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# Introduction

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A guy once told me that Jane Austen novels were just well-written harlequins without the bedroom scenes. He meant that the basic plots follow the same pattern that all romance novels seem to: girl wants true love, looks for it, has one or two emotional mishaps, finds true love. But Austen's novels actually contain many more dysfunctional relationships than healthy ones: for every Lizzie and Mr. Darcy, there is a Charlotte and Mr. Collins or a Mr. and Mrs. Bennett. For every Jane and Mr. Bingley there is a Wickham and Lydia or a Mr. and Mrs. Hurst. Sadly, the novels are true to real life. Our world is full of unhappy marriages; more people live unhappily ever after than otherwise.



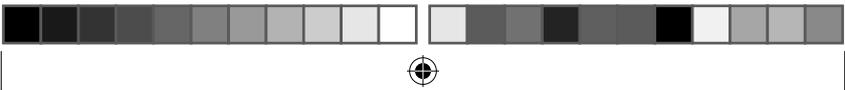


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This is even true in some Christian communities. Unfortunately, single believers are often less diligent and perceptive than Lizzie Bennett in evaluating potential spouses. While this book does not want to give you a checklist for your relationship, it does aim to encourage you to think about marriage in such a way that you will be able to make a wise and biblically informed decision about the person that you marry. Apart from salvation, no other decision will have such an impact on your life.

But why does it matter so much? Won't everything be all right as long as you are in love? Isn't every single Christian male a potential spouse? Actually, no! And that is because God created marriage to be a relationship (the *only* relationship) in which two become one. This is true physically, but it is also true spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and mentally. A husband and wife become one—intertwined to the extent that after years or decades of marriage it is difficult to do or say anything to the one that the other does not immediately feel. This is why it is so important that you pursue this kind of intimacy only with the right person—because you and he will be joined in profound ways that are difficult to understand even after years of experience. Our culture uses the term 'intimacy' almost exclusively in reference to sexual activity. Of course, intimacy





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can include sexual closeness, but its meaning is much deeper than that. Intimacy in a marriage is intensely personal closeness that includes spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical togetherness.

If you are unmarried, it is difficult to grasp the implications that this intimacy brings. This book will help you start thinking through exactly that. Using examples from church history and my own experience as a pastor's daughter and professor's wife, measured against biblical principles, we will look at the areas of personhood that marriage and a spouse will change, and the implications that those changes can have, for better or for worse.

If you are already in an unhappy marriage, there are ways to get help. Depending on the nature and depth of the problem, you may need the support of your extended family, the counsel of your pastor, or even the protection of police.<sup>1</sup> But if you are not married, please don't put yourself in such a situation just because you have not thought things through first. True, you cannot predict or foresee every possible situation in a relationship or the changes that a spouse will go through after the wedding. That is why wedding vows bind a man and wife together 'from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love

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<sup>1</sup> See the appendix at the back of this book for resources for someone in a difficult marriage.



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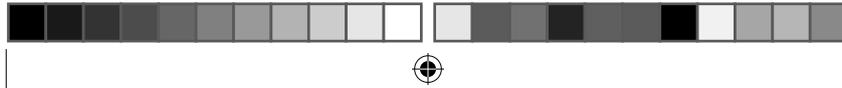
and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy law.<sup>2</sup> A change in your spouse or any other future circumstance is something that you cannot avoid by careful thought and planning before engagement, and no circumstance, apart from biblical grounds, can terminate a marriage.<sup>2</sup> But, being in a bad marriage and getting into an avoidable bad marriage are two different things.

You may be wondering, can't God redeem a bad marriage? Can't God use you to change your spouse for the better? Most definitely—how gracious! He has done these sorts of things in the past and He is doing them now. He also used the prostitute Rahab to help His people conquer Jericho, converted John Newton when he was a slave trader, and allows people to survive airplane crashes. But that does not mean that it is moral to engage in prostitution with the goal of helping the church, to buy and sell slaves with the hope of personal revival, or to crash your plane so that you can see God's power. No right-thinking person would do those things. Yet, many Christians get married to people whom they have no business marrying.

Why does this happen? Many times, people pick a spouse without thinking through the implications

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2 These are adultery and desertion. See Jay Adams' *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible: A Fresh Look at What Scripture Teaches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) for a full discussion of biblical thought on divorce.



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of life-long intimacy with this person. Some women marry because they feel sorry for a guy; others because they see no better option. It's common for young people to marry simply because of sexual pressure or passion, not truly considering the greater implications for the rest of their lives. Many girls marry because they are afraid of some aspect of singleness. They haven't grasped that it's far better to be single for life than to marry someone who will make your life a burden. Singleness can be great; a bad marriage is crushing. And while a stable marriage requires that you be willing to do your utmost to make it work, a thriving marriage requires that both husband and wife work together and for each other in order to be a picture of Christ and the Church. Although a difficult marriage *can* create spiritual fruit in one spouse, it is not something to choose. And single people often cannot see trouble coming until it's too late.

This came home to me one day as my husband and I ate dinner with a youth group. Three teens sat across from us at the table—two guys and a girl. One guy was a computer geek with glasses. The other was a college student with slightly cooler hair and clothes. The girl was obviously with him. But while the computer geek was busy serving everyone at the meal, clearing plates and garbage, the college student got angry with the girl for a small accident



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and poured red juice over her leather jacket and white shirt in revenge. She had picked the wrong guy, and the juice didn't seem to change her mind. She is in for some grief if that relationship continues, especially if it leads to marriage; intimacy with a selfish, angry man will destroy much more than her clothing. She is thinking in the short term without accounting for the long term.

If you are single, you can't hear this too often: *whom you marry matters*. You might think that the way he treats you now isn't so bad. But it's not going to get better after the wedding. You might think that he'll change. It's possible, but most people don't. You might think that you'll be able to minister to him and help him. It's possible, but if you can't change him now, then there's no reason to expect that you will be able to in the future, and after marriage, you will be vulnerable yourself. A husband should lead and cherish you, not need your counsel for basic personality or behavior issues. It is good and right to want to minister to another person, and no future spouse will be perfect in every area. But there are ways to minister to people that don't involve dating them! What matters is not that your boyfriend is perfect, but that in major life areas he is standing on a firmly biblical footing.

What will help you decide whom to marry? Is he growing in Christ-likeness and helping you do the same? He does not have to score 100 per cent in



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every area, but he does have to be headed in the right direction on important issues. A healthy trajectory is vital. That is what you need to look for in each area. Is he heading in a bad direction or a biblical one? Is he doing so intentionally or by default? Ben Franklin said, 'Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards.' This is the 'wide open' part.

Life does not end at marriage. Instead, marriage shapes life after the wedding. Getting married is not, by itself, a worthy life-goal. Your goal right now should not be to get married, but to make sure, first, that your own life is on the kind of biblical trajectory that shows growth in grace. That is also the best preparation for marriage. You should also consider how your development as a Christian will be buttressed and facilitated and sped up by marriage—by your relationship with a particular person with whom you may some day become one.

Before we begin, I want to be clear: this book cannot give you the ultimate Potential Husband Check List, Dating Strategies that Work, or a Perfect Marriage Pattern that you can hold up to your boyfriend to see if he fits. No book can do that for you, because every man is different, every woman is different, and so every relationship will look different. Martin and Katie Luther were a radically different couple from Martyn and Bethan Lloyd-Jones. Both were solid, loving marriages with husbands leading,



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wives submitting, and both spouses serving Christ. Neither couple worried about 'compatibility'. They loved Christ and each other: their compatibility came in living that out. But being in the Luther home would have been a very different experience from being in the Lloyd-Jones home, simply because personality, education, circumstance, and a host of other factors shape each marriage into something unique. This book, then, offers no formula.

What this book can do is help you grasp the effects of a marriage and ask some questions about what that might look like for you. Unless a married person is very frank with you, you can't understand how much a husband will influence your entire life. Every area of your life will be impacted deeply. Intimacy in a bad marriage is a dark thing. It is a source of grief and pain and stifling of personhood. But the opposite of bad intimacy is not living parallel lives as individual adults. Lack of intimacy is sterile. It does not produce; it simply permits. The opposite of intimacy in a bad marriage is not lack of intimacy, but intimacy in a good marriage. This kind of intimacy is a wonderful thing. It is a source of joy and comfort and energy and creativity. Cultivating intimacy with a husband is part of God's design for marriage, and so it brings blessing. But you must not marry someone with whom you cannot actively pursue intimacy in a biblical context.



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Whom you marry matters not only because it will affect your health, make you sad or happy, create fear or security, but also because it will hinder or enable you to live a life of Christian service. Christian marriage, by God's design, should multiply abilities, fruitfulness, and service, not absorb all of your time, energy, and thought. It should be a source of joy, a spurring one another on to love and good works (Heb. 10:24). Of course, it is true that intimacy with even the best earthly husband will have *some* negative impact on you, simply because every Christian husband is still a sinner until he is glorified in Heaven. No marriage is all good or all bad. The question is whether the overall patterns of a spouse's belief and behavior are conducive to the health of a marriage. Pastor and theologian Derek Thomas warns us, 'He may be, let's say, 6'2 and 175 pounds, have green eyes, a great body and make a bundle of money. He may even drive a Porsche! Yes, and hell may come along with a relationship! ... It's all very well to fall in love with a hunk, but you have to ask, "A hunk of what?"'

Asking good questions about a potential spouse can help you sort this out. Will your husband's interactions with your body, mind, and soul tend towards health, sanctifying you? Since the will of God is your sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3), you must marry someone who makes you want to be more



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like Jesus and who can help you become more like Jesus. Your marriage matters not only to you, not only to your family, not only to the church, but also to the world. A married couple's relationship will either be a living picture of Christ and the church, or it will be a living lie about Christ and the church. Even Paul described this as a profound mystery (Eph. 5:32). Will your marriage be one that shines gospel love into the world, or one that adds to the darkness? This book will help you think about that.

In the chapters that follow, we will look at some of the ways that marriage will affect five areas of living: spiritual, emotional, physical, mental, and relational. We will also look at ourselves to think about our readiness to be helpmeets: are we up for the challenge? There is a chapter on love, to help us identify some unbiblical and unhealthy patterns of thinking. A chapter on resources includes a list of helpful books about marriage and study questions that can help you evaluate your own relationship in real time.

God might not have marriage in store for you. But if He does, it's my prayer that this book will enable you to carefully weigh the potential effects of a potential spouse: to weed out the Wickhams and Collinses, because happiness in marriage is not merely a matter of chance. It will affect your time on earth and eternity, so it is a matter that deserves our grave consideration.