

WHEN I GET
Married...

Surrendering the Fantasy

Embracing the Reality

JERUSHA CLARK

NAVPRESS 

Sample from *When I Get Married* / ISBN 978-1-60006-056-4

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ISBN: 978-1-60006-056-4

Cover design by The DesignWorks Group | Tim Green
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Clark, Jerusha.
When I get married-- : surrendering the fantasy, embracing the reality
/ Jerusha Clark.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN 978-1-60006-056-4
1. Marriage--Religious aspects--Christianity. I. Title.
BV835.C877 2009
248.4--dc22

2008036115

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / 13 12 11 10 09

Sample from *When I Get Married* / ISBN 978-1-60006-056-4

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This book is dedicated to

Tom and Penny Anderson

for the countless hours you've spent

serving the Lord—

instructing singles in premarital classes,

discipling couples through marriage mentoring,

and, most importantly,

loving one another for all the world to see.

Words cannot express what you've done for our

family.

Thank you.

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Foreword

Jerusha Clark calls marriage a journey. Like most journeys, there are high peaks and low valleys, joy above anything imagined and low times you never wanted to experience. The journeys I like to go on the most are the ones with adventure. Marriage is an adventure, to say the least. Jerusha is about to guide you on a journey that will strengthen your marriage (or future marriage) and establish a more solid foundation. She gives no promises for a perfect marriage. In fact, you should doubt anyone who says he or she has a perfect marriage! Jerusha will help you see what a successful marriage looks like, and she will give you hope as well. You will be reminded that when a sinner marries another sinner it can get messy, but it can also be one of the most fulfilling experiences of our lifetime.

I have been married to my college sweetheart, Cathy, for more than thirty years. When we speak and write on the subject of marriage, we say that we have a “high-maintenance relationship.” If it wasn’t for

God's presence and perseverance, I wonder if we would have stayed married. We have had to learn to focus on the simple acts of kindness and discipline that make the journey of marriage a safe, healthy, and God-honoring one.

As you read this book, I know you will agree with me that Jerusha is an incredibly gifted writer and thinker. And in her collection of quotes in this manuscript are some of the most inspiring words on marriage and preparation for marriage I have ever read. Here is part of what I took away from reading this well-crafted book.

1. When it comes to marriage, your circumstance may not be able to change, but your attitude can change—and that makes all the difference in the world. You can't change your spouse; you can't control when marriage might happen for you. You can change your own life. As you do that, your relationships will get stronger. It just takes one person, and that person must be you.
2. You are not called to face singleness or marriage alone. Developing replenishing relationships will make you a better spouse, parent, and more genuine person. Don't try to navigate marriage or singleness on your own; it won't work.
3. God cares. The shortest verse in the Bible is "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Jesus was moved with emotion at the death of a friend; clearly He cares deeply for relationships, and that includes your marriage. He wants the foundation of your marriage—present or future—to rest upon Him. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who builds his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house; yet it did not fall, because

it had its foundation on the rock” (Matthew 7:24-25, NIV). Jesus went on to say that if you build your foundation on the sand, when the rain and storms of life come your way, your home will crash due to a poor foundation. Tough times come to all relationships; in this book you will be reminded that God is the creator and the sustainer of marriage. Any good journey is filled with adventure, but when it comes to marriage, you need enough preparation and foresight to have a great experience. If you’re single, this book will guide you in proper thinking about marriage.

No matter where you are in your life—whether single or married—you will benefit from this book. I can’t think of a more authentic person than Jerusha to guide you on this journey.

Jim Burns, PhD

President, HomeWord

Author of *Creating an Intimate Marriage*, *Confident Parenting*, and *Teaching Your Children Healthy Sexuality*

Acknowledgments

WITHOUT THE GENEROUS AND skilled cooperation of many, this book simply would not exist. I offer humble thanks to . . .

- My Creator God, my Strength and Shield—You never let me down. Thank You for walking with me every step of the way. It’s all for You.
- Jeramy Clark, my wonderful husband, for standing by my side, encouraging and enabling me. I’m forever grateful that God chose *you* to hold me—in good times and bad.
- My parents, J. A. C. and LeAnn Redford, whose marriage is an incredible testimony to God’s grace and power.
- My in-laws, Spence and Rona Clark. Over forty years of marriage, and still in love! Your example continually inspires me.
- My Nan, who’s been a loving support and great “fan” ever since I started writing (for that matter, since I started life!).

- Louie and Louise Moesta for sharing your time, expertise, prayers, and love with me. I miss you so much.
- Kathy Hansen, my passionate, dream-big, gift-from-God friend.
- Kathy Moratto. I count it a privilege to journey through life with you.
- Lorraine Pintus for endless encouragement and godly wisdom, always given at just the right time.
- Cameron Germann. You're the *real deal*, beloved friend, and I'm honored to know you.
- Betsy Yphantides, who not only vulnerably shared her story but also read drafts and offered her thoughts.
- Rebekah Guzman for simultaneously encouraging and stretching me. I cherish our partnership on His behalf.
- Mary Lockrem, my part-time publicist! Your friendship blesses me tremendously.
- Tia Stauffer, a most excellent and thorough copyeditor.
- Jenni Key, who speaks truth into my life and the lives of many others.
- The staff at Rancho Bernardo Baptist Preschool—Kristin, Nancy, Sandy, Betty, Carolyn, Tina, Mary Ann, Becky, Stacy, Linda, Monica, and Lorena. Thank you for caring for my girls, sharing your space with me, and making me feel like part of your family.

Introduction

NOT LONG AFTER JERAMY and I got married, I began to wonder if my “happily ever after” had been waylaid at the customs desk of Chicago’s O’Hare airport.

After all, the feds did ask me to declare everything I was bringing into the country. Perhaps an uncommonly shrewd customs officer noticed that I didn’t report the slew of expectations and hopes, plans and dreams I carried in my newlywed heart. Some federal employee might have confiscated my fairy-tale ending . . . without me even knowing it!

Ten days before we (perhaps ill-fatedly) went through customs, Jeramy and I tied the knot in an amazing, all-I-ever-dreamed-of wedding. We honeymooned in Tortola—a virtually untouched paradise in the British Virgin Islands—and flew home to start the adventure of life together. Neither of us expected anything less than married bliss.

But somewhere between retrieving our baggage from the airport

carousel and our first anniversary, it hit me: Marriage was not going to “make me happy.”

The reality of this unwelcome truth was staggering, especially when I considered the facts: My new husband was a wonderful man. I genuinely loved him and felt assured of his love for me. We had fun together. We served alongside one another in church. Our parents were still married after decades together—unlike many other couples, we had personal examples of what it took to stay the course in love. And perhaps more significantly, Jeramy and I were committed Christians who wanted to honor God through our marriage. As far as I could tell, we had everything going for us.

During our first few years of marriage, Jeramy and I shared many powerful experiences—times of passionate intimacy, spiritual growth, and deep emotional understanding; silly moments of amusement; and focused times of collective work. We didn’t have any of the problems we imagined would make marriage “difficult.”

Why, then, was our marriage still challenging and confusing at times, problematic and painful at others?

Long before I met Jeramy, I heard that marriage—especially godly Christian marriage—was “hard work.” But like one of my mentors, Jenni, recently confessed,

For some reason, I believed that simply knowing hard work would be involved should mitigate (or altogether eliminate) my need to actually do that work. I mistakenly thought that merely by acknowledging the reality that marriage wouldn't always be easy, I could somehow render it far less complicated and demanding.

There are certainly times when marriage seems much more like play than work, the rewards far greater than the exertion. I praise God for these times! But often, the labor in building a healthy and holy

marriage is *anything but* effortless and comfortable.

I wanted to write this book because, for me and countless others, one of the most difficult arenas of effort in the marital relationship proves to be the dismantling of false expectations and misguided assumptions.

For more than a decade, I've had the privilege of working with singles and young couples. Listening to and participating in conversations with nearly every woman in my sphere, I've observed this common thread: Marriage is perpetually dissected or dreamed about, celebrated or criticized. *Everyone* has an opinion about what marriage should be.

If you ask singles why they want to get married, or couples why they decided to wed, you might get answers like "I want(ed) to share my life with someone," "I want(ed) someone to love and to love me," "I don't (didn't) want to spend my life alone," or "I like(d) the security of a committed relationship."

Quietly underlying many of these responses are unspoken assumptions, such as "When I get married, I won't feel lonely anymore," "When I get married, I'll always feel loved," and "When I get married, my life will be so much better."

Additional and rarely acknowledged (or verbalized) expectations for marriage hover around the issues of money, sex, and personal security. Many women believe that getting married will end their search for significance, confidence, and stability. They implicitly hope marriage will give them a sense of completeness, desirability, financial well-being, and sexual satisfaction:

- "When I get married, I won't care what other people think about me."
- "When I get married, I won't have to worry about money."
- "When I get married, I'll finally know what I should do with my life."

- “When I get married, my sex drive won’t be an issue anymore; I’ll be fulfilled and happy.”

Despite the fact that many Christians could *intellectually* identify thoughts like these as faulty and potentially destructive, the emotional and mental power of these lies is nonetheless enormous.

Jeremy and I had some great premarital counseling, but I never evaluated the unspoken assumptions I entertained about marriage, let alone whether they were built on the solid foundation of Christ. I think many singles and young marrieds are in a similar situation.

Over the last decade, the U.S. marriage rate has plummeted dramatically. Consequently, our nation currently has the biggest singles population in its history.¹ Because many singles are now postponing marriage (sometimes indefinitely), a large percentage of today’s unmarried people are significantly older than singles in other time periods. And according to marriage experts Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott, the United States also sees more than two thousand new marriages each year dissolve before a couple’s second anniversary.² Global trends are not much different.

Most people have heard that one out of every two marriages ends in divorce. But this statistic does not include those who feel “trapped” in their marriage or those who might categorize their relationship as “emotionally over,” “unhappy,” or “dead.” Everyone seems to know a couple (or two, or ten) facing serious marital issues.

Why are so many singles rejecting or postponing marriage? Why are so many people—even those who profess faith in God—dismissing traditional matrimony and turning instead to alternatives such as cohabitation and nonmarried coparenting? Why are so many marriages hurting or in trouble?

One significant reason is that, like me, people everywhere—both single and married—have harbored and currently hold flawed

perceptions of what marriage can or should do for them. This certainly isn't the only answer to the complex questions of marital decline and difficulty, but it *is* an important and essential one.

That's why I'd like to candidly expose some of the most prominent misconceptions about marriage. My hope is to encourage singles to think rightly about matrimony *before* they make that commitment. I also pray that I might help some married folks wade through any disappointments and misunderstandings they've struggled with in the past, are currently battling, or might face in the future.

Over the past few years I've grown to cherish The Good News Bible's rendering of Proverbs 4:23, which advises, "Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts."

What we think about marriage matters. It matters a *great deal*. How we think shapes the very course of our lives and definitely affects how we deal with relationships. Whether you're single or have been married many years, crooked thinking about marriage will lead to heartache and bewilderment.

At first glance, some of the problems couples face appear relatively simple (or insignificant). Before I got married, I heard about the stereotypical "Who squeezes the toothpaste the right way?" fights that ensnared newlyweds. I thought Jeremy and I could avoid most of these by discussing everything we could think of and by determining ahead of time not to "sweat the small stuff." What I didn't realize is how ridiculously *huge* queries like "What is the 'perfect' temperature setting for the thermostat?" could become to me.

Many of our ideas about marriage ultimately boil down to matters of preference, tradition, and upbringing more than a "right" or "wrong" way to live. Beyond toothpaste, toilet paper, and thermostats, for instance, questions about how a husband and wife elect to celebrate holidays, who handles the family budget, and whether or not a couple chooses to live in the same town for thirty years or move regularly are

usually not issues of sin versus righteousness.

But imagine with me what might happen if you expect to visit your extended family each Christmas, while your husband wants to spend time at home. Or what if you are accustomed to celebrating every holiday, anniversary, and birthday with elaborate decorations and big surprises, while your husband grew up with the impression that such things are extravagant and unnecessary—in his mind, a simple expression is the most loving kind? What if you assumed that your husband would handle the finances, but his mother always did it for their family, and he presumed you would for yours? What happens to a wife who would like to put down roots and settle into a community, while her husband would like to explore a new place every couple of years?

Though premarital counseling and marriage-building books might help couples talk through some of these matters, it's impossible to anticipate everything involved in an intimate relationship. Surprises—and probably some downright shocks—are unavoidable. Relationships expert H. Norman Wright hit the nail on the head: “Though hints of . . . differences appear in courtship, often the huge gulf does not yawn open until after marriage, when the two are thrust together for 16 hours a day, not just when they want to be together.”³ At this crossroads, best-selling authors Bill and Pam Farrel assert that virtually “every couple goes through a period where they wonder, ‘What have we gotten ourselves into?’”⁴

And here's the kicker in it all: The surprises, the outrages, the differences, and even the “what have we done?!” fears might be easier to deal with if they didn't touch so inconveniently on *much deeper* issues.

When how to celebrate a holiday becomes a question of whether a spouse feels loved and valued; when who handles the money gets mixed up with questions of provision, security, and spiritual leadership; when

the numbers on a thermostat stand more for the warmth or frigidity of a relationship than the interior temperature of a home—*that* is when couples start looking at each other across an ever-expanding canyon of disillusionment.

At such a point, some couples attempt to bridge the gap by solving what appear to be their problems. Perhaps they make mature compromises about celebrations, determine an equitable division of labor, and endlessly discuss the minutiae of day-to-day living. But what happens when frustrations still creep in and discontent refuses to go quietly? What if changing habits and circumstances isn't enough to stem the tide of gnawing restlessness?

I believe singles and couples will best be prepared for and successful in marriage if they look first and most intently at their basic beliefs about matrimony—the *thoughts* they regularly entertain about marriage. People can spin their wheels for years, trying to clean up their behavior and addressing surface-level issues, when what might be needed is a pervasive reordering of their minds' and hearts' expectations.

For instance, assuming that marriage would make me happy led to a host of difficulties in my relationship with Jeramy—concerns that ultimately couldn't have been solved by changing outward actions. Because what I think determines what I do and say, eventually shaping my very character, my *thoughts* needed to be transformed before altering my behavior could make any lasting difference.

In his classic work *The Marriage Builder*, Christian psychologist Dr. Larry Crabb identified “the appealing emphasis on becoming happy and fulfilled” as a major flaw in most people's view of Christian marriage (and, ultimately, of the entire Christian life).

Uppermost in the minds of many Christians, [though] perhaps unconsciously, is a preoccupation with following Christ to achieve the

abundant life of pleasant, satisfying emotions and fulfilling, enriching opportunities. . . . The joy and peace available to the Christian have become confused with the similar sounding but very different idea of [personal] fulfillment.⁵

This is certainly not to say that God has anything against happiness or fulfillment in marriage. It simply raises the question of expectation to a different level: How would our thoughts about marriage change if we believed that even more than wanting to make us happy, God created marriage to make us holy?⁶

Happiness and holiness are *by no means* mutually exclusive in marriage. (We can thank God for this truth and rejoice that a healthy marriage does bring great joy!) Still, viewing marriage primarily through the lens of holiness can transform how both singles and couples deal with basic assumptions about love, family, sex, and money. Contemplating ideas like this pushed me to explore what I believed would happen—and what others believe will happen—“When I get married . . .” The result of my research has translated into the resource you now hold.

I’ve structured this book to apply the Bible, God’s timeless Word, as well as the wisdom He’s given to those who’ve gone before me, to ten specific and prevalent misconceptions people often entertain about marriage. At the end of each chapter, you’ll also find some questions for small-group discussion or solo journaling, intended to help you press into what you’re reading.⁷ Whether you’re single or married, I hope that together you and I can journey through these ideas, delving deeply into the hidden recesses of our minds and hearts, letting Christ shine His light there.

As we begin to rethink our basic understanding of marriage, we will perceive that if marriage is a delightful blessing, it is also a call to servanthood and refinement. If it is full of the most profound joys,

it also overflows with the most painful sufferings. Through marriage, God can sanctify two imperfect people who have vowed—and continually choose to vow—an unconditional commitment to one another.

If God grants or has granted you the gift of marriage, you will inevitably taste the bitter effects of loving in a fallen, broken world. Our longing for perfect harmony and intimacy will never be satisfied this side of heaven. But we can avoid some of the grief and regrets of this life by purposefully aligning our thoughts with God's, our ways with His.

One of the ways we can do this is by noting, right at the start of our journey, that God's plan for every life does not include marriage. First Corinthians 7:7 plainly states, "God gives the gift of the single life to some, the gift of the married life to others." I don't know whether that encourages or enrages you. But I do know that whether you are currently married or single, God's design for you is good *right now*. He *will continue* to orchestrate loving plans for your future (see Jeremiah 29:11). I don't say this to simplify or trivialize the longing for marriage single readers may feel. I would never wish to do that. Wrestling with whether or not God has marriage in store for you is just not the focus of this book. My aim is to help both singles and couples think about the realities of marriage with balance, truth, and wisdom.

If this is your desire, I give you the same encouragement Paul offered his beloved Romans: "Let God transform you . . . *by changing the way you think*. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will [for marriage, and everything else] really is" (12:2, NLT, emphasis added).

With that in mind, let's venture on, allowing the Lord to reveal our misperceptions and renovate our thinking.

I'll Always Feel Loved

THE YEAR I TURNED twenty, I read Fyodor Dostoyevsky's masterpiece *The Brothers Karamazov*. Actually, I devoured the book. *The Brothers K* seemed like a daunting read when I first picked it up. (Hundreds and hundreds of pages by a gone-to-glory Russian whose name is nearly impossible to pronounce correctly, let alone spell? This wasn't exactly my idea of spring-break relaxation!) But after listening to a sermon series by a teacher I deeply respected, I was convinced I needed to read this classic tale of suffering and redemption, love and loss. I was not disappointed.

The piercing wisdom of *The Brothers K* is incomparable. But one particular quote, which seared my mind even more than countless others, came early in the novel from the mouth of Dostoyevsky's brilliant character-creation Father Zossima.¹ A society woman asks Father Zossima how she might achieve immortality and presses him to analyze her distressing lack of faith, which she believes is hindering her

ability to love. The woman insists she enjoys caring for others, but also wants an immediate reward for it. Upon hearing this, Father Zossima replies shrewdly yet compassionately:

I am sorry I can say nothing more consoling to you, [but] love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams is greedy for immediate action, rapidly performed and in the sight of all . . . but active love is labor and fortitude and for some people, too, perhaps, a complete science.²

You didn't know me at twenty, but idealistic hardly covers it. I didn't fancy myself unrealistic, but was I full of inflated dreams and impossible expectations? You bet. The illusory love of my dreams—and I'm not just talking about the romantic love that I hoped for, ached for in a physical, hurt-in-the-pit-of-my-stomach kind of way; I'm also talking about the spiritual love I sought in my Savior's arms—was warm and fuzzy. It made me feel safe, whole, and strong. At least it did in my dreams.

Yet when Jesus drew me nearer in True Love, and when I actually began to practice loving Jeramy, whom I eventually married, there was much more pain than I had bargained for, much less that was instinctual and natural about loving. There were fewer immediate rewards than I envisioned and a whole lot of labor and fortitude required.

I thought that for Christians, love was supposed to be easy; I thought it should flow organically from the center of my being. Instead, I discovered what Jesuit scholar Dean Brackley aptly noted: "What love requires is not always obvious. Above all, love demands sacrifice, and we are slow to sign up for that."³

I am slow to sign up for sacrifice. And surrender. And everything else that makes love really *work*. I want the passionate kisses and someone to hold me when I'm scared and tell me that he'll never leave me,

but I don't usually jump to it when "I forgive you," "I'm sorry," and "Let's do it your way" are necessary.

Perhaps old Fyodor Dostoyevsky knew a thing or two about love. His words through Father Zossima don't indicate that love is always harsh and dreadful . . . and we can thank God for that! But compared to the love of our dreams—the love we often *expect* from a spouse and *assume* will be ours—true love can seem a severe and unkind reality.

To flesh this out, let me share with you how these ideas influenced my girlfriend Betsy's life. I wish you could sit down with Betsy and hear her tell this story over a cup of tea. You would love her. In fact, I don't know anyone who doesn't adore Betsy. She's a riot and a sweetheart and an incredible mother. Beautiful, too. But even for someone as strong and fabulous as Betsy, it was hard to realize that getting married didn't equal an unending supply of "perfect" love—either from or for her. I'm getting ahead of myself, though. I'll let Betsy's words communicate how God used the experience of *not* feeling loved to draw her closer to Himself . . .

He Handed Me a Bible!

As told by Betsy Yphantides

Phil and I met at church the summer after we graduated from college. We dated for a year and a half before getting engaged and then planned our wedding for a year and a half later. That meant Phil would be finishing medical school at roughly the same time we said, "I do."

Before Phil and I got married, I didn't spend a ton of time thinking about what marriage would be like. I had always heard, though, that marriage completes people, so I guess I believed that through marriage I would become spiritually and emotionally whole. I honestly don't know where I got that. But it was there in me—and big time.

I also believed that being married, I would feel loved and adored at

least 99 percent of the time (nobody's perfect, right? . . . so that 1 percent could account for our "bad days"). At one point during our engagement, I remember Phil scuffed up my rose-colored glasses; he told me marriage would be tough and that though he was expecting the worst, he hoped to be pleasantly surprised. How offensive!

I got over that day's hurt, but Phil's choice commentary on our future prospects hadn't come to an end. He would say things like "Love is a decision, and I've decided to love you—even when it gets hard." He's decided? Where are his feelings? Won't we always feel love for each other? I wondered.

Honestly, I didn't appreciate his unidealistic attitude. How could he think it was going to be so hard? We got along incredibly well; we never even fought. Why would things suddenly change with a ceremony? I assured him he was wrong; I was right, and marriage would be wonderful.

There was just the tiniest little problem. Things did suddenly change with a ceremony.

Especially when we first got married, I wanted Phil to meet all my needs. It was as if the ring went on my finger and Phil went on my life pedestal. And because I had put him on mine, I wanted to be on his life pedestal, too (that seemed only fair). I wanted him to keep my love tank overflowing by putting me first in everything. When he wouldn't, I would get frustrated that he wasn't keeping my tank full. Surely his tank was full, I reasoned; he was married to me, and I was keeping him in his "rightful place"!

My disappointment, letdown, and unmet expectations nailed me between a rock and a hard place. I couldn't quite grasp how to get above or around or out of it. There were tears, frustrations, heated conversations, and confusion surrounding this love mystery.

Unfortunately, I was trying to shove Phil into that place in my heart that only God can fill. Not only was it unhealthy for me; I was also foisting terribly unrealistic expectations on my husband. I remember Phil actually placing my Bible into my hands, directing me to go to God and ask Him to meet my needs.

It worked, and we haven't had a fight since!

Okay, maybe not. But wouldn't that have been nice?

No, at first I was seriously offended; it seemed he was trying to get out of his love responsibilities to me, or worse, he was trying to act as the Holy Spirit, convicting me of sin. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Slowly, I began lowering my expectations of Phil and looking to the Savior to meet my needs for love. I took Phil off the throne of my life and asked Jesus to resume His rightful place.

Now that I look back, I'm so grateful that before we got married, Phil made the decision to love me . . . with or without feelings. Now that my "cute" factor is on its downward slope [author's note: so not true!], I'm grateful my husband bases his love on a choice instead of fleeting feelings. Emotions cannot direct life; they just enhance it.

After we were married, our single friends would often ask Phil for relationship advice in front of me. He would respond with, "The key to happiness is lowered expectations." When I assumed that Phil would meet all of my needs for love and affection, security and completeness, I hated this counsel. A lowered expectation . . . is that how he saw me?

These words certainly aren't fluffy and warm, but through the years, I've found there is deep truth to them. With Phil's lowered expectations I am free to make mistakes . . . lots of mistakes. I don't have to worry about disappointing someone who is expecting disappointment. How freeing! In similarly lowering my expectations of Phil, I can allow him to be himself, without the pressure of making me happy. He can have a bad day and it's okay; I don't take it personally. A lot of joy comes from not having to make each other happy. Our dependence is taken off each other and placed on the right Person: our perfect heavenly Father, who never lets us down.

Being in Love

When *Psychology Today* asked people, "What makes a good marriage?" 90 percent of the population answered, "Being in love." No surprise

there. When the article’s author pressed a thousand college-aged readers to list the “essential ingredients of love as a basis for marriage,” however, “no single item was mentioned by at least one half of those responding.”⁴ In other words, people can’t seem to agree on what love is. Or perhaps, to say it more accurately, people don’t actually *know* what love is.

And really, hasn’t love always struck people as somewhat of a mystery? “There are three things that are too hard for me . . .” wrote the ancient sage Agur, “four I don’t understand: the way an eagle flies in the sky, the way a snake slides over a rock, the way a ship sails on the sea, and the way a man and a woman fall in love” (Proverbs 30:18-19, NCV). Today, scientists can explain a good deal about these things, but even the most brilliant biologists and physicists cannot explicate love with precise terms and formulas.

When genuine love—or even the potential for love—strikes us, we’re usually baffled by the accompanying physiological cues. Certainly, something different happens to us—our hearts race, our minds are blurred, our bodies respond in what seem like crazed and irresponsible ways (I remember sweating in the most ridiculously unfeminine way on first dates)—but most of the time, we can’t pinpoint exactly what’s going on.

Unfortunately, people often mistake these biochemical reactions (well, maybe not the sweating) for love itself. The conglomeration of physical feelings, however—from butterflies in the stomach to the anticipation before physical consummation—is merely *a portion* of what constitutes love. Regrettably, these powerful biochemical reactions can deceive and mislead well-meaning people. Hormones can make someone *feel* genuinely “in love,” but again, physical feelings account for only part of authentic love.

God’s gifts to us, through modern medicine and science, can help us discern better. Brain chemicals do not have to rule us. In their book

The Singlehood Phenomenon, Drs. Beverly and Thomas Rodgers help singles understand the role biochemistry may play in falling “in and out” of love. I highly recommend their exploration of this topic. For the purposes of this book, however, I’d like to focus on only a couple of brain chemicals, which specifically influence the way people view love as well as the people they love.

According to Drs. Rodgers and Rodgers, and the researchers they partnered with, extremely high levels of phenylethylamine and norepinephrine can be detected in couples who report mutual attraction or intense romantic feelings or who claim to be “in love.”

Phenylethylamine (PEA for short) is a naturally occurring neurochemical and a cousin to street amphetamines. It creates a biological “high.” But as with any related amphetamine, PEA can inspire an intense yet false sense of well-being.⁵

“When PEA is flowing through our bodies,” the Rodgers wrote, “we tend to be unrealistically optimistic.”⁶ We’re literally *high* on young (as in the early stages of) love. PEA can create what the Rodgers termed “attraction junkies,” people who confuse brain-chemical highs with true love. They are addicted to the feelings that accompany a new relationship and may become “serial monogamists” who go from one serious relationship to the next but rarely commit to marriage.

Norepinephrine, another brain chemical associated with love in its early stages, raises blood pressure, increases excitement, exhilarates us, and gives us excessive energy. As the Rodgers observed,

This is what gives us our extra zip when we are getting to know a possible mate. Norepinephrine puts that spring in our step and allows us to go without sleep and food in pursuit of our loved one. This superhuman feeling [can make you] think that each relationship must be the “real deal,” only to realize much later that it had been powerful neurotransmitters operating in [your] body.⁷

Perhaps the biggest problem with both PEA and norepinephrine is that “as with most chemicals in the system, our bodies build up a tolerance to [them]. After a while it takes more and more PEA to produce love’s special kick. As the chemical wanes, a more realistic image of our partner appears.”⁸

PEA, in particular, seems to run a long course in the body. Drs. Rodgers and Rodgers noted,

While there are dips in one’s PEA levels—first at three months, then two years—it takes about four years for PEA to run its full course. By the four-year mark, the effects of PEA and the many other brain chemicals wear off and we no longer feel love’s special kick. Our partner falls off his or her pedestal and becomes a mere mortal.⁹

Okay, so I know some of that is pretty technical. But even if you have no interest in brain chemistry, think of the effect this could have on a relationship, especially one that leads to marriage. You’re on a “high” for the first three months of dating, engagement, or marriage . . . so in love. But after that, perhaps there are some bumps in the road. Maybe by two years, the pedestal is starting to crack. By four years, “love’s special kick” has definitely worn off, and the person you once thought you could kiss all night and into the next day . . . well, you stop making out like you used to.

What happened? Do people just “fall out of love” or come up against “irreconcilable differences” like divorce lawyers seem to think? Is our disappointment in love simply the result of brain chemicals flying around inside us? As the apostle Paul might say, “By no means!”¹⁰ But knowing that there *is* a natural and biochemical reason why our loved ones fall from grace can help us *decide* to love rather than allow those chemicals to rule us.

Perhaps that's why the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write these words to his beloved Philippians:

So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of. (1:9-10)

A lot of what we hear about love is sentimental gush, when what we need is so much more than that. I want to live a lover's life, a life Jesus will be proud of. It just seems difficult sometimes to admit that the best and wisest and *right* course is through sincere and intelligent love. Those words fly in the face of our obsessed-with-spontaneity and consumed-with-passion world. Tragically, people either assume that sincerity and intelligence can't be spontaneous and passionate or dismiss sincere and intelligent love as boring, old-fashioned, and flat.

Think back to my friend Betsy and her husband, Phil. Remember his counsel to unmarried friends—the key to happiness is lowered expectations? What if, going into marriage, you expected that you were *not* going to be loved 100 percent of the time; that you *were* going to be disappointed now and then; that, in different ways and at different times, you *were* going to fall in and out of love with your spouse (meaning your feelings would ebb and flow, and though you wouldn't always *feel* loving, you could still choose love)? What if you assumed—before you got married and throughout the course of your married life—that all of this was normal and okay?

Would this, just maybe, be a sensible and intelligent way to approach marriage? Would this, just maybe, be a loving way as well, considering that you would be taking a huge weight of pressure off any spouse you might be blessed with?

Maybe this is beginning to make sense to you, but let me play devil's advocate for a moment and place before you one of the problems I faced as a single woman: I didn't *want* to fall in and out of love. Even more significantly, I didn't want my husband to fall in and out of love with me.

After I was married, I tried to wrap my brain around the idea that Jeramy and I couldn't always feel for one another what we did on our wedding day. But I wanted that passion to last. I wanted our experience to be different, our Eden to remain intact. Let's take a couple of minutes and explore what we're really looking for when longing to be loved "perfectly."

With an Everlasting Love

"One advantage of marriage," claimed popular author and speaker Judith Viorst, "is that when you fall out of love with him or he falls out of love with you, it keeps you together until you fall in again."¹¹ I read that in a marriage book somewhere. And I think it was supposed to be encouraging . . . you know, the commitment of marriage is more powerful than your feelings and all that. Let me assure you, I wholeheartedly believe this, and it's great, and hip, hip, hooray for commitment.

But . . . as I mentioned before, I don't *want* to fall in and out of love. I don't want Jeramy to fall in and out of love with me. It scares me. No, scratch that; it terrifies me.

When Anne Morrow wed Charles Lindbergh, I don't know what she expected from marriage. I imagine she could foresee problems (and rather big ones) from the get-go. Lindy, as her husband was known, didn't share Anne's zeal for literature and poetry. In a day when international stardom was *not* an everyday sort of thing, her husband was a superstar. She couldn't have known, but their first child would be abducted from his crib and murdered not far from their home. Anne Morrow Lindbergh carried deep sorrow in her days as a wife.

The wisdom that suffering brought her is both powerful and piercing. In her book *Gift from the Sea*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh described what I've often wrestled with in my own love (and lack thereof):

When you love someone you do not love them all the time, in exactly the same way, from moment to moment. It is an impossibility. It is even a lie to pretend to. And yet this is exactly what most of us demand. We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity — in freedom.¹²

I am so afraid that if love recedes, it will never return. I don't want to fall in and out of love because I don't trust fluidity. I guess in some ways I don't really trust freedom. I suppose I'll never fully understand His kind of love—a love that expects nothing, but hopes everything.

But I want to. I really do. And I want you to get it too. I want you to walk down the aisle confident that when the love for your spouse ebbs and flows, He will bring it back. If you're already married, I want you to trust—without a shadow of doubt—that His love is strong enough to hold you during the tide and turbulence of life.

Our God is in the business of new life, beauty from ashes, hope from fear, something from nothing. “[Wherever] you send your Spirit, new life is born to replenish all the living of the earth” (Psalm 104:30, NLT). Redemption, grace, renewal . . . these are His tools. And the love He forges is the only love that really lasts. While we frantically seek permanence in the infinitely unstable, while we're busy trying to find love and peace in the eternally unsatisfying, He's beckoning. Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling . . .

And what kind of love does He offer? Is it a love that ebbs and flows like the love of an earthly spouse? Is His a fall-in-and-out-of-love feeling? No, no, a thousand times no. And yet there are times I can scarcely believe this truth. It's so scandalously beautiful, so hopelessly rich.

"I have loved you with an everlasting love," God proclaims in Jeremiah 31:3 (NIV). You are so valuable that "you were bought at a price," He tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:20 (NIV), and it's the highest price one can pay—Life Himself. Romans 15:7 reminds us, "Christ accepted you" (NIV).

Our Savior cries out:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are Mine! . . .
You are precious in My sight . . .
You are honored and I love you . . .
For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake,
But My lovingkindness will not be removed from you,
And My covenant of peace will not be shaken. (Isaiah 43:1,4;
54:10, NASB)*

Don't skim these verses, even if you've read them many times. Go back and let the words sink into your mind and heart: *You are Mine . . . you are precious . . . you are honored . . . and I love you.* You are incomparably valuable, eternally cherished, and fully acceptable to the God who created you, loves you, and died so that you could spend eternity with Him. This is the love you are looking for. And no boyfriend, no spouse, no human is ever going to give this to you. You can't absorb this love from a book, a sermon, a CD, or a friend. You have to experience it for yourself.

In the original text of the Bible, several different words are used

for the verb we render in English “to know.” The Greek verb *gnosis* connotes an experiential knowledge, a deep connection between the knower and the thing or person known. This is the way we are urged to know God. Indeed, the picture of eternal union between Christ and His church is a husband and wife—the most intimate portrait of relationship humans can conceive of.

If people lived as if they *really believed* the verses that we’ve looked at in this section, if people *genuinely trusted* in their belovedness, the world would be a very different place. I need God’s grace every day to live out the truth behind these words about His love, and I imagine that you need that same grace. Why do we not ask for it? “You do not have,” wrote Jesus’ half brother James, “because you do not ask God” (James 4:2, NIV).

As my friend Betsy has learned to do, as I am learning day by day to do, let us ask God to meet our needs for love. Let us ask Him to remind us of who we are: His beloved ones—cherished, valued, precious, and honored. And let us entrust ourselves to the permanence of His perfect love . . . forever.

The Pain of Practice

As we begin to trust more completely in the Lover of our souls and in our own belovedness, we find it easier to expect healthy and realistic things from the people we relate to and love here on earth. This helps take pressure off our relationships and establish better channels for communication, physical expression, and mutual sharing.

But even growing in understanding cannot entirely eliminate pain from love’s equation. I wish that I could tell you differently. But I would be a bad guide were I to mislead you on this point. So I will tell you the truth. I’m quite sure it will not shock you, since you have likely experienced this yourself: Love hurts.

As Mike Mason so beautifully wrote in *The Mystery of Marriage*,

“Love aims at revelation, at a clarifying and defining of our true natures. It is a sort of sharpening process, a paring away of dull and lifeless exteriors so that the keen new edge of a person’s true self can begin to flash and gleam.”¹³

Of course, the difficulty in this statement is immediately apparent: Sharpening is an inherently painful process. Try to extract the pain from love, and you’ll have nothing left. Try to escape the breaking process, I dare you. Mason called it “excruciating” and “inexorable.” No one is man or woman enough to take it. And what’s the worst thing about it? What breaks us is not some nebulous force “out there,” but *love*, love Himself.¹⁴ No wonder Dostoyevsky called love in practice a harsh and dreadful thing compared to the love of our dreams.

And so people begin to build up secret resentments to the demands of marriage. They start to hold back, to see what they can get away with, to give reluctantly and then only what is *absolutely necessary*.¹⁵

If, however, we can go into marriage knowing that our spouse will fall from grace, that we will not always feel exactly the same about him as we did on the wedding day (or the best day of our courtship), if we have settled in our minds and hearts where our value and worth come from—what makes us lovable and accepted—then we can actually face this refining, often exhausting dimension of love without fear and trepidation.

It does not unnerve me like it used to that God will (and, boy, does He ever) use Jeramy to smooth out my rough edges. He is sharpening me through relationship with Jeramy Alan Clark, and, by grace that I cannot comprehend, I get to be part of Jer’s growth too. As Mason described it, we are beginning to flash and gleam, our dull edges being pared away. And let me tell you, the pain is worth it.

Love demands everything. This is one of its chief characteristics. Unless you are challenged to overhaul your character, be turned inside out and upside down (for the better, of course), you are not really in

love. Loving Jeremy has made me more patient, more gracious, more forgiving, more merciful, more loving, more generous . . .

But can I confess how agonizing it was—and still often is—to see how *impatient* and *ungracious* I am deep down? How slow I am to forgive, how stingy I am with mercy and love and money? I say that I am “more” of these things, but you have no idea how far I still have to go!

Loving just one man for your whole life is probably the single most important and most humbling experience you can have on this planet. I pray that for you, though. If it happens, I pray for your courage and stamina. You will need both for the sharpening process. Indeed, without them, without *Him*, it is impossible.

If you ever get serious about love, you can make a symbolic gesture of surrendering everything, even backing it up with a dramatic (and public!) statement to that effect—which, by the way, is what happens at every wedding. But this is just the beginning. The “I now pronounce you man and wife” merely starts you on a lifelong journey of handing over absolutely everything, and not just the things you have . . . I’m talking about everything you *are*.¹⁶

Does this vision of marriage—or love—disappoint you? Does it seem unromantic or just too darn difficult? I genuinely hope not. I’m not writing any of these things for mere shock value or with the desire to scare people away from marriage. That couldn’t be further from my desire!

Instead, I hope any disenchantment will be what nineteenth-century British author Eliza Tabor once claimed it could be: “Disappointment to a noble soul is what cold water is to burning metal; it strengthens, tempers, intensifies, but never destroys it.”¹⁷

Let your love—True Love—be strengthened, tempered, and intensified but never destroyed. Listen to the words of God through His prophet Isaiah: “I have refined you but not in the way silver is refined. Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering. I will rescue you

for my sake—yes, for my own sake!” (48:10-11, NLT). Through love, He will refine you and make you more and more like Himself . . . for His own sake.

When I was going through a particularly difficult time in life, someone forwarded me an e-mail about silversmithing. Apparently, for silver to be refined, it needs to be placed in an incredibly hot furnace again and again, until all the impurities are burned out. The e-mail’s author asked the silversmith working that day how he knew when the silver was finally ready. “That’s easy,” the smith said with a smile. “It’s done when I can see my reflection in it.”

God is refining us in—and with—love so that He can see His image more perfectly reflected in us. And the ironic beauty is that He does it because of love. He loves us so much that He uses love to make us more lovable.

Marriage may not always make you feel loved, but the Creator of marriage will. If you define your life in and through His love, none of the refinements of marriage, the disappointments that come, or the ebbs and flows of intimate relationship will break you. And that is a gift beyond price.

Pressing On . . .

1. How does the idea that love might require “labor and fortitude” (work and strength) strike you with fear? Intimidation? A loud *Amen!*? What in our modern Western society makes us afraid of diligent labor? Why do you think most people would like to disassociate love and work?
2. In their book *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott noted,

Each of us constructs an idealized image of the person we marry. The image is planted by our partner's eager efforts to put his best foot forward, but it takes root in the rich soil of our romantic fantasies. We want to see our partner at his best. We imagine, for example, that he would never become irritable or put on excess weight.¹⁸

Why is it important to evaluate realistically our own romantic fantasies (or, as Dostoyevsky called it, “the love of our dreams”)? Ask the Lord to help you confront any lingering falsehoods or illusions about what being in love, being married in general, or being married to a specific person might be like. What did you discover as you journeyed in prayer with the Holy Spirit?

3. At many weddings, the pastor will read from the famous “love passage”:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Love will last forever. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NLT)

The older I get, and the more I've tried to love, I'm often struck with the sheer impossibility of these words. No human can love in this way. Our only hope lies in aligning ourselves with the One who *is* Love, the One who can pour love through us and on us. Spend some time discussing or journaling about your need for *His* love and *His* help in loving others.

4. Have you ever struggled to believe that God loves you with an everlasting love, no matter what you've done? Consider this truth: God *never* conditions His love for you on your behavior. What does that statement mean to you? Is it difficult for you to grab hold of that truth and live out of it on a daily basis? How might your life be different if you lived in consistent and confident assurance of His love?

5. During a particularly rebellious period in Israel's history, God lamented over His children: "The bellows blow fiercely. The refining fire grows hotter. But it will never purify and cleanse them because there is no purity in them to refine" (Jeremiah 6:29, NLT). When it comes to your own refinement, what materials are you giving God to work with? Do you fill your life with goodness, truth, and beauty that there might be "purity in [you] to refine"? None of us seeks righteousness perfectly, but regularly filling our lives with moral filth and toxic thoughts will make it even more difficult for the Spirit of God to refine us, whether through marriage or some other means. What commitment regarding your purity and His refinement would you like to make to the Lord?