



Marriage Breakthrough

FIVE DAYS TO A BETTER MARRIAGE

BY JOHN AND LISA BEVERE



Clear the decks: (verb) Prepare for a particular event or goal by dealing with anything beforehand that might hinder progress¹

Day 1

This nautical term was originally a command given aboard ships approaching battle. When thus instructed, sailors knew to remove any tools, ropes, or other gear that might hinder them from freely moving about the vessel.² Today the term applies to any preparation that positions us for unencumbered action.

The intentional act of clearing a ship's deck serves to keep the ropes from tangling with one another. If the deck is cluttered with debris or disorganized, it is easy, in hard times or rough seas, to trip over something that you could easily step around when sailing is smooth.

We love the idea of positioning you to sail into your future carrying all that will sustain you, while at the same time dumping overboard anything that would weigh you down or anchor you to the past. Far too many have not only “tripped on the decks” and been hurt, but they’ve also fallen overboard and been lost at sea.

God's design for marriage is flawless. Yet marriage seems to highlight

each spouse's flaws like no other institution. Rather than wait until you are navigating a vessel that is desperately off track—with ripped sails, lost cargo, leaking holds, and frayed ropes—we want to soundly position you to *make way*.

Staying with our nautical imagery, a refusal to soundly address foundational relationship issues could be likened to putting out to sea with a cork plugging a leak in the bottom of your ship. It will work for a while, but when enough pressure is applied, it will not hold.

We don't want you tripping or sinking. We want your marriage to be an ark that can withstand any storm you encounter. So let's go after every compromising flaw that is rooted in selfishness, pride, and offense. Let's cut ourselves free from every tethering curse and binding fear and let hope be our anchor.

Our Beginning

We know this clearing of the decks is important because this was not how we began our journey together. We didn't really listen during premarital counseling. When our counselor tried to give us advice about navigating conflicts and stormy waters, we thought, *Fight? We'll never fight! God put us together. This advice is for people who aren't in love like we are. We are not those people. God's hand is on our lives.*

After only a few weeks of marriage, the problems started. It didn't take

long to realize how wrong we had been. We had entered marriage with visions of perfect spouses, but soon we became increasingly aware of each other's every flaw. We began to work hard at changing each other. As a result, our blissful marriage became a battleground between two very strong-willed people. Sparks flew as iron attempted to sharpen iron.³

We still didn't realize that our union was actually weak and fragile. Yes, we were deeply committed to each other, but we thought too highly of our own character, specifically in the areas of patience and selflessness. We had more issues than we would have cared to admit, and even what was good needed fortification to withstand the challenges to come.

Instead of allowing God to clear our decks, we just wanted to *deck* each other. The couple who believed they were a literal match made in heaven had fallen from bliss. We still put on a good face in church, but our home life started to look more like a scene from *WWF Monday Night Raw*.

During our first year of marriage, there was a time when we were engaged in what some would call "intense fellowship." John didn't want me (Lisa) to leave the room, so he told me to sit down on our bed. I wanted out of the room before I could say anything else I'd regret in the morning. John told me to sit down, but I was already in motion when he attempted to sit me back down on the bed to hash things out. The combination of my forward motion and John's shove landed me on the floor.

I jumped to my feet with a floor lamp in my hand. John stared at me in

disbelief, a look of terror on his face. “What are you going to do with that?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I muttered. The ridiculousness of the scene created an opportunity for both of us to calm down and talk through the issue, but the root of the problem went unresolved.

A few days after this episode, I was having lunch with one of my friends. She had been married longer than I had, so I felt somewhat comfortable opening up to her about my marital struggles. But rather than blurt out the details of the floor lamp incident, I decided upon a subtler approach. I casually asked, “Have you ever been in a disagreement with your husband and suddenly found yourself with a floor lamp in your hands?”

She looked at me like the question was absurd. “No!”

I quickly replied, “Me neither!”

I was obviously lying. My friend could probably infer that my supposedly random question was a cry for help. But marital pretenses kept us from taking the conversation any further.

John and I felt like we had nowhere to go. Major issues were developing in our marriage, but we didn’t know who to turn to. At church we hid our struggle and masked our pain. We knew our relational friction was escalating, but we didn’t know how to respond to it. The hopelessness and shame of our situation caused things to go from bad to worse. Consequently, the tension in our home became unbearable.

Then it happened. Our conflict reached an all-time high when I (John) struck Lisa. Before this incident, we had been physical—I had shoved and pushed her—but this was the first time I had struck her. Immediately, I realized what I had done and was completely horrified by my behavior and consumed with remorse. Lisa struck back and then locked herself in the bathroom. We both went to bed that night feeling something had been lost.

The next morning as we both got ready to leave for work, Lisa was silent and increasingly distant. It seemed our relationship was devoid of all sanctity and trust. Both of us were working full-time, and as the workweek passed, the distance between us widened. Lisa was working in sales at the time, and she began intentionally staying out late, checking on the stores in her region to avoid contact with me. When she finally came home, she refused to talk or eat dinner with me and headed straight to bed to read. I was looking forward to the weekend so that we could finally settle what had happened.

My Vow

As a young woman, I (Lisa) made a vow that if my future husband ever hit me, I would leave him. I was raised in a volatile home and was terrified of finding myself in another abusive situation. When John hit me, I was reminded of my vow and confronted with a potentially life-altering decision. Could I remain in my marriage? Could I love and commit myself to a man who had struck me? The people I worked with knew something was deeply troubling me. One of my

supervisors guessed what had happened. She encouraged me to leave John immediately, no questions asked. I was waiting for the weekend to come so I could lock John out of the house. In addition to talking to my co-workers, I was reading Dr. James Dobson's book *Love Must Be Tough*, which inspired me to elevate the situation to a crisis.

When John came home that evening, he could not get into the apartment. I had locked the deadbolt, which was only accessible from the inside. He did not have a way to get in. This was before cell phones, so he stood outside and called out, "Lisa, I'm home. Please let me in!" I eventually opened a window to inform him that I knew he was home, but that he would need to find another place to stay for the night. John was in complete disbelief. After a while, he realized that he was not getting in, so he decided to stay the night with a friend under the guise of prayer and fasting.

Now that I had the place to myself, I decided to have a serious conversation with God. I think my opening prayer went something like this: "All right, God, I've got some ideas for You. While John is away, he needs to have a revelation of how horrible he has been toward me. Maybe You could give him a bad dream or scare him with a lightning strike. Just please don't kill him because I don't have enough life insurance on him."

But no matter how much I prayed about John, the only person God would talk to me about was me. God wasn't interested in discussing John's issues with me. He wanted to address the condition of my heart. He told me, "Lisa, you need supernatural intervention in your marriage. And if you want supernatural

intervention in your marriage, you're going to have to act supernaturally. That means you forgive when you don't think it's deserved."

"Lisa," God kept saying, "you hold an account against John."

Keeping an Account

When John and I fought, we didn't just fight about the issue at hand. We used ammunition from our months of marriage to belittle and discredit each other. An ever-growing record of offenses, condemnation, and bitterness was the foundation for every disagreement. Even small arguments evolved into battles of what felt like epic proportions.

I, the biggest culprit in these drawn-out conflicts, was unwilling to forgive John his past offenses. Because of the hurt I had carried into our relationship, I was scared that if I canceled his debts, I would jeopardize my emotional and physical safety. Yet God told me that while John was far from perfect, he deserved my forgiveness.

I kept trying to direct God's attention back to John, but He wasn't cooperating. I pleaded, "Why do I always have to change? I hope You're telling John to do the same thing because he's not going to change unless You tell him to."

But through all of this, God was revealing the depravity of my own heart. Pride and selfishness soon reared their ugly heads. I found myself thinking

about how people would respond if John and I weren't sitting together or holding hands at church on Sunday. I decided I would allow him to come home just in time to get dressed and ride with me to church so we could keep up appearances. I wasn't concerned about John or our relationship. I was concerned about what other people thought of us. My pride was keeping me from experiencing the transforming effect of God's grace right where I needed it most.

Finally I broke and let God have His way in my heart. Even in the wake of John's heinous mistake, I chose to acknowledge my part in what had transpired. As soon as I humbled myself, God's grace entered in. Humility always opens the floodgates of grace:

...“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

(1 Peter 5:5 ESV)

It became evident to me that I could not change John. Only God could do that. But I could allow God to change me.

John came home from that weekend away a different man. After God dealt with him in the first years of our marriage, he never struck me again—and it's now been almost three decades. Our union was transformed as both of us responded in humility before God and each other with hope for complete restoration and reconciliation.

The Moral of the Story

We wish we could say the wounds from that season of our lives healed overnight, but they didn't. The next two years of our marriage continued to be marked by great emotional turmoil and struggle as we tried to learn how to live together in a way that honored God. We had heard advice ranging from both of us being the boss to Lisa utterly disappearing in voice and role.

In our immaturity, we frequently lashed out at each other when God was doing a work in our individual lives. We emerged from our first four years of marriage feeling very broken. In some ways, we lived in the aftermath of our mistakes. There was even physical evidence of our failures around us, including a damaged refrigerator and a replaced window. But God didn't lose hope in us. He was redeeming our mistakes by turning them into opportunities to clear the decks. What the enemy meant to destroy our marriage, God used as a foundation for what was to come.

Though we have always said we had struggles, we have never gone into this much detail in our teachings. We are sharing more information now not to excuse our behavior, but to encourage you that change can happen. At the same time, we know that not all abuse has a happy ending, and we are not encouraging any woman or man to stay in a situation in which they or their children are unsafe. If this is you, get to a place of safety. Don't be ashamed. Be safe and get the help you need. More on this in a moment.

During these challenging years, our marriage looked utterly hopeless; yet

thirty years later, we are enjoying life together more than ever before. Our marriage is amazing, which is truly a testament to God's miracle-working power. This is not to say that we have not experienced additional valleys along the way. But this we know: as we have chosen to love, God has been faithful to bring us through each one.

We don't know what your relationship looks like now, but we can assure you there is hope! Turn your heart toward God and allow Him to deal with you. You cannot change your spouse, but He can. Turn the responsibility over to Him. He will begin a beautiful change if you'll allow Him to.

A Word about Abuse

We want to make this clear. Husband, it is never okay for you to get physical with your wife. The Bible says you are to honor her as the weaker vessel (see 1 Peter 3:7). Your wife's emotional or even physical attacks do not warrant similar response. Walk away if you must. Do not respond physically, even if it is only in retaliation to her attacks, or you will forfeit your wife's trust. She will no longer feel safe in your arms. If you have been abusive toward your wife, immediately repent before God and ask your spouse for forgiveness.

Wife, your husband's natural desire is to protect you. God gave many men superior strength for this very purpose. You may consider physical attacks on your husband to be trivial fits of anger, harmless as long as they don't inflict physical damage. But to him, your attacks are devastating. Right or wrong, men

are wired to respond physically when they are attacked. We do not want to provoke or evoke the worst in one another; we want to bring out the best. If you have been abusive toward your husband, repent and immediately cease such behavior.

Maybe you grew up in a family culture of violence. Perhaps your family defaulted to verbal, emotional, or physical abuse. We want you to know this is never a healthy way to resolve conflict. Christian counseling can give you the tools you need to resolve the challenges of life and family in a healthy way. Many churches offer small group studies on these topics. Never be ashamed to seek professional and spiritual help.

This goes for both husbands and wives: if your spouse feels unsafe around you, remove yourself from their proximity and work to regain their trust. Do not try to force conversation in any setting where they feel at risk. If you do, things will only escalate, and you will most likely do something you will later regret.

Day 2

Offense

*To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover
that the prisoner was you.*

—Lewis B. Smedes

The first thing that needs to be cleared from the decks in your marriage is

offense. Because offense is so toxic, we will spend considerable time discussing this one issue.

A refusal to forgive robs freedom and hinders our passion. It takes perverted pleasure in the pursuit of revenge—an endless quest accompanied only by misery. The act of forgiveness is an act of liberation for both the offender and the offended.

Many believe forgiveness should be withheld until adequate recompense is received. How many of us have said, “I’ll forgive them when they change”? But in God’s kingdom, forgiveness is not optional. It’s the only way of life. The more we forgive, the more we become like our Father in heaven. If we are going to be agents of His greatness, we must embrace the power of forgiveness.

Paul charged us:

Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.
(Colossians 3:13)

This is often hard to swallow. It is a command, not a suggestion. And there are no conditions or exceptions given. God tells us to forgive anyone who offends us. End of story.

We often make liberal allowances and excuses for our own faults and expect others to do the same. Yet we find it much more difficult to forgive the faults of others, especially our spouses. But anyone who is unable to forgive has

forgotten what they have been forgiven of. Many of us become self-righteous and forget that we all deserved to spend eternity in hell. Our offense toward God was so severe that He had to sacrifice His only Son to reverse its effects. Christ spoke His pardon from the cross, when bitterness would have been a far easier choice. He forgave us before our behavior was worthy of His forgiveness, and we are to do the same for others.

We probably don't have to convince you that your spouse isn't perfect. No one is! But mistakes create opportunities for us to extend God's grace. Our willingness to forgive is one of the greatest evidences of Christ within us.

Releasing the Hurts

When we were first married, I (Lisa) was among those guilty of saying, "I'll forgive you when you change." Until John altered his behavior, my running list of his offenses would continue to grow. I thought withholding forgiveness would motivate him into transformation, but it left him feeling condemned, hopeless, and disempowered.

Everything changed when God showed me how He forgives. His forgiveness is not a reward for modified behavior. It is a vote of confidence. As God renewed my understanding of forgiveness, He replaced the words in my mouth with ones that reflected His heart: "I believe you want to change, and I forgive you."

At the time, I didn't understand how important it was for me to forgive John. I later realized that my bitterness toward my husband was warring against his ability to change, for Jesus said:

“If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (John 20:23)

For centuries this verse has been misappropriated and twisted into a tool to propagate fear and oppression. This was not Jesus' intention. When we study the entire body of His ministry, we can understand the purpose and significance of these words. Jesus, more than anyone else, understands the power of forgiveness, for through it He reconciled the irreconcilable.

Remember, according to 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, we are the ministers of reconciliation through whom God makes His appeal to the world. We are meant to affirm and extend the forgiveness offered in Christ. When we instead choose to maintain an offense, we cease to declare God's hope and instead agree with the one who is called the accuser of the brethren. We articulate condemnation to those whom God wants to offer a new start. In his commentary on Jesus' words, G. L. Borchert put it this way: “There needs to be a recognition of the significant role that declarations of forgiveness can have in freeing people to set aside their past sins and feelings of guilt and turn their attention to the joy of living with the risen Christ under the direction of the Holy Spirit.”⁴

Forgiveness is a divine act. No other virtue requires such a great sacrifice of self. It is a conscious choice of vulnerability instead of vindication. But in the

sacrifice of self we find God's embrace. By choosing forgiveness, we refuse to worship our feelings and instead submit ourselves to God's truth. And by forgiving our spouses, we create the opportunity for them to recognize and receive God's invitation to be reshaped by His grace.

When we come to God in repentance, His response isn't, "I'm God, and I know you're just going to do this again in two weeks." He simply says, "I forgive you," and offers us the empowerment to change. God doesn't speak failure into our futures; He declares hope and promise over every struggle. Let us do likewise for each other.

Opening Your Spirit

Offense causes us to close our spirits. In our efforts not to get hurt again, we build walls around our hearts. We may think these walls protect us, but in reality they obstruct our ability to receive and give Christ's love. Without His love, our lives will be devoid of purpose and power. Our goal will be self-preservation, and our actions will exude selfishness. Eventually, our hearts will become like stone and our lives will be marked by indifference toward others. This is the antithesis of the gospel message.

You may recognize the names of the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. These are two of the largest and most well-known bodies of water in Israel. The Sea of Galilee receives water from the north and releases it to the south. This constant flow makes the Sea of Galilee conducive to life, and various aquatic

inhabitants flourish within its depths. The Dead Sea, by contrast, only takes in water. Everything it receives, it retains. Because the Dead Sea has no outlet, nothing more than tiny bacteria or fungi can survive in its salty ecosystem—hence its name.

When we retain offense, we become like the Dead Sea. Our closed spirits cause our marriages to become environments where no good thing can flourish or even survive. Through forgiveness, we reopen our hearts so God’s power can flow in and through us.

A refusal to give and receive forgiveness inevitably leads to the poisoning of the soul. We are not self-sufficient. Only God is. Our vitality requires a harmonious exchange with those we do life with; we must freely give and receive.

The Limits of Forgiveness

You may be thinking, *I feel like my spouse constantly needs to be forgiven. My forgiveness is not inexhaustible. There has to be a limit!* The disciples thought similarly:

Then Peter came to [Jesus] and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?”

“No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!” (Matthew 18:21-22)

When Peter asked this question, he was trying to be as magnanimous as possible. Peter grew up under the Law, which said, “You must show no pity for the guilty! Your rule should be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Deuteronomy 19:21). So when Peter offered to forgive up to seven times, he expected Jesus to say, “Yes, Peter, you’ve got it!”

We know from elsewhere in the New Testament that Peter’s offer of seven pardons was the number of times he thought he might need to forgive someone in a day (see Luke 17:3-4). So Jesus’ response—to forgive “seventy times seven”—was not merely His mandating a greater limit of forgiveness for a lifetime of offenses. He was communicating to Peter that forgiveness should be given without measure.

For someone to sin at the level Jesus described, they would have to commit 490 offenses in one day! To sin that profusely, your spouse would have to offend you once every three minutes—provided neither of you went to sleep. That’s a lot of sinning, more than anyone is likely to achieve. But even if your spouse could sin against you more than 490 times in one day, that doesn’t mean you can stop forgiving them after offense 490.

In Scripture, the number seven symbolizes completeness, specifically between earth and heaven. Jesus used the number 490, a multiple of seven, to convey that we are to forgive completely, following the standard of our heavenly Father. This generous forgiveness is only possible because we have been restored to God through Christ. In Him, there is harmony between the Father and His children. We are therefore empowered to forgive because we are

new creations with new hearts. Our hearts have freely received His forgiveness, and in order to remain spiritually healthy, we must freely offer forgiveness to others.

We know Jesus wants our forgiveness to be inexhaustible because after His conversation with Peter, He told a parable about a forgiving king and an unforgiving servant, which concluded with this explanation:

“Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

“That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.” (Matthew 18:34-35)

We will not receive forgiveness if we refuse to forgive. There are no exceptions. Why is it so important to God that we forgive? Because in forgiveness we discover and imitate His nature. We transcend the limitations of our inherent human wretchedness and instead conform to the likeness of our Father. In God’s forgiveness we are made whole, and we are invited—even charged—to extend His wholeness to those whom we forgive. If your spouse is frequently asking for forgiveness, then God has blessed you with the opportunity to be an agent of His healing power.

For more on the topic of offense, see John’s book The Bait of Satan.

Day 3

The Fight: John's Story

There was a time in our marriage when we were offended with each other for about eighteen months straight. The same argument resurfaced over and over again. We even made subtle jabs at each other in front of our children. The older ones were not oblivious to what was happening, and they would make comments like, "Can you please not talk about this during dinner?" Our pain and disunity were a source of constant tension in our household, and they were eating away at our marriage and family.

One night, after we berated each other in our usual fashion, I (John) stormed out of the house. I was furious with Lisa, and I immediately started complaining to God. I lamented Lisa's shortcomings and shortsightedness. I felt like God had stuck me with a wife who was unsupportive and unnecessarily critical. How, I wondered, could I continue in life with a wife like this?

I'll never forget how God responded. The Holy Spirit didn't say a word to me about how sorry He felt for me, nor did He address the pain I was in; rather He simply whispered to me, "Son, I want you to think of one thing you appreciate about Lisa and then thank Me for it."

It took me a while to respond, but I finally mumbled, "She's a good mom." As the words escaped my mouth, I felt a stirring of life in my soul. God prompted me to continue. I said, "Lord, thank You that Lisa's a really good

cook.” Then, “Thank You that she’s beautiful.” More words began to flow, and I proceeded to gratefully list Lisa’s good qualities at the rate of a machine gun.

At that point I was no longer upset with Lisa; I was upset with myself. I thought, *You’re a complete idiot! Your wife is amazing, and you’ve been a jerk to her. What is wrong with you?* I became painfully aware of how horribly I had treated Lisa. She was my chosen wife and the mother of our children, an absolute blessing from God, and I had treated her like an inconvenience to my calling.

When I left the house, Lisa was fed up with me and I with her. But now I just wanted to go and tell her how grateful I was for her. As I rushed home, I thought to myself, *I may not be well-received, but I just have to tell her how grateful I am for her.*

Once I arrived at the house, I found Lisa and exclaimed, “Lisa, I am so sorry! I’ve been such a jerk. Please forgive me. You are an amazing mother and excellent wife, and you are the desire of my heart.” I shared what God had brought to my remembrance, then started praising her for all her magnificent traits, qualities, and gifts. The words poured out of my heart like a river.

As I spoke, Lisa softened and began to cry. Unbeknownst to me, while I was gone, she had prayed, “God, if you bring John back and he tells me he’s sorry, I’m going to open my heart again.”

The Fight: Lisa's Story

Things had gotten so bad during those eighteen months that I stopped wearing my engagement ring. I would tell John that we were married but not engaged, whatever that meant. I started to believe that I had no love for John. My refusal to forgive had caused my heart to grow cold, and our relationship was in great peril.

At the time, John was traveling a lot, and I began to enjoy his time away more than I enjoyed him being home. *Life is easier when he is gone*, I thought. *He just makes me crazy when he's at home—all that fighting and tension.*

Desperate, I began to cry out to the Lord, “God, we are at a standstill. John is not being nice at all! Father, I know You must be upset by his behavior!”

On and on I went; almost daily I made my case before the Father. But when I was finally quiet, I heard Him speak. “Lisa, tell Me I'm enough for you.”

At first I was a bit frightened. If I said God was enough, did that mean John wasn't going to change? I echoed back the words: “Father, You're enough for me.”

Then I found myself repeating the question. “But what about John?”

Again I heard, “Tell Me I am enough for you.”

“You're enough for me.”⁵

Those words became my refrain. Every time conflict or disappointment arose, I prayed, “Jesus, You're enough for me.” Over time, the revelation took

root in my heart and my prayers transformed. What started as a broken confession (“Jesus, You’re enough for me”) became an overflow of satisfaction in God: “Jesus, You’re more than enough for me!”

Soon God had done His work in both our hearts. John came home from a trip, and I gladly picked him up from the airport (a task I had allowed others to handle during the months when I preferred he not come home at all). I was happy to greet my husband, and I found he had brought me a beautiful gift.

That moment marked a new beginning for our marriage. It is interesting that even before the change happened, God opened up both of our hearts through gratitude.

In marriage, if we commit to imitating Jesus’ example of forgiving even when mistreated, we will see our unions stay healthy and even flourish. Unbeknownst to us at the time, one of the greatest examples we gave our children was saying we were sorry to one another and then forgiving each other. Our children came to understand that we are imperfect inhabitants dwelling in an imperfect world, but God’s perfect forgiveness in our hearts can cover a multitude of sins. Those sins, designed to wreak havoc and destroy our union, actually ended up becoming life lessons to our children of the love, grace, and forgiveness of God. We saw these words of wisdom fulfilled in our family:

Love prospers when a fault is forgiven.... (Proverbs 17:9)

If you choose to hold on to offense, everyone loses because love dwindles. However, when you choose to forgive, everyone in your family wins

because love flourishes.

Fear

The next thing to be addressed in your relationship is fear. For the first ten years of our marriage, I (Lisa) struggled with the fear of abandonment. My father and my first pastor had both left their wives for younger women. Because of what I had experienced, I allowed fearful thoughts to linger unchecked in my mind. They didn't yell; they whispered, *Eventually all men leave. Don't let them get too close. Then they can't disappoint you.* This kind of thinking caused me to even resist small displays of affection. When John hugged me, it wasn't long before I'd start patting him so I could pull away.

One day, after one of my "pat-and-pull-aways," John asked me point blank, "How old will we have to be before you realize I'm not going to leave you? Are you going to wait until we're seventy?" I was stunned.

"I'll wait as long as it takes," he continued, "but we're going to miss out on a lot of fun in the meantime."

I realized I was making John pay for the disappointments I had with other men. I thought, *Why should John have to pay for their shortcomings? That's not fair. In an effort to protect myself, I am sabotaging our relationship.* My fear of losing John in the future was robbing both of us in the present. I decided then that I would rather love John completely, even at the risk of losing him, than

love him halfway and look back with regret on what might have been.

Fear and distrust keep us from thriving in marriage, for fear tenaciously clings to the past while refusing to believe something better can arise in the future. If we want God to do a new thing in our marriages, we must choose to abandon fear and accept what love would forecast for our futures. Fear expects failure, while love ultimately can never fail.

Fear is a spiritual force in direct opposition to God's love and protection in our lives. It is the opposite of love, for both love and fear operate from belief in the unseen. Love challenges us to doubt what we see and believe for what we cannot. Fear urges us to believe what is seen and doubt the unseen. When faced with the fear of failure or the hope of love, we can choose to believe one or the other but not both. Fear displaces love; love casts out fear.⁶

...Perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. We love each other because he loved us first. (1 John 4:18-19)

Love's ability to transform is greater than fear's ability to ensnare. The perfect love that expels fear is only found in the experience of God's love.

Through the power of His love, we can forsake concern for self, because we know that God will faithfully tend to our needs. But if we don't spend time in God's presence, we cannot have an intimate knowledge of His loving nature; for His faithfulness manifests in His presence.

Without knowledge of God's true nature, we will live in constant fear of abandonment by Him or by our spouses, which is a twisted form of punishment. As we grow more and more secure in God's love for us, we can become free from fear and offer selfless love to our spouses. God's Word says:

...Let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

The stronghold of fear is what causes us to say things like, "If my spouse ever cheats on me, I will never forgive him." Such vows, which are intended to shield us in the future, keep us from embracing the power of God's love today. We must learn to trust God to care for our hearts, even if a spouse wounds, rejects, or betrays us. God has asked us to surrender our fears to Him. Refusal to do so tells God we don't believe He is capable of directing our lives. We cannot submit to Jesus' lordship without surrendering our fears to Him.

Day 4

Family Curses

As we began our marriage, we knew God wanted to do something new in us and our children. But there were obvious strongholds among our parents and grandparents: things like alcoholism, immorality, and witch-craft had plagued our family lines. Before we could receive a new legacy, we had to confront the

curse that had plagued our families for generations. These things could only be combatted in prayer and dismantled by the Word of God.

The specifics of family curses look different for each couple, but here is one example. I (Lisa) was concerned about how John's family would react to the blatant dysfunction in mine. At our engagement dinner, my father was drunk and shamelessly flirted with John's mother— right in front of her husband! His actions were focused on hurting my mother rather than on any real intentions toward John's mom. Later, John's mother expressed her deep concern that our marriage would be the first time anyone with divorce in their background had joined their pristine clan. I overheard her say, "We've never had divorce in our family before."

I thought, *Is that how she sees me? Am I going to mess up this lineage?*

I left the dinner feeling both my mother's hurt and so much of my own shame. It seemed if there were scales that could weigh the premarital "good" and "bad" of family contribution, the good was drastically tipped in John's favor. I was bringing in all the bad: adultery, divorce, and addiction were among the issues in my family line.

Breakthrough came when I realized God wasn't concerned about John's good or my bad. He wanted a holy lineage.

Listen to me, O royal daughter; take to heart what I say. Forget your people and your family far away. For your royal husband delights in your beauty; honor him, for he is your lord. ...Your sons will become kings like

their father. You will make them rulers over many lands. I will bring honor to your name in every generation. Therefore, the nations will praise you forever and ever. (Psalm 45:10-12, 16-17)

This passage is primarily a description of Jesus and His Bride, but God used it to paint a picture of His promise for my life, a promise not limited by the mistakes in my family's past. When I read the words *O royal daughter*, something in me came alive. God was speaking to *me* as His royal daughter. In that moment, a new understanding of my identity in Christ was revealed. I rejected the strongholds of my past and embraced a new hope for my family's future.

I realized that instead of the likeness of my natural father (an adulterer, alcoholic, and profoundly broken man), my children would inherit not only the likeness of their earthly father (a godly man), but even more, they would inherit the likeness of their Lord. I stood on the promise that my sons would become princes of the Most High.

As we addressed our family curses, we saw the Word of God proved true. Our family has flourished in the promises God established over our lives during those times of prayer and declaration.

Prayer to Break Family Curses

Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming

a curse for us” (ESV). Whatever curses have followed your family through the generations, in Christ, you are no longer subject to them.

If you are aware of curses in your family line, we want to position you to break off what has limited and defined your legacy. This prayer will help you address Satan’s strongholds with the sword of God’s Word. Freedom from family curses doesn’t happen by accident; you must identify and attack Satan’s schemes. His goal is to keep you from enjoying the joy, peace, and fulfillment that God has set before you. But through the authority you now possess in Christ, you can see your enemy vanquished. Please take a moment to pause and set time apart before proceeding with this prayer. If you plan to pray right now, please make sure you are alone or with only your spouse or a close friend or prayer partner. This is a private and personal time, and you will need to speak out loud your petitions, renouncements, and response.

The prayer below addresses some of the specific curses that threatened our marriage and family. We have constructed this prayer by combining scriptures, for the Word is the sharp and powerful, two-edged Sword of the Spirit. If there are issues in your family line not covered by this prayer, we encourage you to find scriptures that address those issues with God’s truth and promise. Craft a bold declaration in agreement with God’s Word and break the curses off your life by the power of Jesus’ name. We have included references for your further study at the close of the prayer.

Dear heavenly Father,

I come before You in the name of Your precious Son, Jesus; I enter

Your gates with thanksgiving and come into Your courts with praise. I am overwhelmed by Your gracious mercy and love for me, and I thank You in advance for the mighty work of redemption You have wrought in my life.

Now I intend to make a covenant with the LORD, the God of Israel. You are the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and obey His commands. Let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant. I confess my sins and the sins of my father's house, every transgression we have committed against You. Forgive us, for we have acted very wickedly toward You. We have been covered with shame because we sinned against You. But You, Lord, our God, are merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against You and have not obeyed the LORD our God or kept the laws He gave us through His servants, the prophets. We ask You to circumcise our hearts and roll away the sin, shame, and reproach of our pasts.

I confess and renounce my sin and the sins of my forefathers for any and all involvement in the occult, witchcraft, or divination. (Pause here, and stay sensitive to add anything the Holy Spirit brings to your attention to specifically renounce before continuing. This may include, but certainly is not limited to, astrology, séances, horror movies, games, books, etc.) I renounce my involvement in these things and break their curse off my life and off the lives of my children, their children, and their children's children.

I confess and renounce my sin and/or the sins of my forefathers in the area of drug and alcohol abuse. Father, close any door this may have opened in the spirit realm to sin, bondage, or oppression. I renounce my involvement with (specifically call the drugs out by name, if applicable), and I break the power of their curse off my life and off the lives of my children, their children, and their children's children. In Jesus' name, amen.

Because of the finality of Jesus' victory on the cross, you are free from these curses. You need not fear them nor worry that these sins will follow you or your children. You have established a new legacy for your family today.

For further study, see: Psalm 100:4; 2 Chronicles 29:10-11; Nehemiah 1:5-7; Daniel 9:8-10; Joshua 5:9; Matthew 10:34; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Chronicles 29:5-6.⁷

Day 5

Controlling In-Laws

The issue of controlling in-laws is more common among newlyweds, but it can certainly be a factor beyond the early days of marriage. When we face conflict between our spouses and our families, it's natural to want to defend the parents (or other relations) we've known all our lives. All of us should have great love

and respect for our parents. But while you may often welcome your parents' counsel, once you are married, your first obligation is to your spouse.

Before our oldest son got married, I (John) told him, "Addison, I will not tell you what to do in any area unless you ask for my advice. I will no longer initiate direction for your life. You are establishing your own household, and I want to give you space to learn and grow." Addison has expressed his gratitude for this stance and approaches me whenever he desires my counsel.

My desire is not to control my son or mold him into a mini me. I want Addison to become everything God created him to be, and too much of my involvement in his marriage could keep him from assuming his role as leader of his home. (Frankly, I have been amazed by what he's done with his household. It's much better than what I had accomplished when I was his age!)

Scripture is clear:

...A man *leaves* his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. (Genesis 2:24, emphasis added)

To *leave* your father and mother in this manner means leaving the authority of your parent's household. It also means you leave any unhealthy influence your parents' have over you. It's important to honor your parents, but you can honor them without obeying them. You have formed a new household with a new hierarchy. Your parents are no longer your authority figures, so they should not direct your life or marriage.

You may have to deal with in-laws who try to get too involved in your marriage. Early on, one of our in-laws tried to manipulate us and bring division to our union. Her involvement was becoming destructive, and our subtle attempts to address the issue were to no avail. Finally, we met with this individual (whom we both honor and love) and expressed our position clearly.

I (John) said, “You are not going to be involved in running my household. This is a brand-new home. We honor you, but you will not control the decisions in this house. You will not manipulate to get your way.” I had to use strong words because more indirect approaches had failed. Thankfully, this relative realized what was happening, and now she holds a proper, healthy place in our relationship.

As couples, we must guard our unions against every form of attack, including those from our family members. Often these attacks aren’t malicious and can seem innocuous. They frequently take the form of derogatory jests, but such subtle remarks are always destructive. When I conduct marriage ceremonies, I look at all the friends and family in attendance and say, “Woe to you who speaks against this union. This is a union ordained by God. Don’t you dare attempt to manipulate or separate it. Speak only life over what God has established today.”

When Addison got married, we intentionally resolved not to make him choose between his wife, Juli, and us. The truth is, he made his choice the day he married Juli, and we’re thrilled with his decision! In this context of family dynamics, love never makes people choose. Love supports and builds bridges

between old and new relationships. We love Juli and feel she is much more a daughter than a daughter-in-law. This closeness is only possible because we have respected her new household and allowed her and Addison to write their own story.

Unrealistic Expectations

Unrealistic expectations are among the top-cited reasons for divorce in the United States.⁸ Many of us enter marriage expecting perpetual bliss, nonstop sex, and relational ease. We don't expect marriage to faithfully and relentlessly expose our selfishness and insecurities, nor do we anticipate the weaknesses and faults we'll encounter in our spouses. Our misguided expectations can become a source of bitterness and discontentment, which will invariably keep us from building godly unions.

Unrealistic expectations are often fueled by unwise comparison. We are steeped in a culture oriented toward entertainment. We're therefore constantly provided with opportunities to compare our marriages to those depicted on the screen. Movies and television offer us love without work, beauty without sacrifice, and trust without risk. They highlight romantic facets of relationship without portraying the less "Hollywood" moments of life.

If you've been married for any length of time, you've realized marriage is made of more than romantic dates, seamless compatibility, and days free from responsibility. Marriage is hard work, and it's often messy.

Just because your marriage is hard doesn't mean that you shouldn't be married. Challenges in marriage are good because they stretch you. They refine your character and increase your capacity. This relationship is about *largeness*, remember? Everyone loves the idea of growing and maturing until they encounter something that requires maturation.

The issue of unrealistic expectations isn't only about media portrayals of marriage. We also make the mistake of comparing our marriages with those of our friends or neighbors. This is a horrible idea. There is no way for us to know what's going on behind the scenes of their relationships. Everything may appear fine and dandy, but they may be destroying each other behind closed doors.

It is also tempting to compare seasons within our relationships. Maybe we compare a current season—one with kids, diapers, and little free time—to what our relationship was like before we had children. Logically, this doesn't make any sense. There is no way your life can stay exactly the same after you have kids. Parenting involves a lot less freedom and a lot more responsibility. Having children inherently changes your life, so your marriage relationship will look different too. We know this isn't rocket science, but how often do we find ourselves making foolish comparisons that belittle or strain the joy and fulfillment available in the present?

Theodore Roosevelt said, "Comparison is the thief of joy." If you are going to find joy in your marriage, you must stop comparing your relationship with ones that seem better, whether the other relationships are those of your neighbors or the ones depicted on a screen. You will never find joy in

comparison. Joy is not petty and therefore cannot be obtained through pettiness. It transcends circumstances, is not confined to feelings, and finds its strength in an awareness of the big picture—the totality of God’s plan for your life.

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23), which means it is received from God and not from circumstances. It cannot be generated by human will. While happiness is a feeling affected by temporal struggles, joy transcends difficulties. It stems from the hope inspired by our position in Christ. If we lack joy in God, we’ll lack the strength we need to do marriage well, because His joy is our strength (see Nehemiah 8:10). Paul echoed this sentiment in his words to the church in Philippi:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7 ESV)

When you find yourself anxious about your relationship, bring your requests to God with joyful thanks. He has promised to trade your worries for His peace. That’s a good exchange!

Unrealistic expectations will steal your joy and therefore rob you of strength for your marriage. Do not fall prey to this trap. Identify any expectations that have created a stronghold in your relationship and repent for

allowing them to take precedence over the truth of God's Word and His unique plan for your life.

Your Turn

Please take some time to talk with your spouse about the content covered in this eBook. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you write down what needs to be cleared away in your marriage. Some of the necessary alterations will be attitude adjustments and behavioral changes, which God will enable by the power of His grace. Others, like generational curses, must be confronted in prayer.

Don't be discouraged if you find your list fills several pages. This exercise is not about how much is "wrong" in the present, nor is it about which party in your marriage has the most problems. It is about the magnificent things that can be brought forth in your future. By addressing these issues now, you are positioning your family to write a brilliant story, a legacy of heaven revealed on earth. We want you to clear the decks so that you can move forward free of everything that would obstruct you from receiving all God has for you. We've constructed the prayer below to start you on your way.

May this be a sacred moment.

Father, we thank You for offering us a new start and a new legacy. As we make record of the things that need to be cleared from our relationship,

we pray for an atmosphere of heaven to surround us.

We ask You, Holy Spirit, to lead and instruct us.

We pray that the angels of God will encamp around us, ready to execute vengeance upon the enemy who has plagued our families from generation to generation.

We pray for great grace to empower forgiveness and transformation.

We pray for the renewing of our minds according to Your Word. We ask for a revelation of Your love that will cast out every fear. We ask for restoration of trust and refinement of relationships. We pray for You to bring unity where there has been division. We ask that You inspire us to dream according to Your promises, not according to any ungodly expectation.

We speak freedom over our household. We speak freedom into our marriage and into our individual lives, in the name of Jesus Christ. We declare that the kingdom of God has come within us. The will of God shall be done in our marriage and home, on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' mighty name, amen.

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