether the other person is lovable. God tells us, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16). These are timeless Bible verses about love that shape faithful marriages.

For some reason, Julie had a hard time believing I really loved her after we got married. It was 20 years before God did substantial work in her heart, enabling her to believe I did. And ever since then, I’ve been seeking to grow. Here are some of the ways I’ve pursued growing affection:

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

- Date nights. They're never easy, but a regular rhythm makes it easier. Dates don't have to be expensive or even outside the home. But going out can give you a fresh perspective as husband and wife pursuing a Godly marriage.
- Touching. Ever notice how newly married couples are always touching? They're aware of the thrill, the gift, the presence. We never have to lose that thrill of holding the hand of the one God created us to be with. This kind of closeness strengthens spiritual intimacy in Biblical marriage.
- Kissing. Kissing is an intimate act that expresses and stimulates romantic desire. Don't waste your kisses. We've made it a practice to kiss when we leave each other's presence or greet each other. Public displays of affection are a good thing and echo many Bible verses about love.
- Pictures. I keep pictures of my wife on my phone, computer, iPad, and watch. They help me cultivate an eye for my wife's beauty and remember the purpose of marriage God has given us.
- Conversations. There are more than a few times when texting just doesn't cut it. Calls or, even better, FaceTime, bring us closer when we're apart and deepen spiritual intimacy.

You may excel in other ways of showing affection, like writing notes, giving gifts, buying flowers, or using pet names for each other. Do whatever it takes to communicate to your wife that she is unique and treasured in a Biblical marriage.

A second priority for the middle years is perseverance. During these days of full schedules, demanding careers, a growing family, and growing commitments, it can sometimes seem like you're not accomplishing anything significant. Life can devolve into mundane routines, and everything starts to feel like an endless to-do list. This is especially true for a wife who is also a mom.

You long for something more adventurous, more amazing, more out-of-the-box, more exhilarating, more productive—more something. You wonder, is this all there is?

But here's what you're doing.

FIELD GUIDE

As husband and wife, you are living out what God created you for. You're modeling a relationship of cosmic significance, the relationship between Christ and his bride, displaying a love based on covenant—not simply feelings—that says, “I will be faithful to you until I die.” This is the heart of marriage for life and the Christian marriage meaning revealed in Scripture.

Wives are displaying what joyful, faith-filled submission and respect look like in a world that thinks you can only truly be happy if no one is telling you what to do. Husbands are showing our culture what kind, strong, clear, Godly, loving, sacrificial leadership looks like—exactly what Ephesians 5 marriage teaches.

As parents, you're showing your children they are valued, loved, cared for, and protected. You're teaching them that there is a God, that he made them, and that they were made for his glory. You're standing strong against the tidal wave of gender confusion in our culture, raising girls and boys who delight in God's plan. You're building a Gospel culture that will potentially shape generations.

You are part of the church, valuing the gathering every week, being built up into the body of Christ as a testimony of what God is doing in the earth.

So we persevere, remembering God's encouragement: “Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised” (Heb. 10:35–36).

These are the years to walk faithfully in the calling God has given you, knowing that you are serving the Lord, not man. Because we look forward to hearing the Lord himself say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21).

And that won't be because of our faithfulness, but because of his: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:23).

The Later Years (26+): Gratefulness & Servanthood

One of the great temptations in our later years can be to look back with regret or condemnation. We can battle disappointment or even despair —

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

to ask what-if's or why-not's, or be preoccupied with what we did or didn't do, and the poor choices we'll never get to do over.

That's why the later years are a time to prioritize gratefulness. God has brought you to this place, and he has faithfully guided every step, keeping you from evil at times, and redeeming every sin and failure at others. The important thing as we look back is to focus not on our actions, but God's:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him (Ps. 92:12–15).

These are the years to declare that “the Lord is upright and that there is no unrighteousness in him.”

The later years aren't the time to start being grateful. But it is the time to excel in it. Because those who have eyes to see know that their lives have been filled with the kindness and mercy of God, and can say with the psalmist: “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance” (Ps. 16:5–6).

5

PART V:
MARRIAGE FOR THE
LONG HAUL

Julie and I will often remind each other that our blessings far exceed our trials. We look back and see His sovereignty not only in bringing us together as husband and wife, but sustaining us through ovarian surgery early on in our Biblical marriage, two miscarriages, robberies, stolen cars, a daughter whose husband deserted her with five children, a grandson who battled leukemia twice before he was 13, and two recent bouts with breast cancer.

Through it all, God has never failed to be faithful and redeem for good what the enemy meant for evil. And even if we hadn't seen the Lord's faithfulness in carrying us through these trials, we could look back and see that God, without our knowledge or asking, sent his only Son to live the perfect life we could never live, receive the just punishment we deserved, and be raised to new life to give us forgiveness, adoption into God's family, and the confident hope of eternal joy. This hope anchors a Godly marriage far more deeply than circumstances ever could.

So we're grateful. Grateful for God's steadfast, unchanging, never-ending love—the kind of love described throughout the Bible verses about love that shape the heart of marriage in the Bible.

The second priority for the later years is servanthood. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:16 that our outer self is wasting away, and that's all too evident. But the older years are not the time to kick back, live for ourselves, and not serve anyone. Opportunities abound, especially for couples

WHAT IS MARRIAGE

committed to marriage for life. And here's why it makes so much sense as we get older to expect God to use us more to serve others.

We have more time to serve. For most of us during these years, our kids aren't around, we have fewer job responsibilities, and more discretionary time—time that can be invested in encouraging younger couples seeking Christian marriage advice.

We have more wisdom to draw from. If we shared only from our mistakes, we'd have plenty to give to younger couples! But we've also learned from things that have turned out well. Older couples are a wealth of wisdom for those who often have only their peers to turn to for counsel on Biblical marriage and forgiveness.

We have more resources. Gone are the obligations of school, jobs, and raising a family. When I'm asked about retirement, I don't know what to say. Certainly, as the outer man wastes away, it will limit the amount and degree to which we can lay our lives down for others. But I can't help but think of Jesus' words: "For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:27).

Don't we want to be like Jesus? Don't we want to be the one who serves—reflecting the true purpose of marriage as a lifelong testimony of grace?

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Do the stages of marriage described here ring true in your own marriage? How might you grow in the priorities of the stage you're in, whether newly married or pursuing marriage for life?
2. Ask a mentor if there are things he or she has learned in these stages of marriage and discuss how they reflect the Christian marriage meaning taught in Scripture.

FIELD GUIDE



CONCLUSION

I pray this field guide has helped you see that marriage, as God planned it, is worth treasuring. It's worth fighting for. It's worth treating as sacred. And it's something we can pursue with great faith, because as John Newton wrote:

Through many dangers, toils, and snares we have already come
'Tis grace that brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.

Wherever you may be in this wonderful, mysterious, challenging, adventurous, amazing journey of marriage, God's grace will bring you home.

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Heb. 13:20–21).

WHAT IS MARRIAGE



ENDNOTES

1. John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 34.
2. Chad and Emily Van Dixhoorn, *Gospel-Shaped Marriage: Grace for Sinners to Love Like Saints* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 43.
3. Gary and Betsy Ricucci, *Love That Lasts: When Marriage Meets Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 49.



BOB KAUFLIN is a pastor, composer, speaker, writer, and the director of Sovereign Grace Music, a ministry of Sovereign Grace Churches. He serves as an elder at Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville and has written two books: *Worship Matters* and *True Worshipers*. God has blessed him and his precious wife, Julie, with six children and over 20 grandchildren.

