

# HAPPILY

8 COMMITMENTS OF COUPLES WHO  
LAUGH, LOVE & LAST

KEVIN A. THOMPSON



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In memory of Bruce Palmer  
and in honor of Verna Palmer,  
who faithfully modeled these commitments  
to one another

And to Jenny, whom I happily call my own

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is what I always dreamed writing would be like. I'm eight hundred miles from home in a cabin in Colorado. To my right is a fire occasionally inviting me to come sit by it for its warmth. To my left the snow is covering the grass on the riverbank as the water gently rolls downstream.

Today is a negotiated outcome. I wanted a few days to look at the manuscript in the midst of peace and quiet. Jenny wanted our kids to experience the ski slopes while they were still young enough to learn them quickly. As we try to do, we made both happen. As my wife and her siblings chase our kids and nieces and nephews around the slopes, I reread this manuscript, considering the suggestions of wise editors and reflecting on my marriage.

While these acknowledgments may have been written in the quiet of Colorado's early spring, this book was written in the chaos of career and family—Jenny's marketing company, two energetic kids beginning a transition to middle school, writing and speaking engagements, and pastoring a church full of people who invite me into the happiest and saddest days of their lives. I often joke with Jenny that during this

season I long for the day when I will get to write in peace and quiet, but I'll bet if that season ever comes I'll long to go back to the days when I would yell at my kids, "Be quiet, I've got to finish this article on good parenting."

Thank you, Ella and Silas. You have made sacrifices so your father could write. I hope not too many. I've desperately tried to get it right—to push aside the computer to go play catch or to close the manuscript in order to listen to what you've had to say. But I know I've missed the mark on occasions. I've enjoyed this season of parenting and pray you look back on these years with great fondness.

Thank you to those who encouraged me to write and to those who made my writing better. To readers of [www.kevinathompson.com](http://www.kevinathompson.com), whose experiences help me understand the need. To family and friends—those who live on the compound and those who just come to visit. To the leadership, staff, and membership of Community Bible Church. To Andrea and her team at Revell as well as Teresa and those at the William K. Jensen Literary Agency.

But most of all, to Jenny. As I reread the words in this manuscript, I'm reminded of how well you live them out. With an amazing consistency you model for me and our kids how a wife and mom is supposed to love. I don't just love you, I'm happily in love with you.

# INTRODUCTION

## *More Than Luck*

It's unmistakable. Blindfold me, take me into five different fast-food restaurants, make me order a Number 1, and just in the interaction with the cashier I can tell you whether or not we are at a Chick-fil-A. It's not the sounds or smells. At each restaurant, the ordering and paying processes are the same. The signal of where we are is not in what the employee does. It's how they do it.

Chick-fil-A is notorious for training and paying their employees to be nice. Ask them for anything and they will respond, "My pleasure." While clearly not everything a fast-food employee is asked to do is their pleasure, they say it anyway. And almost without exception, the customer believes it.

We are a society fixated on the *whats* of life. What does a company do to get a competitive advantage? What does a team do to prepare for the big game? What did you do to get your last promotion? What does a couple need to do to have a happy marriage? The whats matter in business,

sports, work, marriage, and life. They matter so much that my first marriage book, *Friends, Partners, and Lovers*, was a book about the whats of marriage. What does a happy couple do? They build their friendship, partnership, and intimacy.

But just as important as the whats in life are the *hows*. How do you do business? How does your team approach practice or a game? How will you and your spouse act in marriage? Chick-fil-A wants their employees to approach their work like a privilege. This privilege is displayed by their pleasure of serving.

This is a book about the hows of relationships. As husbands and wives go about their daily lives, a certain attitude should follow them wherever they go. The whats of a healthy marriage will be done happily.

*Happily* is an adverb, and adverbs are often used to describe verbs. While the verbs are the action words, adverbs can describe the manner in which those verbs occur. A good marriage is full of verbs. Whenever I officiate at a wedding ceremony, I have the couple vow five verbs to God, their families, and one another—love, care, listen, learn, and be one with. But marriage has many more verbs than that—forgive, trust, submit, encourage, cheer, wait, embrace, etc. The verbs describe what a couple does in a marriage, but the adverb *happily* reveals the manner in which those actions should be done.

Happiness was never intended to be the main focus of marriage. Gary Thomas is right when he asks in the subtitle of *Sacred Marriage*, “What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?” Happiness is not the central focus and should not be the central pursuit of

a couple. When it is the focus, it's rarely experienced. Happiness is a by-product. When we pursue it, we don't find it. Yet when a couple chooses rightly and lives wisely, happiness comes along for the ride.

When happiness is not a general description of a couple's relationship, something is wrong. Clearly there are bad seasons—not just days, but weeks and months—but the overarching feeling of a husband and wife should be one that life is better together than apart. They should be happily married to one another.

Recently I was sitting down with a friend, who told me his wife had cheated on him. The news was shocking to him, but not to me. The life-altering news my friend had just received is experienced on a nearly daily basis even in our small town.

He couldn't fathom why she had done it. Little did he know it was as predictable as any relationship struggle could be. He had been clueless for years. Moments of struggle had come, but they seemed normal. He reached out for help one time, but before any help was given the issue passed. He thought everything was fine.

Her heart had been dying for years. His ignorance and apathy had been blind to the slow death. Mesmerized by career and hobbies, confusing the birth of children with the certainty of love, he couldn't see what was right before him. Aware of every nuance of emotion in a potential sale, he never noticed his wife no longer smiled, laughed, or spoke about the future.

“I can't believe she did this,” he kept repeating.

*I can't believe she waited to do this*, I kept thinking.

Poor choices should never be excused, but they are often easy to understand. Having died a slow death, her heart was

looking for anything or anyone that could bring it back to life. An innocent Facebook comment led to an inbox message and ended in a six-month affair.

He wanted to get help; she wanted to get out. The odds of success were against them. Despite hundreds of text messages, many phone calls, and some of the most uncomfortable face-to-face conversations one can imagine, it wouldn't be long before another family would be broken apart—the husband thinking she killed a good thing, the wife thinking the “good thing” had ended long ago.

It is not a unique story. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a woman has only a 52 percent chance of her first marriage making it to the twentieth anniversary.<sup>1</sup> Maybe the greatest proof that something is wrong with marriage is the need for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to publish such statistics. The numbers might prove a point, but few people need it proved.

Marriages are struggling. We see the evidence in workplaces, where men and women are sending out messages of their hurting hearts, looking for anyone to recognize them and connect with them. The struggle is felt through social media, as boundaries are dropped and old relationships are rekindled. The heartbreak is obvious in the saddened eyes of school children, who know whichever parent picks them up is the only parent they will see that night. We hear the sorrow of these marriages in conversations with our friends, we deal with the chaos in our families, and often we know the tension exists in our own marriages.

Divorce is contagious. It spreads through peer groups with such speed everyone assumes it's unavoidable. It appears inevitable, as though it's not a matter of *if* as much as *when*. It

can become overwhelming, an almost self-fulfilling prophecy. The brokenness is all around us.

In contrast, I think about my grandparents, happily married seventy years. It's easy to look at their marriage and say, "They are lucky."

Yet nothing appeared lucky about their original circumstances. They were born in poverty and at a time where child-birth was far more dangerous than any modern threat, married at an age that we would now consider far too young, cast from home into military service, driven less by love of country and more by hatred of farming, separated by the ocean during several wars, struggling to raise children on a staff sergeant's salary. Plenty of others seemed to have an advantage in life.

But they *were* the lucky ones—one partner for one life that has stretched into the ninth decade. A few wars, a few children, and a lifetime of little income never seemed to cast any doubt on their love. Search for a bad word, and one was never spoken. Search for an out-of-bounds topic of conversation because it might bring up a bad memory, and one could never be found. "Blessed," they would say. "Lucky," we would all claim.

The plight of so many broken marriages feels like a curse, as if there is a marriage-eating virus that can move unseen onto unsuspecting couples, destroying their commitments and love with a speed that can't even compare to the speed at which we can fall in love.

Divorce feels like a curse for which there is no control and no cure. But feelings are deceiving. There is influence and control. A broken ending is not a guarantee. Marriages that end quickly have actually been decaying for months or years.

Small decisions and behaviors go unseen, slowly destroying the foundation of a healthy relationship.

A good marriage feels like luck—like we have struck the jackpot. The word *happy* is rooted in the concept of chance. *Hap* can be used in *happy*, but it's also present in words like *happenstance* or *perhaps*. Being happy is so great that it feels as though it's a stroke of good fortune. Yet happiness is not happenstance. Good marriages do not face less conflict or difficulties; they aren't assured by great circumstances. Two couples can seemingly have the same income, the same experience, and the same circumstances and have radically different marriages. Why do some marriages work and others do not? Who are the lucky ones?

*Luck* is a term we use in a variety of situations. At times it describes an unlikely event. If one in a thousand people get a specific disease and we happen to be that one, we are just unlucky. Chances were that it wouldn't happen, but it did. There isn't a logical explanation. There was nothing we could have done differently. Some things in life are outside of our control, and we often attribute those things to luck.

At other times we use *luck* to describe skills we can't see. On the surface there is no reason our friend continually experiences success in the stock market while we have a long track record of mistiming the market or picking the one company in an industry that doesn't make money. We attribute to luck the co-worker who shows a pattern of success despite no obvious advantages in knowledge or ability. We say an opponent is lucky even though they continually have our number.

We often say something is lucky when we can't see—or don't want to see—the hidden skills another person pos-

esses. When we look at an individual situation, calling something lucky is appropriate.

As someone who plays golf, I've witnessed about a dozen holes-in-one during my life, but two stand out. They were horrible shots. My dad skulled a ball four feet off the ground for 150 yards until it hit the flagstick and fell in. Another time a friend of mine hit the worst slice imaginable; the ball barely cleared a bunker, then bounced dead right and into the hole. And though every hole-in-one contains an element of luck, if you consistently hit good shots, you are far more likely to have that experience than if you never hit the ball near the green. A pattern of practice over time develops skill.

So it is with marriage. In a world full of broken relationships, it's easy to look at marriage like the flip of a coin. If it works, you were lucky. If it doesn't, you were unlucky, and there is nothing you can do about it.

It's true that any single relationship *can* feel like chance. Yet we're foolish to look at marriage on the whole as a simple luck of the draw. When there is a pattern of divorce, both individually and in society, that's not simply a run of bad luck. When many people have found meaningful relationships that last through the seasons of life, what they have experienced is more than just a good run.

## **The Modern Rules for Marriage**

When couples come to see me, it's clear that though the modern rules for marriage are unspoken, they are clearly defined. The rules go something like this:

1. There is someone just for you. If you find them, you will have great success. If you don't, your relationship will struggle. Marriage is a flip of the coin regarding whether or not you have found your soul mate.
2. Run from pain. Ignore it, deny it, and do whatever you can to distance yourself from it. You aren't strong enough to endure hurt, sorrow, or grief. If you allow it near you, it might never leave. Marriage is fragile, so your relationship can't endure hardship. Deny unmet desires, push aside disappointments, and never talk about what you really want so you won't have to consider if you are happy or not.
3. When issues arise, either avoid or attack. More often than not, do both. When you experience disagreements or frustrations, pretend like everything is okay. Let things build until you finally explode. Then make your feelings unmistakably clear. Force your spouse to buckle under the weight of your emotion.
4. Never forget marriage is primarily about you: your own happiness, meaning, and satisfaction. For as long as you are happy in your relationship, support your spouse. But the moment your happiness wanes, consider if someone else can bring you more satisfaction. In all things, follow your heart as the ultimate guide.
5. There's no need for you to work at this relationship. A good marriage should happen naturally. Just based on what you've seen, what you know, and what you think to be right, you should be able to experience success. When problems arise, it shows there is either something wrong with your spouse or something broken with the institution of marriage.

6. Be careful with love and forgiveness. It's a scary world, so you should do everything you can to protect your heart. The best way for this to happen is to give only parts of yourself to people. When they have proven themselves trustworthy, give them access to an aspect of you, but never all of you. Make sure you are always hiding the parts of yourself that might cause them not to love you or that you don't want to be seen.
7. If you truly love each other, you'll always agree. You will instinctively know what the other is thinking. There isn't even a need to ask. You can assume you understand your partner and they understand you. Differing perspectives or conclusions may indicate that something is wrong in the relationship. Tension is not normally a characteristic of a truly good relationship. If your spouse can't read your mind, something is wrong with them.
8. When marriage is right, it should be easy. Others should applaud you. Friends and family should support you. Both internally and externally, everything should escort you toward a better relationship. If a friend disagrees or judges your relationship, it's a sign that something is wrong with the marriage. If something is right, it shouldn't be hard.

On nearly a monthly basis, I stand before a young couple as they commit their lives solely to one another. With rare exception the moment is full of great hope, as the couple is deeply in love. Despite their love and their freedom to willfully choose whom they will marry, nearly every couple communicates a nervousness of divorce before the wedding.

On the Saturdays I'm not standing in front of a young couple, I'm often standing before a more mature couple. Having experienced the sorrow of a broken marriage, they have chosen anyway to give marriage another try. Even as they state their vows, they often feel the outcome of their marriage is beyond their control.

The sense of helplessness from both the young and the old does not match the biblical concept of marriage. We are not helpless victims in this world. While we are fallen people who live in a fallen world and can suffer tremendous tragedies through no fault of our own, in many areas in our lives, the outcomes we face are determined by the choices we make. Generally speaking, good choices lead to good outcomes and bad choices lead to bad outcomes.

Without question, one person can destroy a marriage. However, even that person's decisions are not made in a vacuum but in correlation with the actions of their spouse. The good news that can be told to any couple is: if you make good choices, chances are your marriage will be a tremendous blessing to yourself and others. Yet within that truth is bad news—humanity rarely makes good choices.

If we choose wisely within marriage, our relationship will flourish. But what are wise choices? How do we make marriage work? Left to ourselves, we act based on our past experiences, a guess, or some hunch we've gotten from somewhere. It's the equivalent of saying, "You will be happy if you live in Switzerland," but then not being given a map to know where Switzerland is.

Most husbands and wives are going through marriage with no clue of how to be successful. Some marriages work and some don't. A few get lucky, but many spouses suffer

unhappily for years, either enduring a lifeless relationship or suffering through the heartache of divorce.

It doesn't have to be this way. We don't have to be left to a marriage roulette where the smart money always bets against an enduring relationship.

There is a better way. There is a map to Switzerland. The map doesn't guarantee success; it doesn't mean a couple won't face a sorrow beyond their control that might destroy the relationship. But a map does exist that can make marriages last and turn lifeless relationships into fountains of comfort and meaning.

## **What We Want from Marriage**

Expectations between two people are rarely the same. We all want different things when it comes to marriage, but while our desires may be nuanced, they probably aren't as unique as we think. If I could assure every couple I marry that they will have a relationship that is both fun and defined by a deep and abiding affection for one another, and that no matter what they might face, love will endure through even the toughest times, I believe every couple would sign on the dotted line. This is what we desire.

### *We Want to Laugh*

Life is hard, and marriage will have its moments of difficulties. However, it should also be fun. If life doesn't have the promise of being more enjoyable with another person, few of us would make the commitment. Obviously situations and circumstances can arise where laughter doesn't

describe a couple's relationship, but those should be the outliers. Laughter should be a regular part of our lives.

Some of my favorite moments of marriage are the times of laughter between me and my wife, Jenny. There are stories only we know about that cause us to laugh. The stress of parenting is often lightened as we keep a straight face with our kids but then laugh hysterically with one another over what they have said or done. Few things connect us like laughing together, whether it be in response to a comedian's tale or a crazy situation even taking place in our daily lives. Laughter is meant to be a central aspect of marriage.

### *We Want to Love*

It might begin with passionate feelings of attraction or romance, but as a marriage matures, a couple's understanding of love deepens. Yes, we want passion, but men and women also desire the security and peace that derives from true love. There is a consistency and trust in real love.

Life can feel like a trapeze act. Before we are fully trained, we are expected to perform a bunch of tricks that require us to swing, fly, and flip. Marriage should cause us to trust our partner to catch us, and love is like a safety net below us. No matter what happens, we know that love will catch us, protect us, and let us have another chance.

### *We Want to Last*

While some promote the idea that we should have multiple relationships throughout our lifetimes because we all change, I've yet to meet a couple who says "I do" who doesn't hope for that relationship to last their whole lives. We should seek

to last just for lasting's sake. Two people can resign themselves to a bad relationship and endure until death. This isn't a goal worth pursuing. Instead, we want a relationship that lasts in such a way that in the end we can say it was all worth it. While bad times will come, we last to see better days. The lasting becomes another success that adds to the sweetness of our connection.

To laugh, love, and last—these are the desires of nearly every couple who walks down the aisle. They are reasonable desires that are far more attainable than some realize. But they don't happen in the way we expect. They are the by-products of some surprising commitments.

## The Lucky Ones

We use *lucky* to describe a successful marriage because we often can't see the skills and abilities required to make marriage work. We are a people focused on facades. We assume the outside of something fully defines the inside. We value the appearance of health more than health itself. When we see happy couples, we compare our marriage to theirs. We wrongly conclude they are happy because they have more money or a nicer home or a better-looking mate or a spouse who doesn't nag as much. We write simple conclusions to our complex problems and assume we are unhappy because we are unlucky. We think there isn't much we can do about it, so we long for something different while changing none of our own actions.

What if the lucky aren't so lucky? What if a successful marriage isn't about the forces of fate but the force of choice? What if we control far more of our relationship than we realize?

A good marriage looks like luck because there are few things on the outside that predict success in marriage. But inside a successful relationship, there are some hidden characteristics that lead to marital satisfaction. These are the secrets of the lucky ones:

1. They have right expectations of themselves and others. They don't overestimate their own ability. They know they are flawed and needy. They understand their partner is the same. In the midst of their mutual brokenness, they find meaning and value.
2. They confront the pain. They don't shy away from it or deny it. Instead, they grieve over the fact that they can't be everything they want to be. They name their imperfection and process through it.
3. They operate between apathy and aggression. They find the middle ground, avoiding passivity, which allows issues to grow, and evading aggression, which can blow something out of proportion. They are strong but vulnerable, realistic but not pessimistic.
4. They seek something higher than themselves. While their marriage brings a great deal of personal satisfaction, that isn't their ultimate goal. They pursue something bigger. This pursuit draws them out of themselves and into a greater purpose. It minimizes conflicts and accentuates commonalities.
5. They overflow with compassion. Empathy, understanding, and compassion are reciprocated between the two. They nourish their love for one another so that it impacts every aspect of their daily lives. They have a

genuine warmth for each other and do not allow their feelings to grow cold.

6. They create a wholeness as individuals and as a couple. They know who they are. They do not feel divided or torn by individual desires or what is best for them together. Truth is allowed to freely flow without being used to intentionally injure the other. They don't live in perfection, but they so consistently handle their mistakes properly that nothing is allowed to fester. Their integrity drives out any possible hypocrisy.
7. They are continually in the process of making peace. They understand their differences and strive to be united in their diversity. They welcome problems as an opportunity to learn more about each other and to grow closer together. They don't have more or less conflict than others, but they handle it in a more productive way.
8. They learn to take a punch. They understand their commitment to one another will not be understood by others, by a culture that easily attacks commitment. They know marriage can be difficult, but they believe the struggle is worth it. They use both external and internal challenges as a way to strengthen their bond.

These practices aren't readily seen. It's rarely possible to look at a couple and know if they truly have compassion for each other or if they are humble in their understanding of themselves and marriage. But these unseen qualities define a relationship—and create the kind of marriages we all want.

The map toward a better marriage is often unseen, but even if it's found, it's often ignored. The connected dots don't

match our expectation of what would make marriage better. It's a contrarian's map. Not only are these eight principles not obvious, but they are quickly rejected by the masses when clearly stated. A few of the ideas aren't just ignored; they are fought against.

But if there was ever a time for contrarian advice when it comes to marriage, today is the day. Never have so many experts produced so much information regarding a topic with such little positive impact. Some have concluded marriage advice doesn't work, but is it possible that the conventional advice is simply wrong?

When the videographer comes to Aunt Elaine and Uncle Charlie's table at your wedding reception, they are well-intentioned when they look into the camera, confess their love for you, and give you the secret to marital success. Their intentions are good, but their advice is often bad. "Happy wife, happy life" might sound like solid marriage advice, but the cliché won't get a couple through the challenges of raising a child with Asperger's. While a husband should seek the well-being of his wife, the simplistic concept of "happy wife, happy life" is grossly dangerous. It implies a man is in control of a woman's happiness. It implies a woman's emotions are so fragile that they can destroy a marriage. It's conventional wisdom, but it's wrong. So is much of the clichéd advice given in wedding reception videos and in private text messages among friends.

Few people realize that "doing whatever makes you happy" probably won't actually make you happy. Discipline, far more than following desire, will lead to long-term satisfaction. "Follow your heart" sounds great in a tweet, but it is not helpful direction in a relationship that at times will test every

aspect of your heart's resolve. "Love is all you need" sounds wonderful in a wedding card, but a lot of couples love each other even as they are divorcing because they can't figure out how to better communicate with each other.

The conventional wisdom has been tried and left wanting. These are the times for contrarian advice. A better marriage is found when you begin to practice the eight principles mentioned above, which contradict much of what you believe to be true about marriage. It all begins with the foundational principle that you have no idea what you're doing . . . and that's okay.

### BE INTENTIONAL

1. Of the modern rules for marriage, which one are you most tempted to believe? What are the negative consequences of that belief?
2. When you think of the ideal marriage, who comes to mind? Why? What do they do that you want to emulate?
3. Why do we often believe happiness is more about happenstance than our choices?
4. What would a happy marriage look like to you?