

PRAISE FOR

KEEP SHOWING UP

Dang, girl! Powerful and practical straight talk in a world that wants you in a twist about marriage. A must-read and re-read. A dose of vitamin T (truth) about what marriage can wonderfully look like when we look more at what God can do in our commuted hearts than what our husband or wife should do for us, more at what God gives to the unit than what we are expecting to get as individuals.

ELISABETH HASSELBECK, wife, mom, television personality, and author of *Point of View: A Fresh Look at Work, Faith, and Freedom*

When you open a Karen Ehman book, you know you're going to find tons of practical suggestions, years of hard-earned wisdom, and a down-to-earth, we're-all-in-this-together approach that is relatable, reliable, and well worth reading. *Keep Showing Up* is all that and more, providing solid biblical direction for getting—and keeping—your marriage on track. Whether you've been married for ten months or ten years, this much-needed resource will help you grow spiritually, even as you strengthen the most important relationship you have on earth.

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS, bestselling author of *Bad Girls of the Bible*

I have been inspired by and grown through every Karen Ehman book that I've had the privilege of reading, but this one quickly became my favorite. Having just celebrated fifteen years of marriage with Mike, I found Karen's words to lovingly convict me and motivate me to re-envision how our differences can actually be the door to a deeper connection with each other and a greater dependency on God. *Keep Showing Up* truly delivers on what the back cover says it will help you and your spouse accomplish together.

JEANNIE CUNNION, author of *Mom Set Free*

Karen Ehman has written the message every wife needs to hear. Whether she's just starting out or has been married for what now feels like a lifetime, there's something for every wife. With humor, grace, practical teaching, vulnerability, and biblical truth, Karen hits on all the hard topics. I see this book restoring marriages that feel dry, empty, shallow, or just tired. I see it as a longstanding resource for counselors or pastors to pass on to women who just need a wise friend to encourage them to keep showing up.

NICKI KOZIARZ, wife to Kris and bestselling author
and speaker with Proverbs 31 Ministries

Marriage is more than just a promise; it's a commitment. It's vowing to each other that you are life partners and will walk through life hand in hand, side by side, regardless of the ups and downs you will surely face. *Keep Showing Up* will help cultivate your marriage during the good, the bad, and those moments you threaten to sleep on the couch! ;)

LAUREN McBRIDE, lifestyle blogger at
www.laurenmcbrideblog.com

I've seen firsthand in my research how one person's simple actions can make or break a marriage. This book provides an excellent, actionable map for how we women can help our marriages to fly even when it gets rough—or boring. We can't change our man, but when we work on us, everything changes! Karen Ehman has written another practical, charming winner.

SHAUNTI FELDHAHN, bestselling author of *For Women Only*

Karen Ehman has such a down-to-earth and real-life style of writing. *Keep Showing Up* is relevant for everyone from the engaged woman to the one who has been married for thirty years and beyond. She offers practical advice backed with scriptural truth to encourage you to help your marriage and yourself. Her use of personal stories and humor will draw you in, but the substance of her words will have you ready to go to work on building a better relationship. I can't recommend this book enough.

KELLY STAMPS, popular blogger at kellyskornerblog.com

Keep Showing Up will make you wonder if Karen Ehman has been secretly living in your home, watching and listening to your marriage. We found that so many of her stories resonated with our own. Insightful, fun, and incredibly practical!

PATRICK AND RUTH SCHWENK, founders of FortheFamily.org and TheBetterMom.com and authors of *For Better or For Kids: A Vow to Love Your Spouse with Kids in the House*

The apostle Paul says the profound mystery of marriage can be summed up in the relationship between Jesus and his jacked-up bride, the church. The inexplicable fact that Jesus keeps showing up and doesn't go anywhere when we continue to ignore and flat-out dismiss him is one of the most stunning pictures of the gospel of grace. In this wonderfully transparent, practical, and Jesus-centered book, my friend Karen Ehman makes much of Christ by exalting marriage to its proper place as a portrait of grace painted with the brushstrokes of our failures and halfhearted attempts at doing the right things.

NOEL JESSE HEIKKINEN, pastor at Riverview Church and author of *Wretched Saints: Transformed by the Relentless Grace of God*—and Karen and Todd's pastor

Keep Showing Up isn't a long list of unreasonable to-dos for wives to undertake. Instead, Karen Ehman comes alongside to coach and encourage you toward a gospel-centered marriage. From newlywed to seasoned wife, every bride should read this book.

KELLY R. SMITH, MrsDisciple.com

Whether newly married, never married, or married so long you can't remember not being married, *Keep Showing Up* is a must-read! With grace, humor, and her own personal experiences, Karen Ehman demonstrates how even a strong union of two can crumble by the wrong mindset of one. This book challenges us to examine our hearts and offers a fresh perspective to help leave crazy behind and stay crazy in love.

REBECCA LYNN DIKEMAN, writer and blogger from Arizona, married for fifteen years

Keep Showing Up is a blessing of a book. I've been married for almost eleven years, and Karen Ehman's book has taught me so much. Yes, it may step on your toes! But it reminds us that marriage is not for selfish ambition but calls us to be selfless—to put our spouse's needs above our own and to love in the “agape” way. In doing so, it helps us be molded into who God created us to be and to love like him!

ASHLEY RHODES, married for nearly eleven years

Wow! This book truly exposes the raw, honest truth about the many ups and downs in marriage. It provides a convicting—and redeeming—solution that will allow you to become a God-honoring wife: *examine your own heart*. *Keep Showing Up* challenges you to stop looking at your spouse and at other external factors that make marriage hard, and instead start evaluating your own heart as you allow God to enable you to love like Jesus.

BAILEY SEXTON, married for three years

Preparing for my recent wedding, I didn't want to hear more “congrats on finding happily ever after.” Instead, I wanted real advice from someone living in a real marriage. In this book, Karen Ehman gives rarely found raw truth in a way that is refreshing. Her willingness to honestly paint the realities of marriage strengthens my “new wife” heart in a way Cinderella never could.

JACKIE SLOT, married for five months

As an almost-newlywed, I found *Keep Showing Up* to be a godsend. Reading each page was like finding treasure troves of pure gold nestled among catchy phrases, humorous anecdotes, and candid and sincere advice—all filtered through the lens of the Bible. I feel so much more prepared as I delve into this new adventure called marriage. However, this book provides valuable information to men and women in all stages of life and with all relationships, not just the one between spouses. I'm making it my mission to *keep showing up*, today and every day, with everyone who crosses my path.

MACEY NESTER, became Mrs. Mitchell Ehman in 2018

KEEP SHOWING UP

How to Stay Crazy in Love
When Your Love Drives You Crazy

KAREN EHMAN

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Keep Showing Up

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

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ISBN 978-0-310-34768-2 (audio)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ehman, Karen, 1964- author.

Title: Keep showing up : how to stay crazy in love when your love drives you crazy / Karen Ehman.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Zondervan, [2019] | Includes bibliographical references. | Identifiers: LCCN 2018052331 (print) | LCCN 2019000412 (ebook) | ISBN 9780310347651 (ebook) | ISBN 9780310347644 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Wives--Religious life. | Marriage--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4528.15 (ebook) | LCC BV4528.15 .E39 2019 (print) | DDC 248.8/435--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018052331>

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Cover illustration: Shutterstock

Interior design: Kait Lamphere

Printed in the United States of America

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 /LSC/ 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Marcia Stump,
a wife who faithfully models for me
how to keep showing up and keep showing Jesus*



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Important Note: This book was written with the average marriage in mind that has its share of heartache, misunderstandings, and normal marital spats. If you are dealing with a more serious issue, such as porn addiction or adultery, or if the conflict you experience over any issue causes arguments that escalate quickly or even frighten you due to verbal abuse or physical harm, get help! Reach out to your pastor if you have one. Or you can find a Christian counselor in your area by visiting ccn.thedirectorywidget.com. Or if you are in physical danger and being abused, please stop what you are doing now and call the National Domestic Abuse Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or visit www.thehotline.org.

Also, I realize that not all of you reading this are on your first marriage. For a variety of reasons—whether beyond your control or due directly to your own choice—you are no longer with your first spouse and are part of a remarriage situation. Please know that, in advocating for you to continue to show up in your relationship and do the hard work of behaving in a biblical manner in your marriage, I'm referring to your current marriage. Do not misinterpret my encouragement to hang in there in your relationship as a condemnation for not staying married to your former spouse. No wagging fingers from me—just grace and a reminder that God's mercies are new every single day.

ONE

WHERE DOES A WIFE GO TO RESIGN?



*There can be no deep disappointment
where there is not deep love.*

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

*Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth
has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and
my heart may fail, but God is the strength
of my heart and my portion forever.*

PSALM 73:25-26

Why is this so hard? I can't do this anymore! I cried out to God as I sat cross-legged on the bedroom floor of our very first apartment, my eyes stinging with hot, salty tears. Out in the living room on a hand-me-down couch sat my husband, bewildered himself, unable to handle his wife's unstable emotions. I'm sure he was also thinking that this marriage wasn't at all what he'd imagined it would be.

I was a brand-new bride of just six weeks, fresh off the honeymoon and with our moving boxes barely unpacked. Our thank-you notes for the wedding gifts hadn't even been sent!

||

But already I had buyer's remorse. Or I guess more accurately, "bridal remorse." All I knew was that this "happily ever after" thing was not so happy after all. I already wanted to resign from my newly acquired position of "wife."

My husband and I met during our sophomore year of college. On our Midwestern Christian campus, students came to get a dual degree—one in their chosen field of study and one in the department of matrimony, snagging not only the title Bachelor of Arts behind their name but also Bachelor/Bachelorette-No-More. I'd received my BA in social science as well as my "Mrs." degree within three weeks of each other. I was pleased with the first one, having worked hard to graduate with honors. My diploma hung proudly on the wall in our postage-stamp-sized apartment. The second degree I now wished I could give back.

I never envisioned being unhappy in my marriage. Not for a moment. Of course, during our dating days, Todd and I had experienced some disagreements and spats. However, these lovers' quarrels always concluded with us smooching and making up, more in love than ever before. (Cue the sappy music and puppy-dog eyes.) But much to my dismay, the first few years of my marriage were rocky and rough.

I had imagined a relationship of big-screen marital bliss. Candlelit dinners. Surprise bouquets of wildflowers. Holding hands at the movies. Moonlit strolls along a lovely path. Then the tidal wave of reality hit.

Instead of the candlelit dinner, it was burnt roast. When he *once again* came home late from work, I wrongly interpreted it as him caring little about my culinary efforts. We didn't get to the hand-holding at the theatre much because we couldn't make up our minds about which show to see. And there were strolls along the path all right—all alone down the dimly lit streets in

our neighborhood, just after I stormed away from my beloved following yet another dispute.

Facing the fresh, harsh reality that marriage wasn't all roses and rosy was a slap in the face emotionally. It left me wondering if I had made a horrible mistake when it came to the choice of my mate.

Yes. Maybe that was it. I had chosen the wrong person. This line of thinking certainly entered my mind. But my brain didn't just play a spirited round of the blame game, asserting that my husband was the problem. I also entertained the thought that there was something wrong with *me*; that although I had read every popular Christian marriage book out there at the time—curled up on my college bunk bed, highlighting until my fat pink pen ran out of ink—I just wasn't cut out to be a wife. Both these options left me feeling disheartened and miserable.

I wiped my eyes and then tried to give myself a little pep talk, assuring my fretting brain that everything was going to be all right. Maybe I was just overreacting. After all, there wasn't a major issue in our marriage. There hadn't been any infidelity. We weren't in deep financial trouble. Neither of us had a major crisis in our career. There wasn't any verbal or physical abuse. A few couples we'd gone to college with were experiencing one or more of those serious issues. I thought perhaps reminding myself of this fact would make me feel better about my current unpleasant situation.

But it didn't. No matter how stellar and convincing a self-lecture I could muster up, I couldn't see past the pain and sorrow of my current condition. This was not the newlywed life I'd wanted. Marriage was supposed to be magical. Fulfilling. Fairytale-like. Not the stress-inducing, bawl-my-eyes-out, fresh disappointment I was currently drowning in. Weren't we supposed to be crazy in love? What in the world went wrong?

WHY MARRIAGE IS SO STINKIN' DIFFICULT

Now that I've had a couple decades of marriage under my belt, I recognize that my newlywed disillusionment was not unique to me. There are lovers all over the globe who dive excitedly into marriage only to realize, after taking the matrimonial plunge, that their relationship as husband and wife is not the heavenly home front they'd imagined. So just what is the problem? Why is obtaining a marriage of harmony and bliss so much harder than falling in love and dating? Is it the sex? Meddlesome in-laws? Financial pressures? Conflict over the kids? Is it just the sheer daily grind of navigating work and home responsibilities while dealing with differing perspectives and personalities? Yes, it's all that and more. And while I can't possibly hope to touch on all those marital trouble spots in one short book, I can focus on one crucial half of the marital equation: *you*.

You heard me. I said you. Not your husband. Not what he is or is not doing—but you.

But first, let's look at some of the underlying issues that make marriage today so difficult.

We Have Sky-High Expectations for Marriage

From the time I was a little girl, I had an idealistic view of marriage. My neighbor Ann and I would sometimes spend the afternoon on my front porch playing with our Barbie dolls. Between the two of us we had several female dolls but only one Ken doll. So we had to take turns sharing the only hubby we had.

When it was my turn for Ken to be my Barbie's hunk-of-a-husband, sometimes the duo spent a quiet evening at home in the Barbie DreamHouse. Other times they ventured off in the fancy aqua camper on an exciting summer vacation. Or perhaps

they splashed around in the makeshift swimming pool Ann and I had created from a shallow Tupperware bowl. But one thing they never did? They never fought.

The husbands and wives on television rarely fought either. Or if they did, the conflict was resolved within a span of thirty minutes. Many of the people I knew in real life—neighbors, relatives, teachers—seemed to have their marital acts together. No, not all of them. I also knew of couples who either had gotten divorced or were in the process of doing so. But at that time, this was rare. And I surmised *my* marriage would not be like those.

Setting the bar too high in marriage—surmising that yours will be free of conflict, full of romance, not a struggle but a breeze, sets you up for disappointment. Let's ditch any idealistic notions and opt for some realism instead. There will be troubles from time to time—maybe even a lot of the time. But while we can't change our circumstances, we can change our perspective. We can expect such times and grow despite them.

Our Culture Doesn't Support Marriage or Encourage Couples to Stay Married

In fifth grade I remember being able to count on one hand the number of classmates I knew whose parents were *not* together. And society as a whole, for the most part, seemed to support and encourage marriage. There were some who bought into the old “a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle” philosophy, but they were women I only read about or saw on the news. They weren't the actual women in my life who were influencing me. The women *I* knew believed in marriage.

I have often wondered about the institution of marriage in the past. Was it easier to be married years ago when staying together was expected and divorce was taboo? Today, do we have the same outside support that marriages had in the past?

And, if not, has losing that outside support made staying married even more difficult?

I love historical buildings. Give me a good tabletop book, full of glossy photographs of architecture from the past, and I will snuggle up under a blanket and dreamily peruse it for hours. One of those ancient, intricate architectural styles is the cathedral. I was challenged once to think about how a cathedral's structure illustrates the connection in years gone by between marriage and society.

Most cathedrals have a unique component to their architecture called a flying buttress. Buttresses were designed to hold the walls and roofs of cathedrals together by exerting pressure from the *outside*. Over the years, however, builders learned to tuck away the reinforcements *inside* the structures or even hide them within the masonry walls. They no longer had to rely on exterior construction components to hold the walls together. They counted on what was inside the building to make them stand strong and tall.

Now consider marriage in our current culture. There just aren't many outside forces acting upon it in a positive way any longer. In fact, sometimes the opposite is true. Marital breakups are winked at. Shrugged off. Even celebrated sometimes. Serial marriages aren't rare anymore—especially in Hollywood.

Because of our culture's shift from supporting marriage, expecting unions to last, it's easier to just give up when things become strained. I've been told by a marriage counselor that roughly 50 percent of the people who walk down the aisle think in the back of their minds that if they become disenchanted or even bored, they can just throw in the bouquet and walk away. Then they can set off looking for a new partner who will make them have all the tingly feelings again. Or if they consider dissolving the marriage, they may not be met with a slew of people

urging them to hang in there and do the hard work of strengthening their relationship with their spouse. Instead, they may be thrown a divorce party instead.

Yes. You read that right. This is actually a thing! A quick peek at Pinterest will even give you all sorts of ideas for hosting one, such as how to make a “Divorced Diva” sash for the new “Ex-Mrs.” to wear, how to create clever invitations for her friends that read, “I do. I did. I’m done,” or instructions for playing the game “Trash the Dress” with the soon-to-be-single gal’s wedding gown.

How disgraceful.

Because we don’t always feel support from the outside, it can contribute to what we ourselves think about our marriage. Will we knuckle down and press on, recognizing that marriage is rough but oh-so worth it, or will we too decide to just fold up shop and move on instead? Why not? It seems plenty of other people are doing it, and being celebrated as they do.

And I’m not talking about always actually getting a legal divorce. Sometimes we just become emotionally detached—divorced in our affections, distant, and disillusioned. *Emotional divorce* is accepted, often even expected, in our culture. It’s the stuff sitcoms are made of.

Everybody seems to agree: marriage is just too difficult. And the quickest, easiest solution? Too often, it’s divorce.

We Are Fallible Creatures in a Fallen World

Now, please don’t misinterpret my words and conclude that I believe there are never good reasons for divorce. Or that remarriage is wrong. A quick scroll through my phone contact list of close friends would prove just the opposite! I have walked with many dear friends through painful, sometimes unwanted, divorces. And I have happily danced at the weddings of friends when they remarried after surviving a divorce. Although I am a

strong proponent of marriage, I realize we live in a fallen world. Not only are there biblical grounds for divorce, there are also serious cases of abuse. Certainly, women often endure horrific—even dangerous—conditions in their marriages that traumatize them and jeopardize their children, and they need to seek help to escape.

Marriage is difficult simply because we are fallible creatures who sometimes make seriously poor choices. Although most of my friends who have experienced divorce were the victims—having spouses who had affairs and then left them—there are a few who decided to divorce for reasons not outlined in Scripture. They didn't hang in there when times got tough. They broke up their marriage due to their own affair, or even for a trivial reason. Some just decided they were not happy anymore. And since they thought marriage was designed to make them happy, they threw in the towel, left their spouses—and in some cases, their children—and set out to start a new life. Years later, they realized what they did was wrong, but there was no way to go back because they or their first spouse had remarried. For these people, there *is* forgiveness and a fresh start. It has been exciting for me to see them gain a renewed perspective on marriage, one that lines itself up with Scripture.

We deal daily with the results of fractured relationships and sinful choices. But the good news is that there is a God who redeems and makes all things new. So please know that when I speak of hanging in there during the difficult times of marriage, I am not subtly implying anything about any marriages from your past. No whispers of shame ruffling through these pages. No implications of guilt. Just God's wonderful mercies that are new for each of us every single morning.

What else contributes to the reality that forging a harmonious marriage isn't a walk in the park? How about our clashing personalities and demeanors? This has been especially true in my own marriage.

OPPOSITES ATTRACT, OR OPPOSITES ATTACK?

The day my husband and I walked down the aisle over a quarter century ago, a thought gripped my mind, threatening to knock the joy right out of our ceremony, replacing it with fear and worry instead. You see, just weeks earlier, as we sat in my pastor's office for one of our premarital counseling sessions, we'd been told that the results of our personality-and-strengths profile tests revealed a sobering assertion—less than 5 percent of the marriages consisting of two people with our specific profiles end up lasting.

Lovely.

My husband and I were college sweethearts who loved the Lord—and each other—immensely. We couldn't wait to become a family, forge ahead in ministry in our local church, and, we hoped, welcome children into our home someday. However, the pastor's pronouncement dangled ever in my mind, a dark cloud of potential doom that I feared would turn into a storm of sadness. As a child and young adult, I had a front-row seat watching the marriages of several couples I dearly loved end up in divorce court. I didn't want my husband and me to be the next ones standing in front of the judge.

However, as I observed those marriages and others that ended as well, they showcased for me an important truth I have seen played out repeatedly over the past three decades: it takes two people to create a strong Christian marriage. Unfortunately, it takes only one person to break it up.

I determined not to go forth in debilitating fear of what might happen once we'd recited our vows. I could do nothing to control the behavior of my husband should he decide to leave me someday. However, I could determine that—with God's help—I myself would be a person who kept my marriage vows,

even when my husband's habits or personality differences drove me nuts, and despite seasons when the storms of life would rock our relationship. My actions toward my spouse could reflect the unconditional, steadfast love of God to those who were watching us, both up close and from afar. I knew it would not be easy, but I was determined to try.

As our marriage marched on, no serious sins or major storms of life presented themselves. It was more just an overall feeling of frustration with the way my husband and I are so different. In how we process problems. How we think things should be done around the house. How we interact with people. And don't even get me started with the thermostat!

I loved that my fiancé was laid-back and agreeable. However, about three months after he became my husband, I began to interpret his easygoing, often indecisive demeanor as passivity. I hated when he was passive. It caused me to get aggressive. I guess you could say we had a passive-aggressive marriage!

Meanwhile, my fiancé loved how during our dating years it seemed I could talk to anyone about anything. But about three *days* into our honeymoon he wondered when I was ever going to shut up! (He says if I go before him, he will put a period on my tombstone because he will then know I am finally finished talking!)

These aren't our only differences. We spend our money and our time differently. We clean the house differently. We don't always agree on parenting decisions. We communicate differently. When conflict arises, he would prefer to wait until . . . *well, never* to address it. In contrast, I would have chosen to discuss it yesterday had I known it would happen today! Why, we can't even decide on a Pandora station to listen to on a long drive! (He chooses smooth jazz, while I opt for the Johnny Cash station.)

It is true that—especially in our dating years—opposites

attract. A soft-spoken, reserved person might be attracted to a significant other who is decisive and talkative. An introvert might go for an extrovert. A fast-paced, city girl may dream of romance with an unhurried country boy. Unfortunately, as relationships move forward, opposites also tend to *attack*. As a result, the habits and characteristics that we found endearing about our significant other during courtship often are the exact things that drive us nuts later!

This phenomenon arises because—for all of us—as our strengths get carried to extremes, they morph into weaknesses. The superb communicator becomes an annoyance who rambles on and on, monopolizing conversations and boring their listeners (that’s me). The methodical planner becomes overcontrolling (also me). That happy-go-lucky, life-of-the-party person becomes a haphazard spouse who forgets details and appointments. The laid-back, agreeable person might hesitate from making decisions, coming across as passive.

With every strength there is a flip side. And if the flip side is not dealt with, it can even lead to the disintegration of the marriage relationship. Journalist Mignon McLaughlin attested to this when she once claimed, “If you made a list of reasons why any couple got married, and another list of the reasons for their divorce, you’d have a . . . lot of overlapping.”¹

WANTING OUR OWN WAY

These personality disparities between husband and wife become the soil where conflict takes root. We can’t for the life of us understand why our spouse handles financial decisions differently than we would. Or why they stack clean dishes the . . . *ahem* . . . wrong way. (The right way, of course, being how *we* would do it.) Or we blink in disbelief at their unconventional

method for painting a room, which seems totally backward to us. These dissimilarities greatly intensify during the parenting years. So many arguments pop up when mom and dad have entirely different opinions about how to discipline their darling dependents.

However, what really makes a harmonious relationship so elusive is that, due to our sin nature, we are wired to think only of ourselves. Or at least to think of ourselves first. I'm not suggesting that we are all complete nuptial narcissists, but we do tend to look out for good ole number one.

The biblical writer James wisely asks, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (4:1).

We want our own way. We want our spouse to let us *get* our own way. And striving to get it leads to conflict. Conflict, when not handled properly, causes friction and frustration. When we are part of a marriage experiencing such struggles, we begin to wonder what is wrong. *Why can't we just get along and be happy?*

Ultimately, each marriage—and the challenges it brings—is unique. However, two realizations I've come to discover over the past three decades of marriage to my college sweetheart have greatly helped me to keep showing up and keep working on our relationship. These truths are not profound, but they are profoundly true: *marriage is hard* and *it's not about me*.

Haven't we been programmed to believe just the opposite? Especially in this age of social media, where creatively orchestrated engagements materialize right there before our eyes on our phone's tiny screen. Or Pinterest-perfect husbands and wives appear on our laptops in the form of smiling spouses, eating delicious food in picturesque surroundings, with the look of love dancing in their eyes. We get the impression that if only you find Mr. or Mrs. Right, a harmonious marriage will ensue.

Marriage isn't hard. Marriage is a breeze! Well, as long as you picked the right person.

And, *of course*, we think marriage is all about us. It is what will finally make us happy—just as Barbie was with Ken cruising down life's merry lane in the cherry-red Barbie convertible! When we find that perfect soul mate, we'll achieve relational heaven on earth. We'll look deep into the eyes of our significant other and romantically utter, à la Jerry Maguire, "You complete me." (I'm so sorry. My nineties are showing.)

***Marriage is hard and
it's not about me.***

How glorious it would be if all these things were true. But the tough reality is that marriage *is* hard and it's *not* at all about us. And it's really not even about our spouses. Well, then, just who *or what* is it about then?

WHY GOD PLAYED TINDER WITH ADAM AND EVE

Have you ever wondered why God invented marriage? I mean, aside from the obvious reason that a husband and wife could produce babies who would grow up and get married and produce more babies, so the world would keep spinning and spawning new life. I mean, after all, God is God. He could have come up with any number of scenarios for producing new human beings while allowing time to go marching on. Why did he decide to initiate the institution of marriage? And why-oh-why didn't he also cause it to be a tranquil and effortless affair? Let's crack open the Bible to see if we can figure it out.

The first mention of the covenant of marriage is in Genesis, the Bible's first book. After spending six days creating the heavens and the earth, vegetation and animals, and finally Adam, the very first man, God rested from his work. Then God looked at

Adam and determined that he was not only alone but also lonely. We pick up the story in Genesis 2:18: “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’”

Whoa, now. Hold the phone. Or at least let it roll over to voice mail. Helper? A *helper*? Really? What a weak and wimpy word! It makes me think of Hamburger Helper—that dish you quickly throw together when supper is near but you haven’t been anywhere near your kitchen that day to make it. “Oh, here. This box of helper will do. It won’t be very good, but it will suffice in a pinch.” But is this word used in Genesis—translated “helper”—a weak “it’ll do for now” word?

I’ve heard and read many explanations of this word’s meaning over the years. Some people have asserted that the woman was made to be a subordinate, almost less-than in importance, assistant to the first man, ready to carry out his wishes in complete submission and without question. Others have made light of the situation, suggesting that Adam was so incompetent he certainly needed a helper. Why, he probably couldn’t find his way around the Garden of Eden and would never dare to stop and ask for directions. And so, ta-da! God created Eve. Not to be a subordinate but because Adam would surely never survive without her.

Let’s look for a moment at the intended meaning of the word we read today as *helper*.

In Hebrew, the language in which Genesis was first written, the word *helper* is the word *ezer*, a masculine noun that does, at its core, mean “to help.” However, many biblical scholars assert that *ezer* originally had two root words with two varied meanings; each was based on an initial guttural sound, but over time blended into one word. One sound meant “strength,” and the other meant “power.” If so, the meaning of *ezer* has nothing to do with a weak, subordinate counterpart. In fact, if you grew

up in a church that was in the habit of singing hymns on Sunday morning, perhaps you recognize this root word from the second stanza of “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” by Robert Robinson, where it reads, “Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I’m come.”

What’s an “Ebenezer”? (I mean aside from the first name of Charles Dickens’s famous character Scrooge!) The Ebenezer was a stone raised into the air by the Old Testament prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 7:12) intended to remind the Israelites of God’s help for them in their struggles. We also see the word *ezer* in Psalm 33:20, used to describe God himself helping us in our time of trouble and turmoil. In fact, the word is used twenty-one times in the Bible, most often in a military sense and referring to God’s prevailing help. God, the epitome of strength and aid; God who will fight for us in battle. So, no thoughts of a weakling woman whose only job is to prop up Adam and be in his shadow, okay? Eve was a powerful partner for Adam, a strong and invaluable ally who fought the battles of life standing right beside him.

How God created Eve also teaches us something about the marital relationship. We resume the story in Genesis 2:21–23:

So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep;
and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs
and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD
God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the
man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

I love that Eve was fashioned from matter taken from Adam's side. She wasn't crafted from a bone taken from his foot, signifying that she was to be a slave bowing down at her husband's feet. She wasn't brought into being by using part of his head, implying perhaps that her brains are better than his and he'd better let her make all the decisions. She was taken from his side. A partner. An equal. And today, husbands and wives stand side-by-side as each other's ally as they travel through life together.

Of course, there are many other Scriptures that give a glimpse into God's plan for marriage. Consider the very next verses—Genesis 2:24–25: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”

A man leaves his family of origin. He is joined to his wife. This uniting is both spiritual and physical. The two humans become one flesh. And, they are naked and yet feel no shame.

Normally, our being stark naked in front of another human being makes us hesitant and reluctant—or at least it should! Not many of us would like to go parading around for all to see wearing nothing more than our birthday suits. (I still hate going to the doctor for my annual physical even though I've had the same wonderful doctor for more than twenty-five years!) But with our spouse, we can be naked and feel *no* shame or embarrassment. Not only that, we can be both *naked* and *nekkid*. *Naked* means you have no clothing on. *Nekkid* means you have no clothing on—and you're up to something. (At least that's what I've been told.)

So, the husband and wife are united in flesh. But being united spiritually? What's up with that? We find our answer when the words of Genesis 2:24–25 are echoed in the New Testament book of Ephesians: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one

flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:31–32).

The husband-wife relationship is supposed to illustrate the relationship between Jesus and the church, pointing others to its importance. Elsewhere in Scripture, the body of believers here on earth is referred to as the “bride of Christ.” The sacred truth shown in this metaphor of marriage is that God destined there to be an enduring union between Jesus and all those who place their trust in him. Our earthly marriage as Christians paints a vibrant portrait to the watching world of this divine design. God’s blueprint is for Christ and the church to be one (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28). Our relationship with our spouse is meant to mimic this pattern of unity.

So why would God ordain that our relationship as husband and wife point people to the connection between Jesus and the church? I mean, couldn’t they just read about it in a Bible or flip on a TV preacher who would give them the gospel message—the account of God sending Jesus to earth to die a sacrificial death, pay the penalty for our sins, and offer us a place in heaven for eternity with him?

Yes, some people *do* receive the gospel by those methods, but the timeworn saying is true: “More is caught than is taught.” God, in his divine wisdom, also desires that people on earth will catch spouses living out his redemptive plan. My pastor, author Noel Heikkinen, summed it up perfectly in a recent sermon when he declared, “Biblical marriage preaches the gospel to our culture by modeling Jesus in a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman, characterized by sexual exclusivity, complementary servant roles, and the ongoing sacrifice of self.”

Your marriage is a message, and people are watching you preach.

So, it isn't just pastors who deliver a sermon. Your marriage is a message, and people are watching you preach.

CLOSE ENOUGH FOR COMFORT

When I became a Christian in high school, I was able to spend valuable time with two women who took on the task of mentoring me. Occasionally I spent afternoons in their homes after school. Sometimes I stayed overnight. I was able to watch up close their behavior as wives. I saw them interact with their spouses in situations of tension and conflict. I observed them having fun. I witnessed them expressing fear for the future as they dealt with a medical condition or a financial strain in the family. And all the while, I was taking copious mental notes.

I saw them live out scriptural concepts such as putting others before yourself, practicing patience, granting grace, offering forgiveness, and pursuing true reconciliation. They made their husbands, kids, and homes a priority while not neglecting their own desire and need for outside interests. I didn't see them retaliate when treated wrongly. Instead, they directly but gently pointed out any offenses. They sought to behave in a way that honored God in their relationships. They weren't perfect, but the way they always endeavored to represent Christ had a deep effect on me.

Their eagerness to extend their arms and welcome me into their ordinary family life changed my life. This front-row access to Christ-honoring marriages made me desire to have such a relationship too. These women didn't preach. They just lived. And I caught the lessons they taught through that living.

Learning about how a wife should act and react wasn't the only benefit. I was also introduced to the relationship of Christ and the church. I was intensely drawn to the gospel when I saw its redemptive story lived out in their homes, a living example

of God's plan for humankind. I got to experience firsthand how much he loves the church—so much that he laid down his life for her.

Now, one interesting fact about the two homes where I saw this lived out before my eyes by wives who loved their husbands and the Lord: *those marriages did not last*. (Hang with me here. I have a point.) I hope that learning this doesn't cause you to disregard the important lessons I learned by studying these wives. The unhappy reality that these marriages didn't last introduced me to the truth I mentioned already: it takes two people to make a great marriage. Unfortunately, it takes only one to break it up.

Both these wives meant their marriage vows. They were not faultless, but their perspective was in keeping with Scripture. While fully determined to do their part in creating a sacred marriage that would last, their spouses stopped working toward this aim. In each case, the husbands had affairs and ended up divorcing their wives.

While this was a sad turn of events, it also highlighted for me an imperative life lesson—one that I want to stress to you strongly.

Everything in life—even your life as a wife—all comes down to you and Jesus.

You cannot make your spouse behave a certain way. You can't control his behavior or micromanage every situation. The only thing you can control is yourself—your response to others, your attitude, your behavior. In fact, that is one of the prayers I have for you as you read further—that you will focus on your own behavior rather than run to your husband to beat him over the head with this book and get him to change his erring ways.

It all comes down to you and Jesus.

This is not a manual about how to manipulate your man so he instantly morphs into Mr. Magnificent. It isn't a step-by-step formula that will ensure that, if you take certain actions,

your husband will follow suit, and then everything will be a basket full of bliss in your home.

This book is really about you and your relationship with God.

- Will you dare to love, serve, and sacrifice, doing it only for an audience of One?
- Will you continue doing the hard, relational work of marriage *regardless* of how your husband responds?
- Will you apologize earnestly when you behave poorly and forgive fully when you are the one wronged?
- Will you be willing to wipe the slate clean, keep showing up, and keep showing Christ—not only to your spouse but to all the watching eyes in your little corner of the world?

Remember, it all comes down to you and Jesus. He sees your heart. He knows your motives. He feels your sorrow and shares in your suffering. You will not be held responsible for the conduct of your spouse, only for your own behavior.

When we understand the reality of the challenges of marriage and hitch it to the truth of God's purpose for marriage, we can

***Will you dare to love, serve,
and sacrifice, doing it only
for an audience of One?***

discover the encouragement—and the strategies—that will prevent us from hanging up on our marriages and will empower us with ways to hang in there instead. Rather than

fighting *in* our marriage, we discover how to fight *for* our marriage. Instead of resigning as “wife,” we can re-sign our commitment to be “all in.”

Yes, the first few years of marriage were tough. And even now, three decades later, I don't have a husband who is everything I could ever want in a man. And he certainly doesn't have