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Volume 1. Issue 25
September 2008

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SACRED MARRIAGE:

What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?

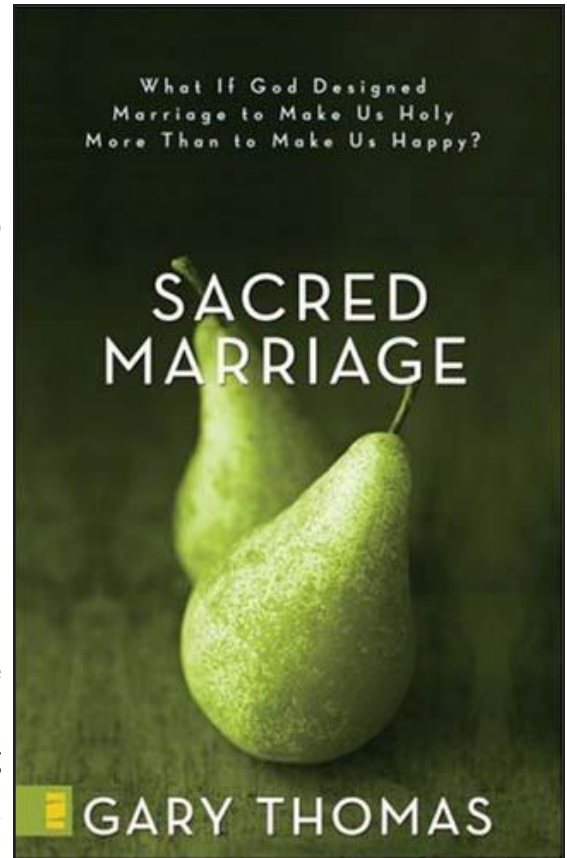
A Quick Focus

The Book's Purpose

- Reveal how marriage can help individuals deepen their relationship with God
- Help couples view the challenges of marriage as spiritual disciplines that benefit them
- Demonstrate how marriage is a powerful tool God can use in our lives to make us more like Him

The Book's Message

This is not another "how to build a better marriage" book. Rather, it is a book on how the struggles and challenges of marriage can shape us and change us in profoundly spiritual ways. Marriage is even more than a sacred covenant. If our hearts are attuned to what God is teaching us, our marriage relationship can help us learn sacrificial love, forgiveness, servanthood, and perseverance. Marriage is a sacred tool that helps us grow spiritually in ways nothing else can.



by Gary Thomas
Zondervan
ISBN: 0310242827

Seven Main Points

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A CALL TO HOLINESS

More Than Happiness

There are no fast and easy tips for a more exciting love life, or simple steps to create a happier marriage. But it is possible to ***“use the challenges, joys, struggles, and celebrations of marriage to draw closer to God and to grow in Christian character.”***

God can and will use the difficulties we face in our married lives to benefit us spiritually, but only if we are willing to own up to our disappointments, our failures, and our selfishness and to throw out the idea that everything will be smooth and easy if we just pray harder!

Perhaps the “simple steps” approach to marriage does not work because God didn’t design marriage to be easy. Perhaps God’s purpose for us goes beyond our personal happiness and comfort.

“What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?”

This fairly radical idea goes against our cultural norm—the belief that good marriages are the result of romantic feelings that somehow last, and that romantic “spark” is the primary basis for choosing a spouse. And yet few if any couples find that romantic attraction can remain the foundation for a lasting happy marriage.

Katherine Anne Porter writes of the piercing reality of marriage: ***“This very contemporary young woman finds herself facing the oldest and ugliest dilemma of marriage. She is dismayed, horrified, full of guilt and forebodings because she is finding out little by little that she is capable of hating her husband, whom she loves faithfully ... She is afraid her marriage is going to fail.”*** When we have only romantic love to fall back on, any hope for the marriage shatters.

“Romantic love has no elasticity to it. It can never be stretched; it simply shatters. Mature love, the kind demanded of a good marriage, *must* stretch.”

Choosing to make the incredible pledge to marry until “death do us part” calls us to our highest and best, but it also calls us to faithfulness in the midst of the reality of living together as two flawed, sinful people.

Mature love based in sacrifice and forgiveness is what marriage must be built on in order to last. And in the daily struggles of marriage, we find the purpose God intended—the opportunity to grow deeper in our understanding of God and strengthen our trust in Him.

If the purpose of marriage were merely happiness and romance, I’d have to find someone new about every two years (and some do!). But if holiness is God’s focus, then living with a difficult spouse is an opportunity for me to grow in Christlikeness, for *me* to be transformed. If I focus on changing myself rather than trying to change my spouse, I find I must depend on God and in that process I will find deep fulfillment.

Humans so often look to each other for things that only God can provide. ***“Much of the dissatisfaction we experience in marriage comes from expecting too much from it.”*** Our greatest satisfaction can only come from a deep relationship with God. We are created to crave our Creator, and anything less will not satisfy. Growing spiritually is the purpose of our lives, and marriage is the context in which growth in character, obedience, and service occur.

Throughout Scripture, God compares His relationship to His people to the relationship a man and woman experience in marriage. This picture helps us understand how God wants us to relate to Him. He loves us, desires us, and wants to be close to us. He longs for our obedience to be the result of intimacy and love not fear. God’s faithful and sacrificial love to us demonstrates how we are to then love

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A CALL TO HOLINESS MORE THAN HAPPINESS


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one another. Our marriages can be small pictures of what God's love is like~signposts of the divine love God wants to share with the world.

We must be clear about why we married and why we should stay faithful in that marriage. A worldly point of view promotes staying married only if our desires and "needs" are being fulfilled. But from God's perspective, we are to maintain our marriage because doing so brings glory to God and points others to Him. What a drastic difference!

As Christians our consuming desire must be to *please God*. God calls us to think not of what will make us happy, but of what will make God happy. Christ's unfathomable sacrifice for me on the cross drives me to be willing to sacrifice all for Him, including living a selfless, love-filled life with my wife, no matter how great the challenges. ***"To do this, I have to die to my own desires daily. I have to crucify the urge that measures every action and decision around what is best for me."***

God's primary message to the world is one of reconciliation, of bringing us back into relationship with our Maker. Our marriages are to be a picture of that message on a human level, continually working for reconciliation, selflessness, forgiveness, and peace. Most divorces are the result of one or both individuals forsaking the work of reconciliation.

A well-watered tree will grow strong and be less devastated if lightning strikes. And marriages, if they are well-watered with a deep commitment to pleasing God, will make it through the lightning strikes of life while sustaining little damage. Since they have grown strong and secure, even through trouble and crisis, they will survive the fire. ***"If I'm married only for happiness, and my happiness wanes for whatever reason, one little spark will burn the entire forest of my relationship."*** As Christians we can stand firm and stand out just for staying married in a culture in which relationships are discarded with alarming frequency. 

LEARNING TO LOVE

And Honor

In the same way that exercising builds and develops our bodies, marriage can build and strengthen our abilities to experience and live out God's love. Love is clearly put to the test within the habitat of married life. We must learn how to love, and then learn it over and over again. Hate is always ready to spring forth like a geyser, but a loving response must be practiced time and again.

"We have to realize that human love and divine love aren't two separate oceans but rather one body of water with many tributaries. We show our love for God in part by loving our spouses well."

When someone fails to love or gives up on a marriage saying, "I never loved you," it reveals that the person has utterly failed to live up to his calling as a Christian. It pleases God when we love well. And loving those who are difficult to love is exactly the kind of love He expects.

That's an incredible challenge. ***"On one level, it's easy to love God, because God doesn't smell. God doesn't have bad breath."*** But God always attaches our love for Him to our love for others. The one we're married to will be difficult to love, but that's the whole purpose of marriage~to teach us how to love. ***"Allow your marriage relationship to stretch your love and to enlarge your capacity for love~to teach you to be a Christian."***

Our culture is obsessed with self-care, self-preservation, and self-promotion. We are losing the art of caring for others that God designed us for. Within marriage, God's desire is for me to focus on making my wife happy. It is extraordinary to ponder the thought that if my wife is unhappy, then perhaps I am failing God! That incredibly difficult spouse you're living with may just be the door to learning how to better love God. Marriage calls us out of ourselves; it teaches us to love in a radical way.

"We must never be naïve enough to think of marriage as a safe harbor from the Fall...The deepest struggles of life will occur in the most primary relationship affected by the Fall: marriage."

~Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III

LEARNING TO LOVE AND HONOR

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One of the key ways we love our spouses is to give them respect, even when we know their deepest flaws and feel they don't deserve much respect. We are called to honor them in spite of their fallenness. Although it is human and natural to condescend or to be critical and judgmental, God calls us to honor one another instead, because we are each made in God's image.

Respecting our spouses goes far beyond just refraining from dishonoring them. Honoring someone is active not passive. We show that we honor people by complimenting them before others, encouraging their gifts and accomplishments, and by expressing appreciation for who they are and what they do.

“Honor not expressed is not honor.”

It's too bad that I spent the early years of our marriage tallying up the pluses and minuses of my wife's personality and that I spent so much time and energy dwelling on her minuses rather than on my own. My self-righteousness prevented me from honoring and respecting my wife and her unique character. I was praying far too often for God to change Lisa when I should have been praying for God to change me! When I slide into contempt, it's because I am weak and sinful, not because my wife is failing. What conquers contempt? Gratitude. Willfully choosing to notice and acknowledge and appreciate all the good in my spouse. Every day we choose whether we will look at the one we married with thankfulness or with disapproval.

When we are fully aware of our own failures, we can offer acceptance and grace to the ones we love. God calls us to gentleness and tolerance, because we are all in the process of becoming all that God wants us to be.

“You will never find a spouse who is not affected in some way by the reality of the Fall. If you can't respect this spouse because she is prone to certain weaknesses, you will never be able to respect any spouse.”

Jesus' simple but stunning remedy is to first take the “plank” out of your own eye before trying to remove a “speck” from someone else's. We need to be so humbly aware of our own need to grow that we work on our own issues first and then respectfully help our spouse grow. ***“He wants us to cast off contempt~to have contempt for contempt~and learn the spiritual secret of respect.”***

CBS

MARRIAGE FOSTERS PRAYER

And Exposes Our Sin

“Prayer is a work to which we must commit ourselves if we are to make sense of our lives in light of eternity.”

~Terry Glaspey

In our lives and especially within marriage, giving ourselves to prayer helps us center our priorities, seek biblical wisdom, and make godly decisions. Without prayer, we are likely to live in the moment, without much thought of God or eternity.

In 1 Peter 3:7, the apostle Peter writes that husbands must live considerately with their wives and treat them with respect so that nothing will get in the way of their prayers. In this passage, he is clearly connecting how we treat each other in marriage to the key discipline of prayer. Peter is not saying that a strong prayer life will benefit our marriages; instead

he is saying that improving our marriages will benefit our prayers!

Becoming godly means becoming selfless. When a couple marries, they are committing to stop thinking of themselves as individuals and begin seeing themselves as one, as a couple. We are no longer free to pursue solely our own desires; we function as a team. Our plans, desires, and pursuits always need to take this into account. ***“This reigning in of my ambition is so very valuable spiritually. The truth is, God's kingdom can move forward without a single one of us. Our***

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perceptions of indispensability are usually based more on our arrogance than on our desire to be faithful."

God does not value merely our accomplishments in ministry. He values our relationships, especially our marriages, as a highly significant part of our ministry. In building our relationships, we bring a spiritual authenticity to all our other endeavors.

A major part of maintaining a strong marriage is learning to manage conflict. That means an absolute commitment to reconciliation and to learning how to forgive. ***"Marriage virtually forces us into the intense act of reconciliation ... Jesus makes it absolutely clear that you must choose unity if you want to maintain a vital prayer relationship with God."*** And when conflict or discouragement is overwhelming, we must choose: leave our spouse, or seek our purpose and fulfillment in our Creator.

"Marriage can cause us to reevaluate our dependency on other humans for our spiritual nourishment, and direct us to nurture our relationship with God instead. No human being can love us the way we long to be loved."

Choosing a life of celibacy can be a pathway toward holiness. We can also approach marriage the same way, choosing to let it be a pathway toward our holiness. Every life situation and its challenges can be a platform for spiritual growth.

In particular, marriage has a way of revealing our sin and leading us toward humility. ***"Sometimes what is hard to take in the first years of marriage is not what we find out about our partner, but what we find out about ourselves"*** Living closely with someone may be the most difficult spiritual challenge we'll ever face. And the only way to survive is to develop a spirit of humility, a willingness to hear and accept the truth about our failures and grow from them.

We must be willing to view marriage as a spiritual discipline.

"We must not enter marriage predominantly to be fulfilled, emotionally satisfied, or romantically charged, but rather to become more like Jesus Christ."

~Kathleen and Thomas Hart

Nearly every case of marital dissatisfaction stems from unrepented sin. I'm guessing that many divorces occur because at least one partner is running from his or her own revealed weaknesses. But if we view marriage as a way to address our sins and be healed, it can bring about our growth in holiness.

"The times that I am happiest and most fulfilled in my marriage are the times when I am intent on drawing meaning and fulfillment from becoming a better husband rather than from demanding a 'better' wife."

What we do with sin in our relationship will largely affect whether our marriage becomes a divorce statistic or a crowning achievement.

SACRED HISTORY

And Sacred Struggle

A young couple struggled with conflict and seemingly irreconcilable differences, and because of past failed relationships, the wife found herself overwhelmingly fearful that the marriage would end. The husband responded in a wonderfully profound and prophetic way. He hugged her tightly and declared that they would work through these difficulties, and no matter what, he would never leave her. Their history together was secure.

This couple was able to embrace the sacredness of the history they were building together. We too can find meaning in the simple fact that our marriages will survive. There are times of struggle and frustration, peace and joy, silence and communication, agony and ecstasy. But we can persevere and find profound satisfaction in maintaining a long-term relationship. And in this persevering, we see a picture of the incredible faithfulness of God to His people.

Some experts claim that it takes about 10 to 15 years for a couple to really find level ground. My heart breaks for the couples who give up after just a few years. ***"They haven't even begun to experience what being married is really like. It's sort of like climbing halfway up a mountain but never getting to see the sights; you're in the middle of the task, your soul is consumed with the struggle, but it's much too soon to experience the full reward ... Becoming one~in the deepest, most intimate sense~takes time."***

Most marriages break up because it is tough. We want to avoid pain and difficulty, but running away from challenges keeps us in spiritual infancy. How do we grow up and learn how to persevere in the face of overwhelming struggles? By looking to God as our source of love and perseverance, remembering there will be an eternal re-

ward for continuing to obey. When a couple is considering divorce, I encourage them to not give up, to push through the pain, and to try to grow because of it. Spiritual growth and character are heavenly values that are worth far more than earthly “happiness.” Saving a marriage is worth the fight. Every experience will be used by God for our spiritual benefit. And in persevering together, we will find deep meaning and purpose.

“The ‘collisions’ of marriage can create relationships of beauty. Beauty is often birthed in struggle. These points of impact may not be ‘fun’~in fact, they can make us feel like we’re being ripped apart~but the process can make us stronger, build our character, and deepen our faith.”

Being in a difficult marriage does not by itself cause us to grow; we must choose to seek understanding, patience, and love, and commit ourselves to doing what is right no matter what our spouse does. But choosing a pathway of virtue puts us in the driver’s seat. We are no longer victims of the sorrow but the builders of a new kind of relationship. **“Virtue is strength~power to do what is right; power to make the right choice; power to overcome the weakness of sin, bad choices, victimhood, and self-pity.”**



FALLING

Forward

Years ago while hiking with friends on Mount Rainier, I was about to attempt jumping across a fast-moving creek. A friend shouted this advice: **“Just make sure you fall forward.”**

Wise advice, because even if I didn’t land on my feet, my forward momentum would at least keep me from being swept downstream. That advice applies in profound ways to Christian marriage. In this key relationship we must also learn to fall forward. When anger flares and problems surface or boredom takes over, we’re tempted in our immaturity to pull back, become distant, or even seek out someone more interesting and less frustrating. But we mature as we choose to move forward through the pain and past the apathy. We will fall, but we can choose the direction in which we fall, either toward or away from our spouse.

An intimate relationship is *built*. It takes investment. It doesn’t just happen. I must continually move toward my wife in order for a deep relationship to be built. **“To stop moving toward our spouse is to stop loving him or her. It’s holding back from the very purpose of marriage. The opposite of biblical love isn’t hate, it’s apathy.”**

One thing that makes falling forward so hard is that our emotions can be in such conflict. We can become so exasperated, angry, and frustrated with the very person we know we dearly love! And yet that is true marriage. Even during the hurt and disgust, we are called by God to pursue and draw near and grow toward our spouse, letting the foundation

of love overcome and redefine our feelings of apathy, distance, and anger. Three spiritual practices will help us fall forward in our marriages: learning not to run from conflict, learning how to compromise, and learning how to accept others.

Our natural desire is to flee when conflict arises in any arena. It feels easier just to run away and search somewhere else for fulfillment rather than deal with the struggle head on. **“Marriage challenges this ‘flight’ tendency. It enforces us with a rock-hard, given-to-God promise that insists we work through the problem to arrive at some sort of resolution.”** Through facing conflict, working through it, and overcoming it, we grow, both spiritually and toward each other. Successfully negotiating conflict creates a stronger bond in the end.

Compromise is another spiritual discipline in marriage. Despite its bad rap as a cop-out, compromise is actually a way to say “I love you.” It shows that we are willing to give way and find middle ground because we value the relationship more than our own desires or rights. Learning to accept one another is also key. Loyal loving the one you’re with teaches us to keep working on the relationship instead of seeking someone new, and ironically, helps us become more satisfied with the spouse we have.

Forgiveness is yet another discipline that binds a couple together. It seems to me that one of God’s primary purposes in marriage is to teach us forgiveness. No marriage is without sin, and when we encounter the resulting hurt and anger, we must make a choice. We can wallow in our bitterness and resentment, or we can forgive and grow in faith and maturity. And in learning to forgive in my marriage (over and over, because forgiveness is a process), I am better able to forgive in other contexts as well.

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“Forgiveness is achingly difficult, and long after you’ve forgiven, the wound ... lives on in memory. Forgiveness is an unnatural act ... [It’s] blatantly unfair...”

Situations that call us to forgive will mold us more effectively into the likeness of Jesus than almost anything else will. And few situations in life give us more opportunities to forgive than marriage does. The struggles we face in marriage can be used to transform us into holy people.

One of the marks of a truly Christian marriage is that it is characterized by servanthood. Few of us enter marriage thinking, “my goal is to be a servant,” but that is truly what God desires of us. Most often our reasons are selfish, wanting someone to fulfill us, complete us, and meet our every need.

But marriage is an incredible opportunity—a calling—to learn the godly art of servanthood. God calls us each day to die to our own desires and expectations, and care for another’s needs. If we live in this frame of mind every day, there will be no disillusionment and dissatisfaction because we’re truly living to serve our spouse, not ourselves. It’s incredibly difficult to do this when our spouse is sinful and truly “unworthy” of selfless service. But we can remember that serving is a gift we give *to God*.

“God is always worthy of being obeyed and served, so when I act out of obedience to him, the person who receives my service doesn’t have to be deserving—they’re benefiting from what I owe God ... God calls me to serve my spouse—so regardless of how she treats me at any particular moment, I am called to respond as a servant.”

CBS

SEXUAL Saints

The gift of sex within marriage can give us great spiritual insights and develop our character. Through sex and procreation we become partners with God in the creation of new life. There is a glory in the ecstasy of sexual union that is a pure gift from God. One of the ancient Jewish sages wrote, **“When a man unites with his wife in holiness, the Shekinah is between them in the mystery of a man and woman.”** The Shekinah glory refers to the overwhelming presence of God experienced by Moses in his face-to-face encounters with the Almighty.

We truly glorify God by nurturing our sexual desire for each other and building this part of our relationship. God designed the amazing feelings involved in inter-course, and we can celebrate His joy and live in gratitude each time we engage in this profound act. We must view the sex act as an in-credible picture of a deep spiritual reality.

“We have come together in [God], called by him, creating a family, serving him, he living in both of us, we now expressing, physically, the spiritual truth that he has created—we are no longer two, but one.”

~Otto Piper

By creating this physical “need” in us, God helps us continually draw together and work to maintain a relationship. Our desire reminds us continually of our deep need for God and for others. It connects the untamed force of sexuality with the God-given boundaries of marriage, family, responsibility and emotional closeness that it needs, and so we grow in character and virtue by focusing our desires within those bounds. It teaches us to find fulfillment in our own spouse, in spite of his or her (and our) imperfections. It teaches us that sex is a gift, a part of a blessed life, but not an idol. It is part of the larger picture of a life lived for God. It calls us to give the best that we have for another. The sexual relationship is an opportunity to serve our spouse and to value our spouse’s interests and needs above our own.

CBS

MARRIAGE

as Sacred Mission

“The Christian family is a product of faith. It offers the matchless opportunity of suffusing every relationship of daily life with the Spirit of God.” ~Otto Piper

Whatever the reasons you originally came together, you can choose now to allow Jesus to enter every part of your marriage and live together as a way to deepen your faith in God. Invite God’s presence into your marriage, into your communication, into your hurts and struggles, into your dissatisfactions, and you will quickly see how much you need God. The challenges and imperfections of marriage truly point us to what our hearts need most of all—God’s love and presence in our lives. Only in Him do we find our deepest satisfaction and the strength to love and serve our spouses.

Because we are created in His image, God has given us the responsibility to create. That responsibility may mean building a business, a home, a ministry, a family, or many other things. Whatever our circumstances or relationships, God calls us to be about the work of creating and building. And if we are not nurturing this sense of creativity in all we do, we will experience profound emptiness. This clearly applies to marriage. We are to use our creative energies to build into our marriage relationship. If we do not, dissatisfaction and staleness will quickly set in.

“There is no question that marriage limits how much we can do, but it multiplies what we can become. If a man or woman focuses on spiritual growth rather than achievement and accomplishment, they’ll see the marriage relationship as providing a wonderful environment for Christian mission.”

A sense of mission outside ourselves is essential as well, because a mature marriage looks beyond itself to how it can be of service in the world. God’s design for marriage, is a selfless giving of our talents and resources for His kingdom. Even if our gifts and passions are different, as spouses we can support each other and be a united team to accomplish whatever God has placed on our hearts. Having to defer to another, or take into consideration another’s needs before pursuing our own ambition full speed, teaches us to reign in our passions and temper them with compassion and selflessness.

“We allow marriage to point beyond itself when we accept two central missions: becoming the people God created us to be, and doing the work God has given us to do. If we embrace ... these two missions, we will have a full life, a rich life, a meaningful life, and a successful life. The irony is, we will probably also have a happy marriage, but that will come as a blessed by-product of putting everything else in order.”



Volume 4, Issue 25

Publishers

Catherine & David Martin

Editors

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Published on the World Wide Web at
ChristianBookSummaries.com.

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Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?
by Gary Thomas, copyright 2000 by Gary Thomas. Summarized by permission of the publisher, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan. 304 pages. \$14.00 U.S. ISBN: 0310242827. Available at your favorite bookstore or online bookseller.

The author: Gary Thomas is a writer and the founder and director of the Center for Evangelical Spirituality, a ministry that integrates Scripture, Church history, and the Christian classics. In addition to writing several books, he has written for every major Christian magazine, with over 85 published articles. He teaches a course on spiritual formation at Western Seminary. Gary lives with his wife and children in Bellingham, Washington.

Summarized by: Wendy Connell, a teacher, freelance writer, and mother of four. She is a graduate of Houghton College and SUNY Oswego. Wendy, her husband, and their family live in Canandaigua, New York.