



**LOVE**  
THAT  
**LASTS**

FAMILYLIFE®



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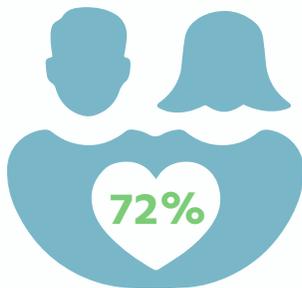
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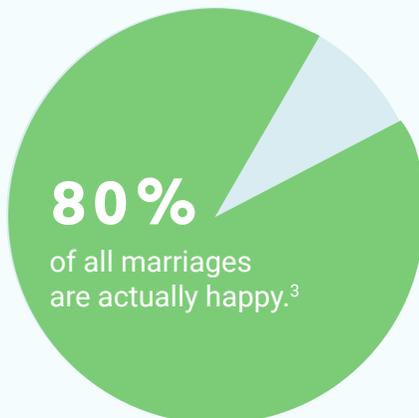


**WEEKLY CHURCH ATTENDANCE/INVOLVEMENT** in a faith based community scientifically lowers your risk for divorce 20-50%.<sup>1</sup>

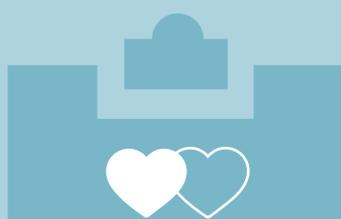
**90%:**  percentage more likely to divorce if you've been married before.<sup>8</sup>



72% of people are still married to their first spouse.<sup>2</sup>



Married couples are generally happier—particularly if the two of you are friends.<sup>9</sup>



**Premarital preparation** can reduce the risk of divorce by 30%<sup>4</sup> and significantly increase marital success.<sup>5</sup>



Your marriage enjoys more well-being if you celebrate your spouse's good news.<sup>10</sup>

**THANK YOU**

Gratitude for your interactions scientifically predicts your connection and satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>



Happier marriages create a separate identity from their families of origin.<sup>12</sup>



● The amount of time chemically one can expect to stay in love.<sup>6</sup>



Happier marriages protect each spouse's autonomy while still building a shared identity and togetherness.<sup>13</sup>

**40:** percentage more likely to divorce, if your parents were divorced.

**Rises to 91%** if your parents married others after divorcing.<sup>7</sup>

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# The Divorce Announcement That Shouldn't Have Surprised Me

BY TRACY LANE

***We'd been sufficiently warned. We were working against all the odds to stay together: Divorced homes. Demanding careers. And now, a chronically-ill child.***

"When we get back to 1-9-1-5 Martha Drive, we're done. I'm leaving. We're through." My husband growled the unspeakable.

I felt shocked. Angry. Numb. The divorce announcement promising our marriage dissolving sparked fear inside of me.

It would've been easier if we could slam the door and walk away to cool down a bit. That way, I could decide if he meant it or not.

The only problem was we were parked on the side of I-40 somewhere in the middle of a 22-hour drive home. I sat crying in the backseat, trying to administer medicine to our 3-month-old who just had her second open-heart surgery five days before.

Not exactly the easiest place to express—or even believe in—our never-ending love for each other.

So I don't know why the divorce announcement came as a surprise to me. Plenty of people had sufficiently warned us.

Even our daughter's doctor encouraged us before her birth to consider the impact her health would have on our marriage too.

"This is the thing marriages crumble under. This type of life: caring for a chronically-ill child. This type of stress: the surgeries, the hospitalizations, the never knowing if she'll make it," he said. "I see it every day. You certainly can stick it out. And I hope you do! That's why I want you to be aware it's about to get so much more complicated to make it."

## THE ODDS WE'D SPLIT UP

To be fair, we were working against even more odds.

Some we knowingly entered marriage with: Two sets of divorced homes. Demanding careers.

Some we inherited that summer: Surprise death of a parent. And now, a chronically-ill second child.

Any textbook prognosis would define our chance of a lifelong marriage as follows: "Better sign a good prenup and stay Facebook friends with your high school sweetheart, just in case!"

But does telling people they probably won't make it mean they'll start *believing* they won't make it? It's almost like the perceived stats grant the permission to call it quits.

*Nice try. We knew the divorce announcement would happen eventually. Better luck next time.*

## YOU'LL NEVER STAY TOGETHER

American couples enter marriage with the idea they only have a 50% chance of making it. That divorce statistic has been drilled into our heads since the 1980s.

Why go all in on something that probably won't work?

But Shaunti Feldhahn says in her book *The Good News About Marriage* that research proves 72% of all married people are still married to their first spouse.

Too often we sorely underinform couples of the possibility of marital longevity. Did you know every marriage—even your marriage—has a chance of making it? Of riding out the worst days, when you, too, wonder if your spouse means that divorce threat?

That's no matter the odds against you. Or the ones that bombarded your life all in one crazy, defeating summer.

## WHAT IF WE COULD MAKE IT?

When we arrived home from that defining road trip, we decided to see a marriage counselor. Our appointment was over lunch. We didn't want to put too much time and effort into something that was on its way out.

But the lunch with the counselor reset our expectations. He and his wife had experienced significant hardship too. They had lost a child. They weren't supposed to make it either.

But guess what? They did. They're still together. And he told us we could too. It made us believe it a little bit. Just enough to try to prove which marriage prophecy was right: the divorce announcement or the hope of staying together.

To be honest, the day-to-day in our marriage is hard just like yours might be: messy floors, burnt dinners. And in our marriage, just like maybe in yours, we've encountered much bigger challenges than that.

Still, the day we said our vows we both actually *hoped it would work*. Just like you and your spouse did. Whether you believed you could make it or not, there was something inside each of you that dreamed of forever.

That's not silly, Disney-movie leftovers from a traumatic childhood. That's God's good design for marriage working itself out in you.

In Genesis, God declared that Adam shouldn't be alone (Genesis 2:18). So He created a gift for Adam in Eve. A partner suited exactly to him. They weren't told they'd live happily ever after but were called to live faithfully committed to the promises they made.

A photograph of a man and a woman walking away from the camera in a lush green forest. The man is on the left, wearing a dark quilted jacket and dark pants. The woman is on the right, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt and a long red skirt, and has a floral crown on her head. They are holding hands. The background is filled with dense green trees and foliage.

***They weren't told they'd live happily ever after but were called to live faithfully committed to the promises they made.***

## 5 WAYS WE CAN BOTH BEAT THE ODDS

### 1. Focus on your commitment to each other ...

- Over your peers. Don't spend every Saturday golfing with the guys or shopping with your best friend.
- Over your kids. I'm all for co-sleeping for some good shuteye. But it's a great idea to put the baby to bed in her own room and hop in bed with your hubby. I'm also all for some good marital enjoyment.
- Over your families. Yes, honor and respect your parents. But recognize your spouse is your top priority. The honey-do list at your own home can take a backseat for awhile to help out your aging mom or single sister, but make sure your spouse consistently gets the message, *I choose us*.

### 2. Take measures to grow together.

Find an interest you're willing to share and make time to share it. Run a marathon together. Join a book club and read the book aloud in your living room together. Find a charity you want to serve at together. Even a pocket of time here or there will cultivate commitment to each other. It will rightly force you to choose time with your spouse over time for yourself or with others who might

seem more fun at times but are ultimately less important.

### 3. Seek counseling as needed.

Visiting a therapist to talk things out together does not mean your marriage is in the dumps. It means you're brave enough to say you don't want it to go there. Instead of letting recurring arguments fester and settling for divorce announcements, ask for professional input to find workable solutions.

### 4. Go on regular dates.

Regular would mean once a month-ish. Yes, babysitters are expensive. Schedules are busy. The kids cry when you leave. You'd rather take a nap. But it also feels great when your spouse is still committed to the time alone with you. The least you could do is return the favor by being an agreeable date-night participant.

### 5. Choose each other over your careers.

At work, I feel smart, funny, important, well-liked, and recognized for my skills and effort. I don't know if your home is like mine, but I wouldn't really list those in the way I feel inside our house every day. No wonder it's so easy for husbands and wives to feel fulfilled in a role outside the home. The only problem is that role in the workplace could really be done by someone else. Yep, you're great at it, but absolutely replaceable.

No pressure, but that's just not true at home. No one else can be the husband or wife to your spouse or the mom or dad to your kids. Prioritizing your home will always be a win. And the more time you spend there, you'll find the more comfortable and significant you'll feel there too.

## WE HAVEN'T QUIT YET

Though we have threatened to on a few, rare occasions, we haven't quit on our marriage yet.

We've endured more stressing odds against our marital union—our daughter's health worsening, moving across the country away from our support system to get better care for our chronically-ill child, new house, new job, new school, new life. All alone with just each other.

It's been difficult. It seems like we're often arguing about ... well, anything. We each deal with the stresses of our life in different ways.

Sometimes that feels overwhelming to me, and I want something dreamier. Softer. More romantic.

Then I realize we're the couple there together in the post-op waiting room. Side by side. Praying God would heal our child just one more time.

We're the couple rejoicing in normal, mundane days next to each other at teacher's conferences and groaning over the same kids' Chick-fil-A meltdowns.

We're the couple who receive the same automated message from the pharmacy six times a month: "new prescription ready for pickup." Packing kids' lunches in the same kitchen. Cooking eggs, brewing coffee on the same outdated green counter tops. Sometimes in silent annoyance. Sometimes in cheerful companionship.

I guess in the end it hasn't been as dreamy most days as I'd hoped it'd be.

Yet we are the couple still living out our dream of love and life together. And I'm glad we're still making good on those vows of commitment and faith promised, instead of the threats of the odds stacked against us.

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# 8

## WAYS TO STAY COMMITTED THIS WEEK



- 1** If you're struggling with **attraction to someone other than your spouse**, do everything you can to create space from that person (more extreme temptation, like Joseph in the Bible, may require you cutting off ties altogether). Tell a same-gender friend of your struggle. When you catch yourself thinking of that person, commit to pray for your spouse and marriage.
- 2** Look through memorabilia or photos or listen to love songs that **help you remember** what you love(d) about your spouse.
- 3** **Pray together.** (Embrace the awkwardness, and just try it.)
- 4** **When your spouse lashes out**, take the personal challenge to only respond in kindness.
- 5** **Do one unsolicited act of kindness** for your spouse each day.
- 6** **Praise your spouse to someone else**, even if your spouse isn't there.
- 7** Genuinely **say you're sorry and take full responsibility** for something you've done, looking your spouse in the eye.
- 8** Create a **running list of things you're thankful for** in your spouse.

# 7 REASONS

## *Why You Need Someone Else*

# IN YOUR MARRIAGE

BY JUSTIN TALBERT

***You want to find joy and delight in your marriage. But you'll never be able to accomplish this alone in the four walls of your home together.***

Marriage is about as difficult as it gets. Marriage is essentially one *broken mess*—you—becoming “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24) with another *broken mess*—yes, your lovely spouse.

Sounds flammable. And as we all know from personal experience, it can be.

In my line of work, I discuss these matters regularly. What I've seen it come down to is this: when a couple simply admits they are capable of divorce—yes, even *you*—they're on a positive trajectory. When a couple affirms the difficulty of marriage and decides despite these difficulties marriage *is* worthy of the work required, they have a higher chance of making it.

Those willing to put in the work, armed with a winning strategy involving God's grace, make it. So, *chin up*. A thriving marriage *is* attainable.

But it's not magic. So let's get practical.

## YOU NEED A HIGHER POWER

At the center of a divorce-proof marriage is an intimate, personal communion with God. It means each spouse has sacrificed his or her own desires to live for what God wants instead. It means a working understanding of His gospel of grace toward you.

Essentially, it's an increasing desire to kill your own sin ... not your spouse's! And it's evidenced by and founded in the longing to know the Bible better. To know God more deeply. To personally reflect His glory in everything you do.

So to start, this must be true for you *and* your spouse at the individual level. Yet, it must be true for you as a *couple* too.

*Together* you approach God. The well-worn paths of prayer and Bible study still lead quickest to God's presence. But you can get creative in how you go about these disciplines together.

Try a Bible-reading plan together. Create a rhythm of reading individually in the morning, then conversing at night. This gives you the full day in between to both marinate on and apply what you read before expressing it.

Consider listening to a Christian podcast or sermon together during long commutes or travel. Make sure to hit "pause" every once in a while to just chat. Whatever it ends up being, make sure it works for you both—then stick with it!

## YOU NEED OTHER PEOPLE

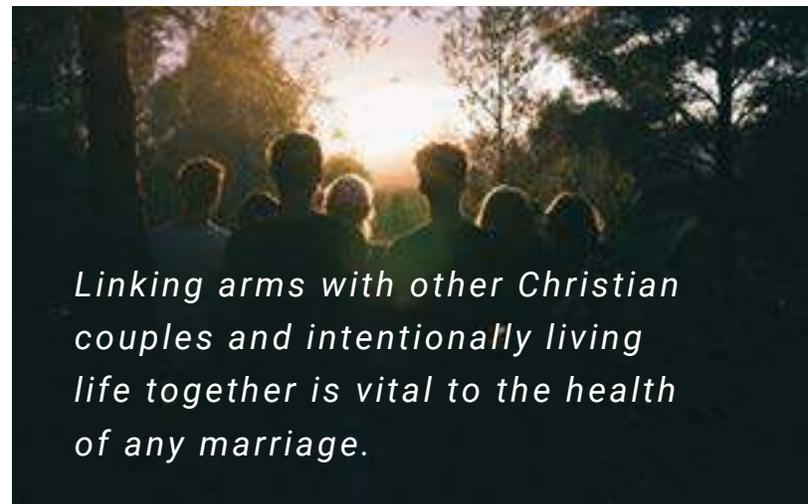
But you'll never be able to accomplish this alone in the four walls of your home together. However necessary it is to go before the Lord individually *and* together as a couple, if your communion with God stops *there*, your marriage remains in imminent danger!

The only defense is a Christ-centered community. A community tethered to a local church.

Linking arms with other Christian couples and intentionally living life together

is vital to the health of any marriage. The statistics agree. Weekly church attendance lowers your risk of divorce by 20-50%. And that's just church *attendance*. The sort of Christ-centered community *participation* I'm talking about goes beyond that.

You need God and other believers speaking into your marriage for numerous reasons.



*Linking arms with other Christian couples and intentionally living life together is vital to the health of any marriage.*

### 1) **Because you each have blind spots.**

Ashamedly, I remember a fight during our first months of marriage. Talk about a complete idiot! I actually believed *I* was God's gift to *my wife*—and not the other way around!

Huddled around the close friends of our Christ-centered community of other married couples, it didn't take long to see how blind I was (and am!) to so many of my flaws. It's the same at the marriage level.

Your marriage has flaws you two simply don't see. Living invested in a Christ-centered community allows space for these flaws to come into the light and be sorted out.

## 2) ***Because your marriage needs a safe place to air out.***

You need a space to air out your marital issues in a healthy, spouse-honoring way. Listen, this comes back to the gospel. Your "mask" isn't fooling anyone—especially not your spouse. We are all seriously broken, fragmented, and sin-ridden.

One of the most practical applications of Christianity is the freedom you have in Christ to admit you don't have it all together. So admit it. And feel the freedom of walking in the light (1 John 1:7) with other couples that are committed to the blossoming of *your* marriage.



*One of the most practical applications of Christianity is the freedom you have in Christ to admit you don't have it all together. So admit it.*

## 3) ***Because your marriage needs people committed to it.***

Do you know what it's like to have someone all-out committed to you? It transcends almost all other human experiences!

In seminary, my wife and I joined a group with six married couples in it. We made the mistake of staying surface-level. Within a year, *three* of the couples ended in adultery which spiraled into divorce.

That was *half* our group! While I don't take full responsibility for their failing marriages, I mourn the fact our group never penetrated into what was really going on.

This is what a Christ-centered community does. Gutsy, sacrificial, unconditional commitment towards each other. And that is transformational to *any* marriage.

## 4) ***Because your marriage issues are real—but normal.***

As you live with a commitment toward others, you realize how non-weird your struggles are. Sure, they *are* bad. And absolutely must be dealt with.

But hear this: *confessed* sin doesn't end marriage as much as *isolated* sin does. Believing you're alone. That you and your spouse are the only ones struggling. What a satanic ploy.

First Peter calls the devil a lion for a reason (5:8). He separates one from the pack ... and then devours.

There's nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9)! The things you're dealing with are serious, but they are *not* new. So having others rally around you to fight *for* you is marriage-saving. It cuts divorce off at the root.

## 5) ***Because you need to follow Jesus as He intends.***

I mean this literally: obeying God is impossible without other people around you. You can't do Christianity *apart from* community.

Dozens of "one another" commands fill the Bible. Whether it's to welcome one another (Romans 15:7), forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32), confess sins to one another (James 5:16), serve one another (Galatians 5:13), or to love one another (Romans 12:10), the blessings of following Jesus are activated by a close-knit community.

As Andrew T. Walker writes, "'We' is one of the most important words in the Christian vocabulary for shaping our identity as Christians." As a married couple who takes your faith seriously, make every effort to foster a community you care deeply for. And do it now!

## 6) ***Because you need a mission beyond the two of you.***

It's important for Christians to look *inwardly* to make sure they're in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5), and to kill sin (Romans 8:13), and to make sure

they're overall healthy. But that can't be all.

Every Christian has an *outward-facing* emphasis too. Because we are *ambassadors* for Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:20). In Christ, you represent Him to the watching world. As you seek to obey Him, He is working *through* you and impacting others.

It's the same with marriage. However important it is to be *inward-facing* as a couple, you must balance that with an *outward-facing* emphasis too. Your marriage has an "ambassadorial edge" to it. You *are* representing Him to the watching world. You have a mission as a couple, not only for inward health, but outward impact—and they work together. One helps the others.

This, again, is why Christ-centered community is integral to your marriage flourishing. It is a group of people that stand side by side—shield to shield. They offer a fanatical service to the outside world, finding all sorts of tangible ways as a group to serve your community.

Service like this momentarily pries your eyes from the flaws of your marriage. And you go home with your spouse exhausted, proud to be married to such a warrior. Sure, your spouse has insecurities, a temper, and sometimes shows up late to family functions—but suddenly these appear insignificant in comparison to the bigger mission.

## 7) ***Because your marriage shines light to a watching world.***

Many have asked: "How do we win back our confused culture?" The answer might shock you: With *your* marriage.

Yes, it is *your* marriage that will win people back to Christ.

Which surfaces a profound truth: your personal marriage is incredibly public. People notice.

This can be bad news. If spouses start quitting on each other, it's not reflective of how Jesus treats us.

Or, it can be good news. The hard work you put into your marriage behind closed doors, that nobody ever sees, bursts forth with radiant, soul-winning light as both of you take on your day. People notice, that's crucial to remember.

This is intensified by the accountability of a Christ-centered community. The health of your marriage can breathe life into someone else's. Which then launches them like arrows into a darkened world.

And when *you* are off your game, observing how another couple is relating to each other can remind you of all that's good. It can spark a new drive to fight *for* your spouse, not

against them. Which then launches *you* like a blazing arrow into a desperate world.

## **YOUR MARRIAGE NEEDS CHRIST AND A CHRIST-CENTERED COMMUNITY**

Friends, marriage is innately difficult. You aren't the only crazies out there! Hopefully, by now you've decided your marriage is worth the battle.

I wish I could be present with you, grab you by the shoulders and look you in the eye. So much is at stake here. Anchor your life and your marriage in the hope of Christ. Huddle around others. And don't waste time getting there.

Silence the excuses of your mind right now. Where believers gather is where Jesus himself gathers (Matthew 18:20). And He's the divorce-preventing Savior. Enjoy Him. Enjoy your community. And then find pleasure in your thriving marriage.

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# 7 PRAYERS

for a Love That

*Lasts*

1

## *Be first here.*

Move us both toward the same goal: bringing honor to You (see Psalm 34:3). Let us seek You before all of our other needs, trusting You'll take care of us (see Matthew 6:33). When I'm tempted to put myself in Your place or fail to trust You as a good and great God, convict my heart.

2

## *Show me my own heart first.*

What's the "log in my eye", Lord (Matthew 7:5)? Show me how my sin and issues wedge themselves between us, and what I've allowed to get too important.

3

## *Help me give thanks.*

Constantly shift my focus to not forget any of the benefits You give me in my marriage (Psalm 103:2). When I want to complain, whine, or dissolve in anger, let me start with gratitude. You are so generous and good. I know You see me.

4

## *Show me all the ways I can root for my spouse.*

Give us ideas, courage, and kindness to pursue good memories together and cheer each other on. Help me happily serve my spouse, and compassionately see and respond to my spouse's needs. When I'm insulted, help me humbly give back a blessing (1 Peter 3:9).

5

## *Show me how much grace I receive. Then let me dole it out to my spouse.*

Your kindness leads me to heart-change (Romans 2:4). I want to love You much because I understand how much I'm forgiven (Luke 7:47). As I understand Your grace, help me give that grace freely (Matthew 10:8). Even when it's one of my sensitive areas, help me always trust, always hope, always persevere (1 Corinthians 13:5-7).

6

## *Help me choose us.*

You designed us to be one flesh (Mark 10:8). Help me make every effort toward unity (Ephesians 4:3), rejecting isolation—even in my mind (1 Peter 3:8).

7

## *Help me watch my mouth.*

Let me only say things that :

- Build up (and don't corrupt)
- Are right for the occasion
- Give grace to everybody listening (Ephesians 4:29)

When I'm about to speak something dishonoring to You or my spouse, lock up my lips (see Psalm 141:3). Don't let my tongue start fires; let it give life (see James 2:3-12).

# That SAME Stupid Fight:

## *Handling Conflict with Your Spouse*

BY JANEL BREITENSTEIN



***Conflict with your spouse is inevitable for all couples. Whoever got the idea into our heads that “marriage should be easy” . . . probably wasn’t married.***

There’s a reason so many of us would rather get a cavity filled with Kenny G in the background than have that same . . . stupid . . . fight.

Conflict with your spouse is inevitable for all couples. (Whoever got the idea into our heads that “marriage should be easy”... probably wasn’t married.) How can you deal?

The following concepts from Peacemaker Ministries may result in love being a little less of a battlefield.

### WHY DO WE FIGHT?

Conflict with your spouse happens when values collide. He wishes she would park straight; she wishes he would apply the same logic to getting his socks 17 inches closer to the hamper.

As James 4:1 puts it, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” Our goals are thwarted.

Conflict with your spouse can be unspoken or overt, tangible or intangible, quiet or quite loud. They can involve clashes within ourselves, with others, with the world at large, and with God Himself.

Conflicts can be tricky because the way

we go about handling them is heavily influenced by the culture in our family of origin. Whether our “normal” includes glossing over, gossiping, lashing out, storming away, or having a family meeting, our personal experience has dictated “acceptable” responses to conflict.

We all fall on a spectrum, right?

- **Escaping:** There are the classic “stuffers,” who prefer a false peace. They’re escaping conflict by outright denial, internalizing responses to conflict.
- **Attacking:** On the other end of the spectrum are “blowers,” who shoot for a false justice. They might attack with words, physical force, or the withdrawal of privileges, like money or sex.
- **Peacemaking:** In the middle of these extremes is the true peace and true justice of godly responses: Talking it out. Finding a mediator. Overlooking an offense. Jesus calls us “blessed” when we are peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). Not peace-fakers. Not peace-breakers.

## THE REPLAY

We don’t act as “peacemakers” just because it’s the moral thing to do. It’s because when we enter conflict, we have the opportunity to honor God and replay His actions when He was in conflict with us.

(Wait. How I handle my spouse’s

workaholism is a chance to exemplify the gospel? Please explain.)

When sin broke our relationship with God, He went the distance to repair that relationship and make peace with us. When we were His enemies, God demonstrated the quality and quantity of His love by making a way for peace (see Romans 5:8). And it’s a job God has passed on to us.

Second Corinthians 5:18-20 puts it this way:

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*Through Christ [God] reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.*

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The way we show forgiveness, peace, and justice in our relationships is a show-and-tell about what God did for us through Jesus.

So your response to the sniping of your mother-in-law, or your husband’s passivity, or your wife’s nagging?

Those are opportunities to honor God and grow more like Him. (*Will I obey God and trust Him? Will I make my desires, my goals,*

*my “rights,” and my agenda serve His will above mine? What is His will?).*

Conflict also allows us to serve others and to grow as it gives us new ways of looking at life.

Does that mean conflict with your spouse could actually improve the relationship?!

That’s exactly what I’m saying.

## WHAT NEXT?

When my kids had learned some basic, conflict-management skills, I was eager to lay down my referee’s jersey and whistle and let them finally work it out on their own: *Sit here. Don’t get up till it’s resolved. Do not pass “Go.” Do not collect \$200.*

Yet even that tended to drag on, sounding like a couple of cats tied up together in a sack. But you know what helped them cut to the chase far quicker?

**Asking them to start with the log in their own eye.** This comes from Matthew 7:5: “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

I get to the core of the conflict a lot faster when I start with addressing my own heart issues. Which means ...

**Resolving conflict with your spouse in a healthy way starts with taking 100%**

**responsibility for our contribution—even if we think our contribution is only 5% of the problem.** Here’s a tip I heard from author Gary Thomas: We always underestimate the impact our sin has on other people.

Often, our desires have swollen not just from something we want, but into something we must have. So we’re willing to pass judgment and mete out punishment in order to achieve that desire (even in stealthy forms like the silent treatment or emotional withdrawal). We’re not trusting God to meet those desires. They have become demands.

As you’re able, **consider how to embrace humility and confess to the other person** (you might be surprised how this gets the ball rolling). Admit specifically what you did, as well as admitting the attitude that was in your heart. And don’t forget to acknowledge the hurt you’ve caused.

## THE PAUSE PROCESS

So you’ve decided you’ll intentionally honor God and trust Him with this conflict with your spouse. You’ve spent time searching your heart and repenting from your own sin. [How can you move to a place where it’s not “us against each other” but “us against the problem”?](#)

How can this become “Let’s work on the issue of household division of labor” rather than “her vs. him”?



Peacemakers outlines a five-step process to keep in mind:

1. **Prepare:** Seek counsel. Pray. Continue to examine your own heart and reactions.
2. **Affirm Relationships:** Show value for the relationship and hope for the future. Help them feel secure to address the problem and not worry about protecting themselves.
3. **Understand** and Acknowledge Interests: People's positions are motivated by their spoken and unspoken interests: Concerns. Desires. Needs. Limitations. Fears. Values.

It might help to dig below the presenting issue—whose family to visit over the holidays, or how you're talking to me when you're exhausted from work, or whose turn it is to cart the kids

to school. Look beneath that: What's the desire of each person, and why is it important to them (even if they're expressing those in illegitimate, unjust, or downright rude ways)?

For example, behind the clipped responses after your long day at work? Maybe your spouse feels like everyone else gets the polite, presentable side of you. Or that ultimately, you don't appreciate or truly see him or her.

4. **Search for Creative Solutions:** There are almost always more than two options. How can you think creatively about a solution to address both of your interests?
5. **Evaluate Options:** Which of these speak to both of our interests? Is there a way I need to willingly lay down one of my interests?



## “HOW CAN I KNOW IF I’VE REALLY FORGIVEN THEM? I’M STILL MAD WHEN I THINK ABOUT THE ISSUE.”

Forgiveness is one of the most challenging tasks we face as human beings. It’s not a natural response but a supernatural one.

**Forgiveness is a choice.** It’s a decision modeled after God’s forgiveness of us: a decision not to hold the offense against the offender (if you need a pep talk, check out Matthew 18:21-35).

It releases the person from their sin against us—desiring good and blessing for them. And since forgiveness is a choice we make, it doesn’t even depend on the other person. We can forgive whether the person is sorry or not.

**But here’s what forgiveness isn’t.** It’s not forgetting or excusing, releasing someone from worldly consequences of sin. (This is different from revenge. It’s accountability for their choices. A forgiven criminal should still go to jail. An embezzler should not be given a position as an accountant.) Forgiveness isn’t a feeling, although feeling might be present.

It’s promising the following:

I will not . . .

- Keep ruminating negatively on this.
- Seek to hurt my offender as a result of this; I will seek to bless him or her, even if that means establishing accountability and finding justice.
- Gossip about this, speaking to others who are not part of the solution.

Instead, I will continue to pursue a relationship with the offender (unless repentance has not been demonstrated and love dictates I set boundaries to protect both of us).

In all of this, you might even come to a renewed appreciation of the lengths God has gone to forgive us, and play out the gospel in your own life and for those you love.

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*Janel Breitenstein is an author, freelance writer, speaker and frequent contributor for FamilyLife, including Passport2Identity®, Art of Parenting®, and regular articles. After five and a half years in East Africa, her family of six has returned to Colorado, where they continue to work on behalf of the poor with Engineering Ministries International. Her book, on spiritual life skills for messy families (Zondervan), releases March 2021. You can find her—“The Awkward Mom”—having uncomfortable, important conversations at [JanelBreitenstein.com](http://JanelBreitenstein.com), and on Instagram @janelbreit.*



GUIDED JOURNAL PAGE:

# WORKING THROUGH A CONFLICT

- Posed as a question, how would I define the issue we're arguing about?
- How would I define my spouse's position? (Use neutral language.)
- What is the underlying value in my spouse's position? (What is your spouse trying to advocate for or protect?)
- How would I define my position? (Again--use neutral language.)
- What is the underlying value in my position?
- What underlying values do we share? (List as many as possible. Be generous.)

- What emotions do I feel around this conflict? (Be as honest as possible.)
  - Anger is typically defined as a secondary emotion—coming after fear, disappointment, rejection, frustration, hurt, etc. If I’m angry, what lies beneath my anger? Why do I feel this way?
  
- In Matthew 7:5, Jesus tells us to “first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” What is my contribution to this conflict (even if I think it’s only a small percentage of the problem)? What would my spouse say is my contribution to the problem?
  
- What might have become too important to me, growing from a desire to a demand?
  - Is there anything that has become more important than God and how He commands me to respond? Anything on which I might be staking my fulfillment, rather than trusting God? (This is how an idol is birthed.)
  
- How do I think God is wanting me to trust and honor Him in this conflict?
  
- Looking at Jesus’ response toward my sin, what can I learn about how to respond to my spouse?

- What do I need to confess to God and my spouse—
  - Specifically, about my actions?
  
  - Generally, about my heart's attitude?
  
- Have I prayed about this?
  - How do I feel God prompting me to respond to this conflict in myself? To my spouse?
  
  - In what ways can I thank God for my spouse right now?
  
- *Merciful God, here's how I want to respond to you:*
  
  
- *Mighty God and Wonderful Counselor—I need help:*
  
  
- When I think outside of the box, what creative solutions could satisfy both of our interests and their underlying values?



*I Needed Her to Be*

**MORE**

*Than Just My Wife*

BY CARLOS SANTIAGO

***Then I asked my wife a question that would change the nature of our relationship forever. I needed her to be more than someone who I did fun things with.***

A best friend takes time to cultivate. I met mine in the fifth grade.

Pablo joined our class midyear and offered to help me work on a science project.

We instantly hit it off, and before long, we were inseparable. We had the same classes in high school, went to the same college, worked for the same companies—we even wound up marrying sisters.

With so many shared experiences, to say we could read each other's minds would

be an understatement. A more accurate description would be like two networked super computers working on a common goal, each fully aware of the unique capabilities of the other, maximizing strengths and minimizing weaknesses.

When facing a project together, he would instinctively handle things he knew were difficult for me. I would take care of the areas I knew were difficult for him. Together, there has never been a problem we couldn't solve.

After my wife and I got married, my "Pablo time" was significantly reduced. Distance, responsibilities, and a genuine desire to spend every waking moment with my new bride meant I rarely saw my old friend.

One morning, when I attempted to leave for work, the car wouldn't start.

My automotive resumé, at this point, contained only two lines:

- Expert gas pumper
- Proficient windshield-wiper fluid filler

I had no clue what to do next. I needed Pablo. Even though we both knew very little about cars, I was confident we'd be able to figure out what to do together.

When my wife realized I was still lingering in the garage, she came in to investigate and found me leaning over the open hood.

She encouraged me to call Pablo, but he lived 70 miles away and was probably already on his way to work. I'd have to figure this one out without his help.

I stood there for a moment, considering my options.

Then I asked my wife a question that changed the nature of our relationship forever. "Could you be my Pablo?"

## HAPPY COUPLES

In her book *Highly Happy Marriages*, Shaunti Feldhahn interviewed 1,000 couples and found, "A happy spouse looks at the other person as their best and closest friend—a friend they want to stay close to no matter what."

This shouldn't surprise us. More than 2,000 years ago, Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 taught,

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*"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"*

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When we marry, our spouse should be the first person reaching out a helping hand when we're in trouble, and the first person we want to hang out with when things are good.

The more time couples spend together, the better.

Feldhahn found that 83% of couples who hang out, at least weekly, rate their marriages as "very happy," echoing the sentiment of Song of Solomon 5:16, "This is my beloved and this is my friend ..." Marriage is sweeter when your spouse genuinely is your best friend.

## DEVELOPING THE "BEST"

My wife had seen Pablo and I work on enough projects together that she understood what I was asking. I needed her to be more than my wife—more than someone I did fun things with. I was asking her to work beside me to fix this problem.

But more than that, I was asking her to be my new best friend.

She said yes, turned around, and left the garage. When she returned a few minutes later, her clothes told me she was ready to get her hands dirty.

It took a while for us to figure out this new dynamic. I didn't simply want someone to "hold the flashlight." I needed her help to think critically. I needed her to use logic to poke holes in my theories. A process which felt natural to me, but felt like arguing to her.

She didn't want to seem disrespectful, but it showed me her brain was fully engaged in solving the problem. It was the exact type of support I needed.

Over the years, we've not only diagnosed and repaired the car multiple times, but we've gutted and remodeled our kitchen, run cables, paved a walkway, built a deck, and tackled hundreds of little projects together.

I still love working with Pablo, but nothing compares to working with my wife. She

has become my best friend, and our bond grows stronger every day. The "honey-do" list is a thing of the past. We tackle problems as a team.

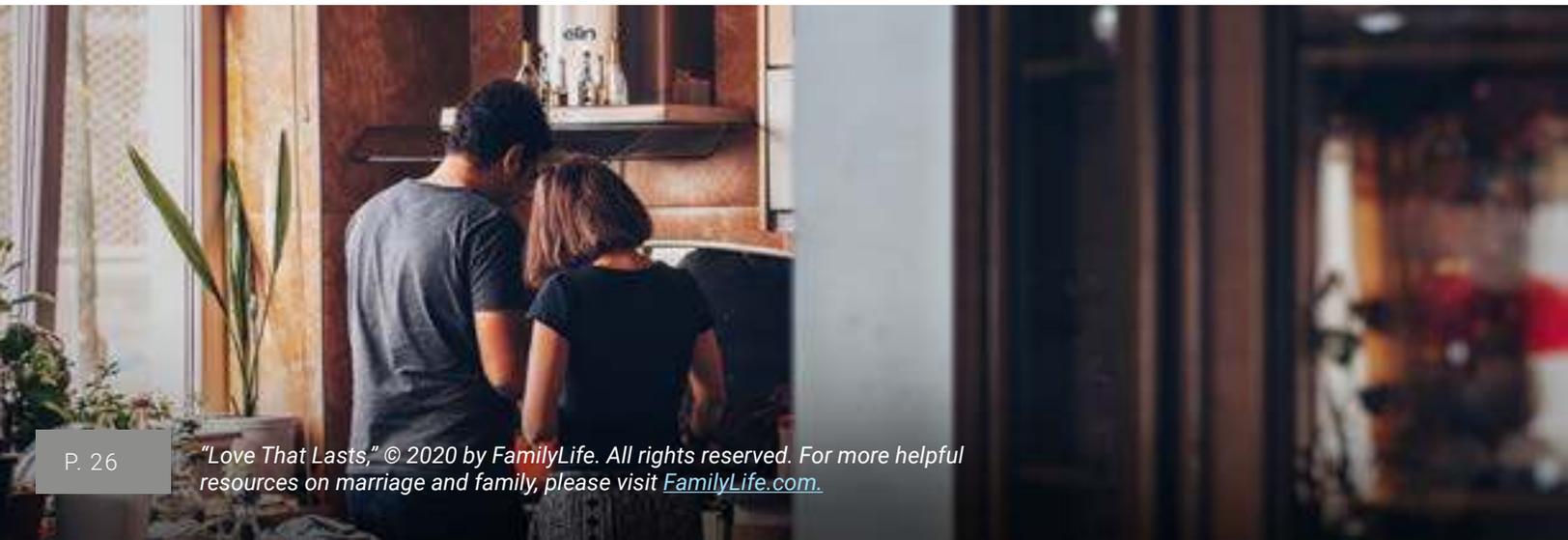
## START SMALL

But what if you don't share many interests, or your spouse refuses to engage in the activities you care about? Start small.

Not long ago, I peeled carrots as my wife prepared the rest of the dinner. I didn't think much of it, yet two days later, she was still thanking me. Why?

My wife is a pastry chef. She certainly doesn't *need* my help in the kitchen. But when I peeled those carrots, it told her I wanted to hang out with her more than I wanted to check the computer. She was reminded she had a friend to help her tackle the challenges of life, big or small.

Find little tasks you can do together. Whether prepping dinner or replacing an alternator. Any shared activity will do. Start today, and before you know it, you might soon have a new best friend.



*Build Your Friendship With*

## 7 YOU-CAN-SO-DO-THIS

# *Creative Date Nights*



Make sushi together. (Go for veggie sushi if it's your first time.) Feed at least one roll to your mate.



Go on a bike ride in a place you've never been. Pack at least one surprise.



Pull over in a vacant parking lot, and dance to "your" song, or one you've handpicked. Grab a small surprise from the back seat: A favorite beverage or candy, a scarf to keep your spouse warm, a rose.



Go to a used bookstore. Provide a warm beverage. Snag your mate and kiss a little between the stacks.



In your bedroom, light as many tea-lights as you have dishes for. (Start a movie for the kids, or do this after their bedtime.) Grab takeout. Select at least 8 discussion starters [from this list](#).



Spread a picnic blanket in the bedroom. Pack a picnic basket. Unload each item only after each of you has told at least one thing your spouse doesn't know yet about you.



Go on a progressive dinner. Have salad or appetizers at one restaurant, an entree at another, and grab dessert to eat at home while you maintain contact with at least one body part.

# HOW YOUR EQ *Determines Your* HAPPINESS IN *Marriage*

BY GARRICK D. CONNER

Marriage is an adventure ... an opportunity ... a chance to love and be loved, to know and be known. But successful marriages don't just happen. They take time and intentionality.

It's interesting that one of the most important facets of marriage is also one of the most overlooked—the idea of knowing yourself.

## **YOUR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (EQ)**

My wife, Michelle, and I have been married for almost 23 years. We're both fiercely independent and like to do things our own way. In many ways, we're a classic example of "opposites attract." One thing we absolutely agree on though is that mornings are from the devil.

When we first married, we mindlessly went through our get-ready routines each morning. We could even go 30 minutes without speaking. It wasn't because we were upset; we were just tired. And neither of us likes mornings. More than two decades later, our routine hasn't changed much.

What makes this work for us is that at some point early on we actually had a meaningful conversation about mornings. It included some general information about how it takes us both time to warm up in the mornings, and it's not personal if we don't say much to one another. (In fact, we actually preferred that we say nothing.)

But underneath that discussion was a canvas of self-knowledge derived from 20-plus years of experience at being, well,

us. This is essentially what is referred to as “emotional intelligence” (or EQ).

Marriage counselor and researcher John Gottman spends time and energy helping couples know and access their EQ. In his book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, he explains, “Happily married couples aren’t smarter, richer, or more psychologically astute than others. But in their day-to-day lives, they have hit upon a dynamic that keeps their negative thoughts and feelings about each other (which all couples have) from overwhelming their positive ones. They have what I call an emotionally intelligent marriage.”

While it’s true that some EQ is innate, I believe every individual can work on developing it. Within a marriage relationship, each individual should constantly be striving to grow in two key areas.

## SELF-AWARENESS

I think of self-awareness as knowing things about yourself—your preferences as well as how you’re likely to respond in a particular situation. A few things about me: I love fried shrimp and chocolate ice cream. I don’t like sushi. I hate when someone sneaks up on me, intentionally or not. I have a highly sensitive startle response and will likely shout and recoil. Especially if I’m working alone in a quiet place or have gotten really lost in my own thoughts.

Because I’m self-aware of certain things, I can make things easier for my wife. For example, I told her early on about my startle response, so she’s good to make sure I hear her from a distance before she walks in and scares the Jesus out of me.

In a marriage, each person can use self-awareness to make the relationship work better.

When Michelle and I were first married, I really messed up by not celebrating her birthday in a big enough fashion. In my own family of origin, birthdays were just another day on the calendar—and you happened to have cake. But in her family, birthdays were the opportunity to be queen for a day (or a week). Cards. Balloons. Flowers. Candles. The works. Needless to say, I now make sure she is fully celebrated.

Both individuals in the marriage should be growing in self-awareness. This isn’t just about the husband knowing why he leaves his dirty socks all over the house or why the wife leaves her damp towel on the bed. This is about really discovering some of the real reasons for the things you do. Or being able to honestly tell your spouse that there’s no real reason for some of the things you do.

## MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is closely related to self-awareness, but it goes deeper. I think of mindfulness in terms of knowing why we



***Mindfulness allows you to regain a measure of control over yourself so that you can bring your best self home to those you love most.***

feel and think the way we do at a specific point in time.

For example, one morning not long ago, I had an upsetting meeting with a co-worker. The discussion made me distressed. And to be honest, that negative conversation impacted every interaction that day.

So when my wife texted me to ask about meeting her for lunch, I agreed. But it wasn't long into our lunch before I regretted my decision. She wasn't aware of my bad morning, so my "emotional hangover" clouded our conversation.

I was frustrated, but not with her.

But in the absence of information, those around us tend to take our moodiness personally. Not long into our lunch date, Michelle stung me with these words: "I wish you'd just told me no."

When we fail to practice mindfulness, we often become our own worst enemies, sabotaging interaction after interaction. And without a little intentional self-help, we can soon find our spouses and children bearing the brunt of our frustrations.

For that reason, I always urge people to do their best to draw a dividing line between their work life and their home life. For many, that means driving around the block a couple extra times before going home, especially if they've had a difficult day. For others, that means just sitting in the garage for a few minutes to collect thoughts and clear the mind before entering the house.

Mindfulness allows you to regain a measure of control over yourself so that you can bring your best self home to those you love most.

## A BETTER TOMORROW

As a believer, self-awareness and mindfulness also involve reminding myself of the true source of my value. That's not about what my boss thinks, my co-workers think, or my wife thinks. It's about who Jesus says I am—His child. Radically loved. Deeply accepted. And completely forgiven.

No matter how good or bad you currently judge your marriage to be, every marriage can grow and improve. Your path to a better tomorrow begins with taking time to really know yourself. And then being vulnerable enough to share with your spouse.

The journey is definitely more like a marathon than a sprint, but the goal is to cross the finish line together, hand in hand.

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# FRAMEABLE *scripture* ART

## PRINT THE FOLLOWING PAGES.

Display these truths in your home to help anchor your love in the lasting truth of God's Word.



*Finally,*

ALL OF YOU,

HAVE UNITY OF  
*mind,*

SYMPATHY, BROTHER LOVE,

*a tender heart,*

AND A HUMBLE MIND.

DO NOT REPAY EVIL FOR EVIL

OR REVILING FOR REVILING,

BUT ON THE CONTRARY,

*bless,*

FOR TO THIS YOU WERE CALLED,

THAT YOU MAY OBTAIN A

*blessing.*

1 PETER 3:8-9

MAKE  
EVERY EFFORT  
TO KEEP THE

*unity* OF THE *Spirit*

THROUGH THE BOND  
OF *peace.*

EPHESIANS 4:3 [NIV]

I IN THEM  
AND YOU IN ME,  
THAT THEY MAY BECOME

*perfectly*  
ONE,

SO THAT THE WORLD  
MAY KNOW THAT YOU

*sent me*

AND LOVED THEM  
EVEN AS YOU LOVED ME.

JOHN 17:23