



Marriage was God's idea, so we know He designed it to be very good. But why do most marriages look disengaged or stagnant? This is an essential resource for couples desiring to thrive—not just survive—and who want a marriage that showcases God's grace to the watching world.

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# Great Love Stories Can Have Ugly Beginnings

On our twentieth anniversary, I told Marilyn, “This has been the best twenty years of my life.”

She responded, “It’s been the best nineteen of mine. There’s no way I’m giving you that first year!”

Decades of marriage and five children later, I’m thankful for God’s kindness to us in saving our marriage after a nearly disastrous beginning.

Our story begins in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1995.

I had just gotten back to the office where I was working as an attorney. I’d derailed my schedule by locking my keys in my car after meeting with a client in Waco (the one in Tennessee, not the one in Texas). Disheveled and harried, I finally dragged myself through the office door around 10:00 that night.

Then I saw her.

She was sitting in a paralegal’s office, working on her résumé.

Her long brown hair fell down around her shoulders, shining against the backdrop of a blue business suit. She was stunning.

She turned and looked at me as I walked by, and my feet almost involuntarily turned into that office. I chatted with her and the paralegal, who was her sister, for nearly an hour. I later learned that her sister told her, “I’ve worked here for three years, and that guy hasn’t talked to me for five minutes the entire time.”

I was smitten.

A few months later, I saw her in the office again, and this time, I was a little bolder. I said, “Hey, if you ever want to go for a run or something, give me a call.”

She paused, handed me her business card, and said, “If you ever want to go on a run, you give *me* a call.”

She later told her roommate, “I’ve met a really interesting guy, but he asked *me* to call *him* if I wanted to hang out . . . so he’s either cocky or he has a girlfriend.” And she was right. I was dating someone else at the time and was trying to assuage a guilty conscience.

After the other relationship ended, I decided I was not going to date for a year. But then I remembered Marilyn. *One date couldn’t hurt, right?* I called and asked if she’d still like to go on that run. We agreed to make it a hike instead so we could talk.

Given all I did wrong on our first date, it’s nothing short of a miracle that she ended up marrying me. After work that evening, she drove to my house to change clothes. When she went into the bathroom to change, it was so gross she dry-heaved . . . twice.

I told her we’d take my truck. Since I was an attorney at a big firm, she expected a nice SUV. Instead, she slid into my

dirty, turquoise, extended cab Ford Ranger. The interior was filthy; my black lab's hair was everywhere. She even found a dog hair in the ice cube in her cup. I didn't open the door for her, and had to scramble to throw out a beer can and cup of tobacco spit before she got in. On the drive home, my dog sat in the space behind the seat and hung his head over Marilyn's lap, showering her legs with slobber.

When we got back to my house, we decided to go out to dinner. Marilyn wanted to go home and change her clothes first, but I was hungry. So even though I took the time to change into something nicer, she had to go in the same shorts and T-shirt she'd worn on the hike.

After dinner, we hung out for a while with my roommate. She sat on one end of the couch, and I sat on the other. I was intrigued by how she looked right at me when I talked. My roommate even commented on it later. Guys like us weren't used to good eye-to-eye communication.

I think you're getting the picture. She was out of my league, in looks and in pretty much all levels of maturity. I was onto something really good, and I knew it.

Marilyn was everything I wanted. She was strong in her faith and bold in her moral convictions. Unlike me, she had a past to be proud of. Right away, I knew I would have to make changes if this relationship was going to have a chance. I stopped my bad habits immediately. I thought, *I am not going to lose the best thing that has ever happened to me for things that aren't good for me.*

For her part, Marilyn went home from our first date and

***Obviously, God had ordained that we should be together. There is no other rational explanation for why she didn't run the other way.***

(shockingly) told her roommate that it was the best first date she had ever had! Dog slobber and all. She was actually impressed that I didn't try to be impressive.

Obviously, God had ordained that we should be together. There is no other rational explanation for why she didn't run the other way.

Thus began our whirlwind courtship.



I (Marilyn) have to speak up here. We've had our marital difficulties—and we'll get to that later—but Brad was amazing at dating. He made me feel like the most special person in the world. He opened doors for me (after the first date, at least), bought me flowers, and paid a lot of money for small portions of pretty food because he knew it'd make me feel valued. We talked on the phone or in person every day. I never had to pry to get him talking on a heart-to-heart level. He was an open book.

We wrote love notes and hid them for the other to find, tried to outdo each other in planning fun dates, and surprised each other with gifts. I once left a note under his windshield wipers that said, "*You stumped me, Brad Rhoads.*" He wasn't totally sure what I meant, but I didn't know how to explain it. He was unlike anyone I'd ever met. We were absolutely crazy about each other.

At one point, we went out twenty-four nights in a row. Our relationship was booming while bank accounts and work production were going the opposite direction.

Three months after our first date, Brad asked me to marry him. It was a joy to accept.



I (Brad) remember checking my bank account before buying an engagement ring and realizing I was going to spend nearly all my money on her ring. No more emergency funds. No more savings. *Who cares? I get to marry Marilyn!* Nothing else in life seemed to matter.

During our engagement, we thought it would be a good idea to go to a marriage conference. We bought tickets with high hopes, but the first day, the speakers talked about how to navigate differences and struggles in marriage. It took us all of thirty minutes to realize the speakers didn't understand our relationship, so we left and did not return. Why spend two days listening to stuff that didn't apply to us? *We'd do anything for each other. We would never hurt each other!* But we agreed it was good they had stuff like that for people who needed it.

After a quick, four-month engagement, we were married. And we have had a fun and blissfully easy marriage ever since.

Just. Kidding.

We didn't learn how wrong we were about marriage until we got married.

## THE REALITY OF MARRIAGE

Due to our speedy courtship, neither one of us had the opportunity to really get to know the other, nor to observe how we behaved in real life. The rose-colored glasses fell off quickly. Marilyn first glimpsed grouchy Brad at our wedding reception when I wheeled around and snapped with sarcasm at the photographer (who was a dear friend of Marilyn's family) as we got in the car for our send-off: "Why don't we just stop here so you can take one more picture?"

As for our honeymoon, Marilyn tells people that the honeymoon was over before the honeymoon was over. We learned quickly that marriage is really nothing like dating; it's a whole new deal. Living together, sexual freedom, merged finances, annoying habits, and all our sins and struggles became an instant reality. For some, the first year is easy. For us, within six months, I went from Marilyn's favorite person to her least favorite person. Her perception of me went from "no one has ever loved me like this" to "no one has ever hurt me like this."

As Marilyn describes it now, I was great at dating, but pretty horrible at being married. For one thing, my creative energy for her immediately shut down, as I turned my attention away from her and toward building a law practice. Right away, I signed us up for a 35-week bowling league so I could meet people and get new clients. Marilyn hated everything about it. She hated bowling, our dorky, turquoise team shirts, and the building itself, which reeked of smoke. It didn't help that the team was really competitive and that she was not very good at bowling. When she'd throw a bad ball, no one on the team would even make eye contact with her. (One of our teammates asked her to work on her hand strength and gave her bowling videos to watch.) Immune to her distress, I continued to focus on expanding my clientele.

Not only did I ask her to spend her free time doing things she hated for my benefit, I filled any extra downtime with everything *but* her. I was obsessed with sports. On multiple occasions, I went to watch high school football games—where I didn't know anyone on either team—leaving her at home alone on a Friday night. Sunny Saturdays found me inside all day, watching sports on TV and simultaneously listening to sports



talk radio, while Marilyn mowed the lawn, tended the garden, or cleaned the house.

I was irresponsible on many levels. I was, to put it gently, a slob. I remember Marilyn telling me, “It’s one thing to leave the soap in the bottom of the tub, but the wrapper too?” She was gone for a week on a work trip once; when she returned, she knew every outfit I’d worn that week from the five different piles on our bedroom floor.

I didn’t steward her heart, or my own, very well. When she’d get upset, I’d tell her to go to the bathroom and look for the chill pills. Or I might engage her least favorite hand signal of all time: hands up in surrender, then slowly bringing them down while mouthing, “*Calm down.*” When we were looking for a new church home, she would meet with the pastors alone. I just told her I was okay with whatever church she liked best.

In dating, I had treated Marilyn like the most special woman in the world. I pursued her at every level. She knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she was my number one priority. Then, I took my foot off the pedal as soon as we got married.

Marilyn was struggling. She had made significant sacrifices for me. Just before our wedding, I had agreed to launch a branch office of my father and uncle’s law practice. That’s why, when our honeymoon was over, Marilyn and I came back to a new house in a brand-new town. Marilyn had to leave Nashville—a place she loved, a job she loved, and friends she loved—to move to Owensboro, Kentucky, a place where she knew no one, where there was little to do, and where, were it not for me, she would have zero desire to be.

She needed a caring, attentive husband to help her adjust. But she didn’t have one.

She vividly remembers asking the Lord at one point, “Am I sentenced to a life of this?”

Marilyn felt neglected . . . because she *was* neglected. I was aloof and preoccupied with myself. She was clearly unhappy with me and our marriage, but I couldn’t understand why. My staff liked me. My clients liked me. My law practice was growing. I was respected in our community. Hey, I even won the Volunteer of the Year award in our town. I thought, *What is her problem? Is everyone else wrong about me?*

I knew our relationship wasn’t doing well, and I blamed her. I truly thought our primary problem was a hypersensitive wife. I thought, *If she’d quit making such a big deal about everything, we’d be fine!*

For most of that first year, we lived parallel lives. I was building a law practice; she was getting a graduate degree. I didn’t realize how lonely she was, but I’d get glimpses of her deep sadness. When she would sometimes just start crying, I’d get frustrated with her: “Why are you crying? I didn’t do anything!”

That was the point . . . I wasn’t doing anything.

## A CHANGE OF HEARTS

Our marriage began to transform one night when Marilyn came to me and said, “We need to talk.”

Then it got worse: “Brad, I don’t need you.” That felt like a kick to the chest. My whole life hung on her next words . . . “I want to ask for your forgiveness. I have been asking from you what only God can give me. My joy and identity don’t depend on you. My fulfillment in everything only comes from Jesus. I will love you the way He is calling me to love you, but

I am off your roller coaster.”

Through spending time with the Lord over the course of a few weeks, she had come to a new understanding of the amazing sufficiency of Christ. God had been reassuring her that He was enough. She didn’t need me for happiness in any area of her life. She had everything she needed in Him.

It was freeing for Marilyn to realize that her joy didn’t hinge on how good of a husband I was, that it depended instead on the perfect, consistent, lavish love of Jesus. She learned she could be incredibly happy and content even if her husband was self-absorbed and clueless (my words, not hers).

In the following weeks, our marriage shifted from rocky to stable. I admired the new peace about Marilyn, a persistent light that brightened everything she did. Ours still wasn’t a great marriage, though, because it still had one huge problem in it . . . me.

Selfishness still blinded me. In fact, I was too blind to even know I had blind spots. I didn’t see a need to change.

My uncle saw it, though. He could tell I was succeeding in everything except what mattered most. He invited me numerous times to a men’s conference focused on marriage. Each time, I made an excuse. Finally, he called Marilyn and cleared the weekend on our calendar. Then, he called my office manager and cleared my schedule. He followed up by buying my ticket *and* inviting my father-in-law to come too. After all that, he called me. Every time I tried to make an excuse, he’d say, “I already checked. You are clear.”

By nature, I run high on energy and short on attention. Sitting through a one-hour church service can be rough. Eight hours of marriage “preaching” in a room with thousands of

other dudes sounded horrific. Besides, I didn't need marriage advice; I needed someone to tell my wife to relax.

Little did I know what God had in store for me.

I remember moments from that conference like it happened yesterday. Scripture is truly a double-edged sword, and I was cut to the bone. One of the speakers read Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"

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and then asked, "How much do you give up for your wife?"

*Ummm . . . nothing.*

"Live with your wives in an understanding way" (1 Peter 3:7) was followed by, "Do you get into her world, listen to her, and seek to really understand and love her?"

*No, never.*

"Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them" (Col. 3:19).

*I am sarcastic and rude to her often.*

The realization struck me that I probably treated her worse than I treated anyone else.

On the long ride home, I reflected on how I'd left for the conference thinking I was a pretty great husband and was returning thinking that I wasn't doing anything well at all. I felt, with bittersweet gratitude, that God had given me discipline I hadn't known I needed. Although it crushed me to realize how I had treated an amazing daughter of God so terribly, I couldn't wait to get home and start loving her well. I was so thankful Marilyn was still my wife. I had time to make this right!

It was well into early morning hours when I got home. I

woke Marilyn and told her, “The conference was amazing, and I am so sorry for the way I’ve treated you. The only thing that is going to be different from here on out is *everything*.”

I was learning the truth of 2 Corinthians 7:10–11:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. (NIV)

I was eager to right all I had done wrong; I was ready to begin loving my wife as Scripture commanded me to. God wasn’t punishing me or beating me down; He had graciously revealed His truth to me so I could draw closer to Him and my wife.

The next morning at about 5:30, Marilyn got up to plant flowers before church. Although I had only been in bed a few hours, I thought, *it’s time to get started*. I walked outside, grabbed a shovel, looked her in the face, and asked, “Where do you want me to dig?”

She very nearly passed out. I had never gotten up early with her. I certainly had never offered to help her garden. I reminded her of my words in the middle of the night—things were going to be different.

“I’m starting right now,” I told her. “So, where do you want me to dig?”

## MARRIAGES NEED HELP AND HOPE

Since that morning in our front yard, things really have been different. Our marriage has not been perfect, whatever that means, but it has been pretty amazing.

Even with having five kids and multiple life crises, we have, almost without exception, gone on a weekly date for over twenty-five years. We keep short accounts (meaning we try to resolve conflict quickly), extend grace, and have a blast together. Now we get to spend our lives helping other couples experience this kind of transformation.

*How do we make our marriages better than “we’re all right; everything’s fine”?*

A quick look around shows that marriage transformation is sorely needed. Cohabitation is commonplace, divorce is prevalent, pornography is squelching the life and health from men, women, and their mar-

riages. Monogamy is even considered taboo in some circles.

The church is no exception. For many, marriage is something to whine about, not rejoice over. Even marriages that seem generally okay are also kind of stale. An affectionate, fun, life-giving marriage has been relegated to some cute anomaly.

Many churches have no dedicated marriage ministry. Those that do tend to relegate marriage ministry to either premarital or crisis counseling. There is a sore lack of outreach to marriages that are neither thriving nor in flames.

We all know this is not how God intended it to be. If God designed marriage, then He designed it to be very, very good.

How do we get there? What are we to do when we feel stuck in a rut of complacency? How do we make our marriages better

than “we’re all right; everything’s fine”? How can we show the world the beauty of God’s design for marriage—and have a lot of fun while doing so?

Grab a shovel. Let’s start digging.



### DIGGING IN TO GRACE + INTENTIONALITY

We’ve found that there’s often a disconnect between teaching and implementation. Great sermons, books, and conferences rarely translate into real, lasting change in how couples approach life and marriage. So, at the end of each chapter, we’ll provide some questions for your consideration and reflection as a pathway to implementation and growth.

We pray this space at the end of each chapter doesn’t feel like a quiz or a box to check off, but rather helps your marriage grow in grace and enjoyment.

**What characteristics first attracted you to your spouse?**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

**What do you remember about first meeting your spouse, or about your first date?**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

**What are some of the fun things you used to do while dating, or in the early years of your marriage, that you've stopped doing?**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.



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