

PREPARING *for* **MARRIAGE**

CONVERSATIONS *to Have*
before SAYING "I DO"

**DAVID & MEG
ROBBINS**

GENERAL EDITORS

A Resource from FamilyLife

with **TIM GRISSOM**
and **TRACY LANE**

PREPARING *for* MARRIAGE

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To Dennis & Barbara Rainey,
who shaped the first edition of this resource
that forged a foundation for our marriage
more than twenty years ago.

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PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE

A Note from David and Meg Robbins

First things first: Congratulations on your engagement! Marriage is one of life's craziest, most exhilarating adventures! It is wonderful, yet deeply challenging. It is fun and exciting, but it takes a lot of hard work. It's also a holy space, and it exposes the hard and unknown places in our hearts. Marriage is soul-to-soul, skin-to-skin intimacy, and sometimes it will frustrate you more than you can ever imagine. Marriage is sometimes a lot of sex, sometimes a lot of disappointment. Marriage is a lot of things!

Most importantly for you, *your* marriage is . . . about to get real.

You're no longer thinking in terms of somedays or maybes because now there's a ring on the finger and a date on the calendar. Soon you'll put to the test everything the memes and the influencers, your friends and family, and the books and podcasts have told you about marriage.

Since you're reading this book, you're ready. But are you prepared?

A few months from now, the wedding will be behind you. Your honeymoon trip will be a collection of memories (hopefully a lot of good ones). The gifts will have been opened and placed on the kitchen counter, a living room shelf, the closet (let's be honest), or returned to the store (more honesty). And, marking the true end of the wedding season, the last thank-you will have been mailed (please don't ask how long this took us).

Once that day comes, we really don't want you feeling the regret of having planned a great wedding but having done little to prepare for a

great marriage. As we like to say at our FamilyLife Weekend to Remember conferences, “Great marriages don’t just happen.”

Speaking of FamilyLife and marriage conferences, can we tell you something about us and why we believe in this book? We actually don’t like to consider ourselves marriage experts. Yes, we’ve been married for more than two decades, and we lead a large ministry helping families find connection with each other and with God. Though we’ve walked alongside countless couples, immersed ourselves in the study of marriage, both theologically and psychologically, and spend many of our waking hours thinking and talking about marriage, we don’t come at you with edicts and prescriptions but as those who journey with you and who still need to ask for forgiveness daily from the people we love the most.

We come to you as a couple still working on making our marriage better, day in and day out, and want to help you do the same.

Here’s what we know: Marriage takes work, intentionality, and . . . help. Marriage will take more than just the two of you.

After all, think of the entourage it takes just to make even a tiny wedding happen, from the florist to the musicians to making the toast at the reception. And if a wedding takes that much help, how much more does a thriving marriage?

So don’t go it alone. (Marriage or this book!)

We can’t do the work for you, but we want to walk beside you with the intentionality and the help-for-your-marriage part. And yet we’re just the names on the front of this book. We hope you have a real-life mentor couple sitting across from you, helping you think through these conversations. If you don’t have someone yet, we have some tips on how to invite a couple whose marriage you admire to walk with you during this season and throughout your marriage (see page 159 for a QR code with tips for finding a mentor couple). Trust us, you’ll want someone to call after the first married fight who can remind you it’s normal! You’ll need someone to grab coffee with when you know you should apologize but you really want your spouse to go first. You’ll want someone in your marriage’s corner when it feels easier to sleep at your mom’s house for the night.

As excited as we are to walk this path with you, we also don’t want to overpromise anything. This book will not enable you to detour around

every conflict. You won't find a decision tree or fancy formula that painlessly converts every difference of opinion into one-hundred-percent agreement. And no mentor couple will have any hidden, century-old secrets for how to make it to sixty-five years of marriage.

But what we can promise are guides for healthy conversations that will lay a solid foundation for your marriage—a deeper understanding of and appreciation for your differences, proven ways to face challenges, and biblical truth that will help keep your love strong for a lifetime.

God created marriage and made it a beautiful union between one man and one woman for a lifetime. Sure. You'll encounter a million little things and likely a handful of life-altering challenges that can detour your marriage—even mere hours after exchanging your vows. Still, two individual hearts fully surrendered to God's design and purposes for marriage, plus moment-by-moment individually seeking Him for the strength to defer to each other, consider each other, and stick it out together can add up to a lifetime of love and flourishing for the long run.

Let's do this! Cheering you on as you dive into these conversations and praying your marriage far surpasses your expectations! We believe it can.

David and Meg Robbins

President & CEO of FamilyLife

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF ***PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE***

We designed *Preparing for Marriage* to be much more than hypothetical theories or lectures on marriage. That's why, throughout the book, you will find exercises, interviews, and prompts for reflection and discussion. We want you to read *and interact* with the content. Please don't skip over these. They are the "secret sauce" of this book. We want to help you connect meaningfully with your fiancé,¹ not just consume more marriage content. The questions and exercises will help you discover each other, uncover your expectations, and envision a bright lifetime of pursuing what matters most—together.

In Section One, we'll set the table for the rest of the conversations in this book (and for the rest of life). Once we've established the foundation, Section Two will explore where you are both coming from—we'll take inventory of how you became who you are right now and try to uncover your expectations for your future together. Then, in Section Three, we'll talk more about where you want to go and how to get there.

We want to get you both talking about marriage—and not just marriage in general, but *your* marriage. These conversations are intended to open up specific dialogue between the two of you so you can begin to understand yourselves and each other better as you talk about your hopes, values, and expectations.

Let's get started!

1. This spelling is the male form of the term (as opposed to *fiancée*), but in this book we're using it for both men and women.

section one

THE FOUNDATION



one

LET'S TALK ABOUT WHAT MARRIAGE IS

Why are you getting married?

That's a pretty basic question. Even so, maybe you haven't really thought much about it. Maybe marriage is just the next obvious step. You love each other. You're committed to each other. You're better together. I (David) remember how intense my desire to be with Meg forever was—it was practically all I could think of in the days leading up to our engagement and wedding. I'd caught a glimpse of what life with her would be like, and I decided to chase that dream.

These are all good answers. And clearly you care about getting it right, or you wouldn't be putting in the time and effort to go through this book.

But let's step back and consider an even bigger, foundational question—not just why are *you* getting married, but . . . why marriage at all? Chances are, because you chose this book, there's a value of faith in your relationship.

If you believe, as we do, that God designed marriage, maybe it makes sense to you that learning more about His design is a good place to start preparing for your own marriage.

1. Take a moment to consider this question: What do you believe are God's purposes for creating marriage?

The Story of Eric and Amanda

Who would have ever thought that Eric, an athlete and outdoorsman, and Amanda, a refined and accomplished woman, would wind up falling in love? They met while skiing with a group of friends in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. The moment Eric saw Amanda, he approached her and asked her out. Amanda was intrigued that someone would be so bold, and she accepted.

For the rest of the week, they found themselves enthralled with each other's company. They skied together, shared meals, sipped hot chocolate, and talked about anything they could think of. It all felt so natural, so easy, like they belonged together.

Both Eric and Amanda had dated in the past, and Eric had even been engaged. But they both knew that what they were now experiencing was different. After they returned to their homes, three hundred miles apart, they carried on a long-distance relationship. Over the next few months, they talked nightly on the phone, often for hours, and texted like teenagers constantly in communication. They even managed to spend several weekends together.

It felt natural for Eric, who was twenty-eight, and Amanda, who was twenty-six, to think seriously about marriage.

Even before meeting Amanda, Eric believed that the most important thing to know before he got married was that his future bride would be compatible with him. He wanted to find someone who was attractive and fun to be with. He also longed for a wife who enjoyed fishing, was willing to give him the freedom to be with his buddies, and was a natural in the kitchen.

Amanda also had expectations about marriage and the kind of guy she wanted to marry. She dreamed of marriage as a fulfilling, romantic adventure with the man she loved. He would be sensitive, attractive, well organized, and would share the home responsibilities. He would express his feelings, be a good listener, and provide security. He would enjoy children as much as she did and be a loving, caring father.

Because they had strong feelings for each other, Eric and Amanda were more than willing to please each other. Eric would often be vulnerable when he talked with Amanda, telling her about his struggles and doubts as well as his victories. He was a gentleman, creative with romantic gestures, and listened attentively to all that Amanda had to say. He even took her to the theater—a stretch for Eric-the-outdoorsman! Amanda was convinced: *This is the man of my dreams. We're perfect for each other. We hardly ever argue.*

Amanda had never gone fishing before meeting Eric, but now she found herself spending weekends at a lake, casting for bass by his side. She would attend his softball games and even cheer for Eric's favorite basketball team. Everything seemed fun when they spent time together. And Eric could not believe his taste buds when he ate Amanda's cooking. He knew, *This woman is like me in so many ways, and she is thoughtful and caring toward me.*

Of course, no two people are exactly alike, and that was the case with Eric and Amanda. He was boisterous, outgoing, and loved to be around lots of people. She was much more reserved; she enjoyed spending time with a few close friends but felt uncomfortable at a large party. She loved to read, while he streamed TV shows to relax.

Their families were quite different: Eric's dad was an auto mechanic, and his mother a waitress. Amanda's parents were divorced, but her father, a wealthy attorney, provided well for all of them. This gap between their backgrounds asserted itself most when they visited their prospective in-laws.

When she lay in bed at night, Amanda had to admit she was a little bothered about the difference in the depth of their religious convictions. She attended her church regularly; her belief in God was important. Eric said he had never enjoyed church and didn't attend on his own. But he did seem to enjoy going with her when he visited on weekends. That gave Amanda hope that he would eventually change and desire the same faith she had. All things considered, she thought, they seemed perfect for each other.

They were both tired of being single, and by now they couldn't stand to be apart. They couldn't imagine spending life without each other.

And so, while Amanda was enjoying her family's traditional Fourth of July weekend at a resort, she looked out one evening and saw Eric standing by the lake. She ran to say hi; he dropped to one knee. "Will you marry me?"

Their engagement was four months—just enough time to arrange the wedding. The final weeks were hectic. Amanda moved to Eric’s city and started a new job while also setting up the wedding in her hometown. They met with Amanda’s pastor and received some advice about marriage, and they found a home and began moving in.

The ceremony itself raced by in a blur, and suddenly they found themselves reciting their vows: “With this ring I thee wed . . . in sickness and in health, in poverty or in wealth, till death do us part.”

Happily ever after, here they came . . .

2. What parts of this story—if you’d been present—would raise concerns for you?

3. How would you have answered if this couple had approached you and asked, “Do you think we are ready to get married?”

In many ways, Eric and Amanda may be a superb match. Yet, there are some potential challenges that come to mind. There were significant gaps in their knowledge and expectations, and most of the time before they married was spent hundreds of miles apart. They were so caught up in emotions and infatuation that they failed to work out some crucial issues before they committed their lives to each other.

Their family backgrounds and upbringing were worlds apart, and Amanda’s parents’ divorce wasn’t something the couple talked about to determine the impact on Amanda or what mistakes they could avoid. They also had not really discussed their compatibility on faith and some of life’s deeper issues.

In fact, they seemed to have different goals for their marriage altogether.

Despite their strong feelings for each other, Eric and Amanda were beginning their marriage in the dark. They didn’t understand the bigger picture

of marriage, and they knew little about how to keep their marriage together after their expectations weren't fully met and their feelings started to fizzle.

God's Purposes for Marriage

God designed marriage for something bigger than “happily ever after.” Please don't miss the promise of that statement. God wants something even bigger and better for your marriage than what you want for it.

Some may think that by starting with God when discussing marriage, we're going to shrink the thrill and delight of it all. But the opposite is true. When you understand and commit to following God's design, you'll experience greater unity and joy than you thought possible—not because you tacked God's ideas onto *your* plan, but because you *rooted* your marriage in *His* plan. God really does have your best interests at heart.

So let's dig into what God had in mind for us when He created marriage.

Marriage Models the Unity of God

In How God Relates to Himself

In Genesis, God's culminating act of creation was humanity—man and woman.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:26–27

Question: Was God talking to Himself? When He said, “Let *us* make man in *our* image,” who was on the other end of the conversation?

Yes, God was talking to Himself. Without diving into the deep waters of theology, this is the first place where the Bible identifies God as a triune being. As the storyline of the Bible continues, it becomes more and more clear that God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Before anything on earth existed, God had a flawless, intimate community. A diverse partnership.

The marriage of two image bearers, loving each other intimately in their uniqueness, reflects the beautiful relationship enjoyed by the Trinity. Marriage is an embodied testimony, both to the couple and to the world, of God's love—a taste-it-smell-it-feel-it image of the “us” and “our” of the Trinity.

In How God Longs to Relate to Us

Ephesians refers back to Genesis 2:24 to draw an important connection:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound . . . it refers to Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:31–32

Marriage is a way of displaying the great lengths to which God has gone to pull us into closeness with Him. Jesus, represented by the groom, and the Church (Christians), represented by the bride, foster a committed relationship marked by love, faithfulness, respect, humility, service, and mercy.

Through its very nature, marriage proclaims the gospel. Your relationship will model the persevering love of Christ for His people—and the way they love Him in response.

Your marriage will be opportunity after opportunity to experience God's love and commitment in the middle of your kitchen, your bout with the flu, your craving for warmth in the middle of the night. Marriage is giving yourself to someone, warts and all. There is no greater love than that which God initiated to humankind through Jesus Christ. You may have heard it before:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16

God wants you to know Him intimately; He has designed marriage to be a clear and trustworthy image of His devoted and sacrificial love. The marriage you enter into for life will remind you and communicate to the world the lengths God went to in order have a tangible, forever relationship with His people.

4. List some ways that your marriage can model God's unity.

Marriage Is a Space to Pursue Lifelong Companionship

Soon after God created man, He said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18). Up to this point, God had looked over each part of creation and said that it was good. But not this time. Something more was needed. Adam shouldn't be alone.

5. No sin or flaw was in the world yet, and Adam had God Himself as his companion. Why do you think it wasn't good for Adam to be alone?

God created in Adam a unique need in his *aloneness* that was not filled by His personal presence. Adam experienced God in the midst of perfection, yet Adam was still *alone*.

But God actively solved Adam's problem.

Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Genesis 2:19–22

6. What did God do to address Adam's need for companionship?

Notice that God did much more than give Adam someone so that he wouldn't be lonely. God's solution for Adam's need was to make him "a helper fit for him." It's important to note that *helper* does not mean *inferior person*. The sense of a woman's worth and role is elevated throughout the Old Testament by calling her by the same name used sixteen times for God Himself (see Psalm 30:10 and 54:4) and in other biblical references to describe the giving or absence of military help (Isaiah 30:5; Ezekiel 12:14; Daniel 11:34). To be called a helper spoke to the fact that God had plans for Adam that he could not fulfill without a spouse.

Adam needed Eve.

Also notice that this passage does not imply that every unmarried person is incomplete without a spouse. All of us are created in the image of God (see Genesis 1:26–27) and bring renown to God when we yield ourselves to His purpose and plan for our lives. Jesus, after all, was single, and God provided other intimate companionship for Him. However, in God's timing, He does sovereignly choose to bring a husband and wife together for them to accomplish together what they couldn't have accomplished apart.

7. Think of some married couples you know well. In what ways do their differences complement each other?

Most happily married couples could point to specific examples of how God has fit them together. My (Meg) natural inner clock impels me to slow

down and pay attention to the inner worlds of those I love. David tends to run through life at a fast pace and sometimes exhausts himself with well-meaning, good things. I so appreciate David's big-picture vision, and he has repeatedly told me how grateful he is for the way I encourage him to pursue goals in a healthier way.

For other couples we know, the husband is people-oriented and the wife is task-oriented. He helps her relate socially to others; she keeps him focused on tasks they need to complete.

In wisdom, God brings two people together to supplement, enhance, and shape each other. They are stronger as a team. They are two independent people who choose to become *interdependent*—this unity that reflects the Trinity also helps us better live for His purposes. How about that for a win-win?

8. As you look at your relationship, in what ways are you different and in what ways are you alike? Describe some ways that your differences already make you stronger as an interdependent team. In ways you're similar, note how these can also start to form the subculture of your family unit, and could form potential weaknesses, too.

Mark this, because you'll be tempted to doubt it when things get hard down the road: Your spouse is God's gift to you. We know "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow" (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10). Keep your eyes peeled for ways your spouse continually makes you a better person—even

when the growing pains can scream otherwise. How do they bring out the best in you?

Marriage Is a Unique Way to Influence the Next Generation

What if we told you your marriage, and its story, could change the world?

And no, we don't mean that together you'll start an international non-profit organization that ends the food crisis or come upon a cure for cancer while you're gardening. That stuff would be cool, but as followers of Jesus—whether single or married—your story matters in bringing God's Kingdom here and now. As it stands, He's intricately planned you and your fiancé's zip codes, memories, fascination with mountain biking or music festivals, your in-laws-to-be—even that weird sense of humor you share—to pull you toward Him and serve and love people around you (check out Acts 17:26–27).

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Acts 1:8

Your marriage will have power for its mission as you learn to listen and respond to the Holy Spirit. It's easier when you both feed an alertness to how He's working—say, in that conversation at the food truck or in your apartment's stairwell—pulling you to join Him together.

Rest assured, He's got a bigger vision, a bigger movement that He's orchestrating. He works through the ripples of your individual and mutual areas of influence to effect a worldwide wave of the Kingdom of God.

You don't have to be president of a Christian ministry to make waves either—while I (David) will never take for granted the thousands our work at FamilyLife affects, I also have a feeling that it's the behind-the-scenes stuff that brings the biggest smiles to God's all-seeing face. The late nights talking with my son in the dark about his fears, the extra hour I spent after school drop-off listening to a discouraged dad, the rolling of our elderly neighbor's trash bins back up her driveway every Thursday.

Your indoor soccer team, your cynical coworker, your landlord—all are authored with a purpose. Your future marriage carries the opportunity to lean into a movement that's sweeping every tribe, tongue, and nation and that stretches for generations.

One obvious way to influence the next generation: become parents! Foster, adopt, have biological children. In that way, the fruit of your relationship with God multiplies exponentially as time plods on.

Returning to the book of Genesis, where God gave direction and vision to Adam and Eve, the first couple, we read:

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Genesis 1:28

9. Acknowledging this can be a painful subject for some: This passage makes it clear that God's design for marriage includes having kids. What do you think God had in mind when He made this a priority?

IF YOU ALREADY HAVE CHILDREN

"I advocate for biological parents spending one-on-one time with their kids before and after a new marriage because it helps reassure children that they haven't completely lost their parent."

—Ron Deal, *Preparing to Blend*

10. Check out the following passages from the book of Psalms. What do you hear about God’s opinion of kids and why they are important? What values of His will your marriage share?

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Psalm 127:3–5

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

Psalm 78:5–7

Part of God’s intent is for every married couple (and every person) to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) in this generation and those to come. Psalm 78 and passages like Deuteronomy 6:2–7 (below) make it clear that the family is one of the best environments in which this can happen.

This imperative can also be broadened to being “spiritual parents”—mentor kids in your community, be your nieces’ and nephews’ most invested aunt or uncle. Impact any child God brings across your path.

11. Think about your life experience and the experiences of others. Why do you think God places such great emphasis on fathers and

mothers passing on truth to their children and to other kids God brings into their life?

12. As a couple, what are your current thoughts on having kids? Where do your biggest resistances or obstacles lie—and why? When you look at the Bible as a whole, how does this influence your thinking? What do you need to explore further?

13. If a couple is not able to have biological children (or in some cases, chooses not to), what are some ways they can influence the next generation in knowing and living for God?

... that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

Deuteronomy 6:2–7

God’s original plan called for the homes of those who love Him to be greenhouses of sorts—nurturing centers where we all seek Him and learn character, values, integrity, and what it means to grow in a relationship with Him. In no other setting does a child learn more about how to live and relate to God. At the same time, while parents have the unique gift of time with their children that no one else has, we all have been impacted by other adults who went out of their way to love and mentor us.

You may be thinking that with the inclusion of God and His plans for you to serve others, your marriage is getting pretty crowded. But what we’ve seen God do over and over for people who choose to make Him the foundation of their marriage and then serve Him together has been to bring a greater closeness to the marriage than they imagined. The way of godly marriage is not to live only for each other’s good, but to remain open to God’s leading and to be aware of ways your constant journeying with Him can spill over to impact your corner of God’s world (don’t miss John 15:5–11 on this).

Summary

Your future marriage will exist for more than just two people making each other happy. This isn’t an exhaustive list of how God will use your marriage, but it’s a start. The bottom line is that you have the opportunity and call to represent God together. And others, especially the generation coming after you, need your godly influence. To build a marriage according to His design, you cannot ignore its spiritual foundation and purposes.

Why marriage? If you can answer that question biblically now, you’ve got a lot going right already.

IF YOU ARE A PARENT AND HAVE BEEN MARRIED BEFORE

"A second or subsequent wedding for a parent brings three potentially competing emotional attachments into collision with one another: the couple's marriage, the child's loyalty to their family of origin, and the new blended family."

—Ron Deal, *Preparing to Blend*