

COMPLEMENT

The Surprising Beauty of Choosing
Together Over Separate in Marriage

Aaron and
Jamie Ivey

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Together Over Separate in Marriage**

Jamie Ivey

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INTRODUCTION

What I Thought Marriage Would Be

I'll never forget that day in the summer of 1999 when I walked into my dad's office as a young twenty-one-year-old bride-to-be, and said the words out loud that had been haunting me, suffocating me, for weeks.

"Dad," I said, "I don't think I can marry him."

Just in saying it, I felt as though a ginormous weight had been lifted off of my shoulders, even as I waited for my dad's reaction, wondering if he'd tell me I needed to figure out a way to make it work, or that I didn't have to go through with it. I expected my dad to take my side, which is why he'd been my first go-to. But I also knew plans had been made. People's time had been invested. Lots of money was involved. So I was nervous. He certainly, in my eyes, had every right to be really angry and frustrated with me.

Looking back though, I count that moment as a key indicator that I was finally growing up inside. I'd gotten cold feet, yes. I hadn't been able to shake the fact that I wasn't supposed to marry this man. But instead of pushing through and trying to figure things out on my own, I'd actually been listening to the Holy Spirit on this one. Which wasn't normal for me. And from the best I could tell, He was clearly showing me a way out. And I'd decided to follow Him through it.

Obviously, I hadn't gone into things at first with the intention of canceling an engagement and breaking someone's heart. I'd wanted it to work out. I'm never one who likes to admit I can't do something I set out to do. I hate letting people down, and with this one decision I felt like I was letting *everyone* down. A tug-of-war of the soul for sure, especially for a people-pleaser like me.

But Dad said he would support me in my decision, which confirmed it all for me. So I called off the wedding, sold the dress, my parents lost a bunch of deposits, and I started the process of sharing the news with family. I was sad about hurting a person that I really did love—as much as my heart could love anyone at that moment—but I can say I felt more confident about this decision than any other I'd ever made in my entire lifetime.

I recalled this story recently to someone and told them what I'm about to tell you. Making that decision to call off the wedding and break up with my fiancé was, and still is, one of the hardest things I've ever done. But I can also say in the same breath that it's one of the best things, if not *the* best thing (behind following Jesus, of course) that I have ever committed myself to doing. *Ever*. That twenty-one-year-old girl was way braver than she thought she was. As naive as I was, in terms of what marriage entailed and what it meant to truly love well, God had given me a healthy enough dose of knowledge about what marriage was meant to be that it kept me from walking into one that wasn't best for me.

Two years later I happily stood at the altar facing my one and only husband, Aaron, and committed myself to a lifetime with him. Hands down, the best day of my life, when I said yes to a lifetime with Aaron Ivey. I cannot imagine this life without him. I cannot imagine this journey of parenting without him. I cannot imagine ministry without him. He truly is my favorite person in the whole world.

We were still young, and still growing, and we'd still have many obstacles to work through, but we founded our union on equal love, trust, and dedication to each

other. We believed in each other, pursued each other, cheered for each other, supported each other. Both of us loved the Lord and wanted to build our marriage in a way that glorified Him more than ourselves, and this remains our mission now with our marriage today.

Twenty years later, we're still doing these things.
Still complementing each other.

Your and my ideas of marriage are shaped by what we see or have seen in our lives. We're influenced by the married people around us.

When I was in the third grade, for example, I remember spending the night at my friend Ashley's house. Her parents' marriage was like a fairy tale to me. Her dad worked hard, and her mom kept the house well. I often saw her mom in a long, flowing satin robe at night. It was the most beautiful thing. I remember thinking I one day wanted to be married too, and wear a satin robe around the house.

As a college student, I watched my parents walk through a difficult season in their marriage. The tough patch they endured created ripple effects that impacted

everyone in their circle, things that Satan still tries stirring up in my mind to place a sense of fear over my marriage. Yet I also watched God do a miracle in their relationship—the same kind of miracle I’ve seen Him do over and over in the lives of friends I’ve known throughout the past twenty years. What Satan sets out to destroy, God sets out to redeem and build up.

Both sets of my grandparents were married in the late 1940s, when men were going and coming from war, and women were raising babies and taking care of the home. As I became an adult, I began to see the struggles that marriages can endure at that age, when someone becomes distant or when someone becomes ill, as happened to both of my grandfathers.

You’ve had these same kinds of formative thoughts. Your own feelings. Your own observations. Your own take on how our culture views marriage today. All of it has rubbed off on you and factored into your thinking, becoming part of either your desire for marriage, your skepticism of marriage, or perhaps your decision to not want anything to do with marriage.

As for me, I have always desired marriage. I went to a private Christian college right out of high school, where there was a running joke that a lot of the girls only came

to school to get their “MRS” degree. Maybe they were like me and just always saw themselves experiencing the kind of companionship that marriage could bring. Or maybe (also like me) they believed a man would fill some holes in their hearts for them.

I’ll admit, I came into marriage thinking that Aaron would complete me, that my life would finally begin once we were married. I assumed my heart would never be hurt again. I thought he would fill the hole in my heart that yearned so badly to be unconditionally loved. I put a lot of pressure on him to never hurt me and never have arguments with me. I wanted a love that would always make me feel good and never make me uncomfortable.

Let’s just say I brought a multi-piece set of baggage to our wedding day—baggage I wanted to keep a secret from him because I was certain he wouldn’t want this kind of baggage in our house. And I’m guessing, so did you. Or, if you haven’t married yet, you’re well on your way to doing it. No matter where you’re located today in your life journey, you too have ideas about what you expect from marriage. You don’t need to be married to think these thoughts.

But though the world tells you a lot about marriage, and the church tells you a lot about marriage, we believe

God's Word is where we should all be getting our real perspectives on marriage. The Bible holds immense value for those of us yearning to love our husbands well in marriages that bless them, beautify us, and bring maximum glory to God.

Aaron and I think marriage has gotten a bad rap recently. Some people are disregarding the value of it. Others are using it to stifle a person's gifts and talents. Still others enter into it knowing that when the going gets tough, they'll run. There are just so many varying ideas around the gift of marriage. And if we're honest with you (which we always will be), we think even Christians haven't always done the best job of making marriage look like the true gift from God that it's meant to be. But for marriage to be what God had in mind, where it can stand up to real life and not back down from its amazing potential, we can't be buying into beliefs about marriage that clash with what God has always said about it.

I don't care who you are, something will come along to make your marriage difficult. Maybe this happened for you as early as your honeymoon (I'm serious), or maybe by Year Three. For us, it wasn't really until around Year Nine when circumstances conspired to make life hard at our house. In those moments, I knew there had to be more

to marriage than just fun times and a constant companion. I needed a partner who was willing to walk through the fire with me. I needed a partner who was willing to keep the wind in my sails. I needed a partner who was willing to both lead *and* follow in different circumstances.

To complement me. Even as I complement him.

After being married for more than two decades now, I've learned marriage is so very beautiful. God created something for His children that magnifies Him in all sorts of ways. I've learned that great marriages don't happen overnight but are created through years of hard work and sacrifice on both spouses' parts.

I've also learned something else. Remember that desire of mine about Aaron *completing* me? How he would fill all the holes in my heart? That idea was never going to work out, I discovered. But I've grown to see that the way we *complement* each other does some wonderful things in both of our hearts. It's a beautiful picture of how God designed marriage to be.

I've been begging Aaron forever for us to renew our vows to each other one day. If I could have it my way, I'd

love doing it on our twenty-fifth anniversary. We could go somewhere beautiful, preferably a beach. I'd get a lovely white dress; he'd look all handsome in skinny jeans and a white shirt; our kids would stand all around us; and we'd renew what we committed to one another all those years ago. It sounds downright dreamy to me.

Aaron always says no. Every time I ask. He doesn't think about it for even a single second. Automatic no. Because, he says, we made a covenant to each other when we said our vows the first time, and there is no reason ever to renew a covenant. Such a pastor statement! Don't you think? But I understand what he means. And I guess I secretly agree with him.

So I think I've changed my request to a vow *remembrance* ceremony. That's the party I really want!

We recently attended a party sort of like that—our friends Devin and Catherine's anniversary party. They invited their closest friends and family to celebrate the thirty years they'd been committed to each other in marriage. Their four kids were there; their new daughters-in-law were there. We stood outside their house on the back patio, and Aaron led them through a moment of remembering what God had done for them over the past three decades in their marriage.

I'll never forget what Devin said to his wife during that ceremony. As he held Catherine's hands, staring into her eyes while all of us watched, he said, "I recommit my life to you through the lens of experience." My eyes moistened with tears and I thought to myself, yes, *THAT* is what we do in marriage, day after day after day. We wake up each morning knowing exactly what yesterday held, and the day before that, and the day before that. And yet we commit to staying. We commit to love. We commit to serve. We commit to forgive. We commit to cheering. We commit to following.

We commit to each other because God has put us together, and because He thinks we're the best team, and because everything He really wants to accomplish in us will happen with *this* man and *this* woman, with *our* history, staying strong into *our* future.



Marriage is hard.

That may be the understatement of the year. We've experienced it ourselves and we've seen it in marriages all around us. But here's something else we believe.

Marriage is worth the fight.

Maybe you're young right now and don't have marriage on your brain at all; you're just wanting to prepare your heart for what might come. Or maybe you're early married and you want to keep building and repairing, making things better than they've ever been between you. Or maybe you're twenty-plus years in, like us, and you need a fresh kick in the pants to help you value the person that God put in your world to walk through life with you.

Wherever you're coming from, our prayer and hope is that you too can sense the deep honor of *complementing* your spouse in every area of your life. As we dive into these ten different ways that give you everyday, ongoing opportunities to complement your husband, I pray you will feel equal parts encouraged and challenged.

Growth in marriage is a good thing. We'll never arrive, of course. We'll be working on this relationship from now until the day we part through death. But we believe in you, and we believe in your marriage. And we believe God has given you and us, in His Word, the best way for all of us to live it out.

CHAPTER 1

Love

I have a thing for a good love story, and I'd bet you do as well. That's why Hollywood puts so much money and energy into making those stories come alive for us on the big screen. Each time we see a movie like that, we find ourselves rooting for love no matter what kind of journey it takes the characters on.

But most Hollywood love stories focus on the *feeling*, on the excitement and newness that new love brings. They know that something inside of us longs for that feeling of being loved just for who we are. We want the man to chase after us in the airport because he finally realizes he can't live without us. We want our husband to show up at work with two tickets to a weekend in Santa Fe, New Mexico, just because. We want sex on the beach and frolicking through the wildflowers while running

hand in hand. The intense feelings associated with love are what we find ourselves desiring and idolizing.

The problem with this, of course, is that REAL LIFE doesn't always feel like NEW LOVE. Real life is hard. Real life requires more of us than sometimes our emotions can handle. I wish it was as easy as Julia Roberts says in *Nottinghill*: "I'm just a girl standing in front of a boy asking him to love her."

But it's not. Love takes way more work and is far more valuable than how they portray it in the movies.

What exactly is love anyway? The dictionary says love is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, love is an intense feeling of deep affection, as well as a great interest and pleasure in something. I agree with *Webster* on both of those definitions. As a verb, love means to feel a deep romantic or sexual attachment to someone. And I agree with all of that as well.

But what the dictionary *doesn't* tell you, which I want to add, is that love takes hard work to give.

Yes, loving your husband should be hard work.

Maybe you're thinking, *Whoa, Jamie, hold up. If love is hard work, then it's not love. Love should be easy. If it's true love, it shouldn't be hard.*

I'm sorry, have you been living on another planet? People are hard. People are mean. People drive us crazy. If you put two crazy, hard-to-love people together and then expect it to be easy . . .

Nope. Not at all.

Love is something we keep working on. Improving on. I'm much better at love today than ten years ago. Or, gosh, I sure hope so. For instance, Aaron loves words of affirmation, and I'm not the best at giving them. But over the years, I've worked hard at intentionally telling him how much I respect the work he does and how much it matters. And my work is paying off. I'm better at it now than I used to be. Still not a master of it, but I'm learning to love him better. Here's the thing though: it's taken me *hard work* to get here.

And that's okay. When you fall in love with your special someone, there's that intense initial feeling of deep affection. You have a great interest in him. You also feel sexual attraction. All those things are true, and fine, and good. But it's also true that as time moves on and as life happens, those intense feelings and sexual attractions begin to take hard work and time to create—hard work and time that you didn't have to put into it before.

Love is an action. Love is a choice. You choose to love over and over and over again. Day after day. Year after year.

And the challenge of it, surprisingly, is what makes it so beautiful.

When we think about love within marriage, we tend to go straight to the sexual intimacy that occurs between

Love is an action.
Love is a choice.

a husband and a wife. And just so you know, I'll definitely be going there with you in this book. I've saved up a whole chapter for it later on. But while

sex is certainly one of the ways we show love to our husbands and they show it to us, it's not the ultimate way. There is so much more to love than just sex. You know that.

But here's what I want you to think about that's not quite so obvious: *There is so much more to love than just love.*

I believe people in a lot of marriages are doing their best to love one another. But what I see so often today are women loving everyone around them better than they love their husbands. They *assume* they're loving him because they're married to him and doing stuff for him (like having sex with him and cooking his dinner). And yet their marriage is suffering because they're not sharing a genuine Christlike love for each other.

And true love, even married love, can only come from the example that Jesus Himself set for us.

Most people in the world, whether they claim to be a Christ-follower or not, would still claim that Jesus Christ was a good, moral man worth modeling our lives after. I certainly agree with that (though I think he's much more than *just* that). But we have a tendency to think that He's not our model for marriage because He was never married Himself. We could not be more wrong in holding to that opinion. We are meant to be imitators of Jesus in *all of our lives*. Marriage is no exception. Why *should* it be?

If you want to know how and why you can even begin to continually love this man you married, start with knowing that you can only love him because Jesus first loved you (1 John 4:19). Start by looking at the way God sent His Son for you and how Jesus died on a cross

for you, and then you can start to comprehend the kind of love that you're meant to emulate in marriage.

Jesus' love for you was sacrificial. He didn't die for you because you're such a good person or because His Father made Him do it. No, Jesus died on a cross for you and your sins (and for me and my sins) because His love for us is so grand that He would do anything to restore us back to the Father.

Anything.

All right, so that's what Jesus' love is like. A sacrificial love. An *anything* love. That's the love He demonstrated toward us. And so with Jesus' brand of love as background, notice what He said *our* love is supposed to be like. The night before His arrest and crucifixion, He gave His disciples the following "new commandment."

"A new commandment I give to you,
that you love one another: just as I
have loved you, you also are to love one
another." (John 13:34)

"Just as I have loved you." That's the standard for how you and I are called to love our husbands. So if we truly want to be someone who looks more like Jesus every single day, here's our shot at it, right out of the gate

every morning: to love our husbands the same way Jesus has loved us.

And tell me now, does that sound like *hard work* sometimes?

It is. And guess what? It gets even harder. The breakdown I see sometimes in relationships, especially in marriages, is that sacrificial love often seems so one-sided. It feels as though you're the one who's doing all the giving, all the loving, with zero guarantees that your husband will reciprocate that same love to you. It feels so risky. It's almost as if you're just setting yourself up to be hurt. And no one would wish that on themselves.

Yet if we truly want to be like Jesus—if we want our love for our husband to be *true love*—it must be Jesus' love, where we pour ourselves out completely for our man and then leave the results to God. I cannot guarantee that your husband will reciprocate the same type of love for you as you give to him, but I can guarantee you one thing: God will honor your love for your husband, just as He honored the faithful love of His Son for His people. Again, it may not result in being loved back faithfully by your husband. But if you ever expect to be, this is the way you do it.

By loving as Jesus loves.

So let's get really practical about this. The main verses that come to mind when we think of love—the verses that go into such beautiful, hard work detail about what Jesus' love is like—come from 1 Corinthians 13. You often hear

God will honor
your love for your
husband, just as He
honored the faithful
love of His Son
for His people.

them quoted at weddings, probably even at *your* wedding. Or they might be embroidered on a pillow you received as a gift from your great aunt. Maybe they're on a cool print that hangs in your bedroom, hallway, or office. My point

here is that these words about love routinely come up when we talk about marriage, and though they weren't written with *marital* love immediately in mind, I think it's right to apply the wisdom they offer to marriage. If we want to be wives who love our husbands well—like Jesus loves us—here are the characteristics that should be found in us.

- Love . . . is patient.
- Love . . . is kind.
- Love . . . is not envious.
- Love . . . is not boastful.

- Love . . . is not arrogant.
- Love . . . is not rude.
- Love . . . does not insist on its own way.
- Love . . . is not irritable.
- Love . . . is not resentful.
- Love . . . does not rejoice at wrongdoing.
- Love . . . rejoices with the truth.
- Love . . . bears all things.
- Love . . . believes all things.
- Love . . . hopes all things.
- Love . . . endures all things. (1 Cor. 13:4–8)

If we are to be women who love our husbands the way Christ loves us, we need to take these words to the core of our soul and beg God for the strength to be these things to our men. Will we get it right all the time? Absolutely not. I could write a story around each of these descriptions of love and tell you how I've failed to live them. We are selfish humans who, on our own, would only desire to make ourselves happy.

But love, as I said, is worth fighting for. It's worth sacrificing for. Jesus is our teacher in all things love, and His love toward us was sacrificial. Which means if we are to emulate Him and do all these things, we should

expect it to be a sacrifice. Love is not flippant and easy; it is costly and difficult. That's what makes it so valuable.

Being kind when your husband doesn't deserve it feels unnatural. We like to treat people how they deserve. And yet, praise God, that's now how He looks at us, am I right? "He has not dealt with us as our sins deserve" (Ps. 103:10 CSB). He doesn't give us what's coming to us. He gives us His love.

I do love Aaron so much. It's true. But my love for him feels different today than it did twenty years ago. Different is not always bad; it's just different. The love I had for him on our wedding day was so very real, but it was all the love I could muster at that time. And I guess it was all I needed. Our life was easy. It was full of bliss. We were young and in love.

But when I think about loving Aaron now, I see a much bigger picture of what love looks like. I see a love that remains even when we're in a fight. I feel a love for him that amazingly is still capable of growing stronger, like when he reassures me for the four millionth time that I am indeed a good mom. I'm still surprised at how

much love overflows from my heart for him when we're walking through a stressful season and we take time out for a date night. I love him a million times more today than I did on our wedding day. And the only way this happens is because I have chosen every single day to love him more than I did the day before.

I want to love him like Jesus loves me.

When we walked through our hardest season of parenting so far, and then our first hard season of marriage, I had to make a daily choice to choose love—to choose to give love and receive love even when it would have been much easier to shut down and be closed off. Because as much as I love the idea of love being a passive verb that is easily attainable, I know it takes choosing. For all of us. It takes kindness when we want deep in our hearts to tear our husband down. It takes throwing away the scorecard when we desperately want to add up points against him. It takes forgiving when we would feel better keeping a death grip on his wrongdoings. It takes grace when all we want to give is punishment.

It takes all of these things day after day. And what I've found to be true in my own life is that I love loving Aaron, and I have a strong suspicion that he too loves loving me.

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INTRODUCTION

What I Thought Marriage Would Be

Just wait 'til you get married. It's all downhill after that." I can't tell you how many times I heard this spoken over me before marriage. Some said it to get a quick laugh, brushing it off as merely a joke. But sadly, I think others truly meant it.

It still saddens me when I hear people refer to the *best days* of their relationship with their spouse as the ones before they said, "I do." It's not the way it's supposed to be.

What was once a vibrant friendship and dating relationship, somehow becomes less thrilling, less spectacular. At least, that's what so many people assume.

Maybe you've heard someone half-jokingly say something similar. In the moment, it's easy to simply laugh it off and move on, but a bland marriage is far too

common in today's culture. There's a painful truth about how many people view and experience marriage. To be fair, no one enters into marriage dreading it or hoping it will shift toward a lifeless, joyless, empty relationship. No one intends for their marriage to wear out and get stale. No couple hangs their wedding day photos on the wall of their first home and says, "Well, that was the best and last day of our fun relationship." Yet somehow it happens.

As a young single man, I always found myself scratching my head, wondering *why* that is the case for so many marriages. Before Jamie and I were married, I didn't see many marriages that were thriving and full of life. Sure, I saw some that were fully committed to each other, lasting thirty+ years, but none of them seemed to represent the kind of giddy, adventurous, passionate marriage that I had so hoped was possible.

Tom and Betty were an older married couple I remember seeing in church every week. Tom had a great job, one that required carrying a briefcase, wearing a suit, and boarding an airplane a few times every week. He drove a shiny Dodge pickup truck and parked it in a spotless garage in the suburbs of Houston. Every day at 5:30 p.m., Betty unearthed a crock pot full of red meat

and potatoes as Tom walked in the door and sat down to a table set for two. Betty seemed unhappy and unfulfilled, but Tom seemed pretty grateful for the apron-adorned woman of his dreams. They stayed married as long as I knew them, but every time I saw them, they sure seemed unhappy. Somewhere along the way they had grown distant from each other, like two islands in the Pacific without a bridge or boat to ferry between.

I also remember looking at the marriage of my Uncle and Aunt. It seemed they had a pretty normal marriage. At least it seemed that way from my adolescent perspective. Their modest home was decorated with Bible verses and framed portraits of white-Jesus. He hung on the wall in the dining room, the hallway to the bathroom, and right above the TV in the living room. Try watching an episode of your favorite TV show with Jesus frowning down on you. It's weird. And just like the scowl on Jesus' face, they both had a frozen frown etched onto their faces as they lived their days and nights in the same house. Most nights, they ate dinner in silence like strangers, then wandered to their bedroom, crawled into two separate corners of their king-sized bed, and turned the lights off. They divorced after twenty-three years of marriage. The spark of love had dwindled, too dim to revive.

White-Jesus paintings couldn't save their passionless marriage.

I knew a pastor and his wife while in college who had what I believed to be a pretty typical marriage. He led, she followed. He ran the house, she cleaned the house. He led from a stage, she served in the shadows. She mothered the children, kept the laundry clean, and smiled at every church function. At the time, it seemed to be a totally normal Christian marriage. They were faithful to each other, they didn't fight, but they were rarely affectionate. There was an obvious shallowness to their friendship.

I remember eating dinner at their house one night. A wave of disappointment and sadness came over me as the meal ended and I got in my car to drive away. The conversation had only been about his ministry, what God was doing through him, and how he was leading his church. She sat silently at the far end of the table, uninterested, slowly spinning spaghetti noodles around her plate, then cleared the table as he continued to tell me more about himself. I remember that feeling so *off*. She had to have imagined more for their marriage on that sacred day where they recited vows, kissed, then ran

down the wedding aisle to the church fellowship hall to celebrate with friends and family.

I stood as a groomsman at a good friend's wedding while I was in college. He was marrying the girl of his dreams. They were a super-fun couple, the kind that laughs at each other's jokes and finishes each other's sentences—no matter how annoying it is to everyone else. They were like magnets to each other. You never saw one without the other attached by the hand. As I stood with a close-up view of their wedding ceremony, I watched them place rings on one another's fingers, speak their vows, and stare goldenly into each other's eyes. I was so happy for them, but at the same time I couldn't help but feel a weird sadness, wondering if their love would dwindle and burn out as well. I mean, it was inevitable right? That's all I had seen in older marriages all around me. Was this what so many spoke of when they joked about marriage being the beginning of the end? As soon as the caterers and DJ packed up the wedding venue at the end of the night, would the fire I saw in my friends' eyes begin to slowly dissolve?

I certainly hoped not.

Not all marriages I saw were bad. I can remember several throughout the years that seemed to be beautiful.

A few couples seemed to be in love and giddy about each other. But, from my perspective, they were the rare oddballs, not the norm.

After a few failed dating relationships of my own in college, I finally met Jamie in the winter of 1998. I'll tell more of our story throughout the chapters of this book, but I'll say this now: she was altogether different than any woman I had ever met. She was dazzling. Jaw-dropping. As we became closer friends, I soon discovered that she had a loveliness about her that was far beyond her outward appearance (even though, let's be honest—she's gorgeous). Our friendship was intoxicating. I loved every second of being around her. Whether it was walking through the aisles of Target or eating chips and creamy jalapeño dip at Chuy's in Houston, Texas, we laughed as much as we talked. We talked about dumb things, we talked about serious things, and laughter was the thread between every conversation.

Younger guys often ask me, "How did you know that Jamie was the *one*?" I always answer the same way. And the answer is as earnest as it is simple. "I knew Jamie was the one when I couldn't imagine it *not* being her." I still feel that way about her. And now that we've been married for almost two decades, I can honestly say that our

marriage is more fun, more life-giving, more fantastic than any year previous. We've had hard years, hard seasons, but I've never been able to imagine doing life with any girl but her.

When we began to talk seriously about marriage, we had so many conversations about what we wanted our marriage to be like. Of course, we talked about what kind of apartment we wanted, wondered where we would live, what our jobs would be in the future, and all the other mysterious things that come with embarking into an unknown future. But, more than those things, we found ourselves talking about *what kind of marriage* we wanted. The more we talked about it, the more we realized that we had the opportunity to build our marriage however we wanted.

Nobody stumbles into a thriving, beautiful marriage. You have to build it. Work at it. Nurture it.

Dream it up and determine to do it right. When you start a marriage, you get to say, "Let's do it the better way! Let's not be content with a status quo marriage just because

Nobody stumbles
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that's what most people we see have. Let's make it count, and let's have fun along the way!" So that's what we did.

I'll never forget one of the most powerful things Jamie has ever said to me. As we finished dinner at one of our favorite restaurants, she leaned in and casually said, "I'll go anywhere you go, as long as we go *together* and do it *together*." Wow. I'm not sure she even knew how profound that was in the moment. See, *there's a difference between going somewhere, and going together*. Most couples are going *somewhere*. But, one of the secret ingredients to a healthy marriage is going somewhere—*together*. Togetherness is as subtle and yet as powerful as salt in a pot of soup. Without the salt, you still have soup. But with salt, it's so much tastier—and much more fun to eat.

Togetherness is the salt of marriage.

You can try to do marriage without togetherness. You can try to wing it, hoping to stumble into a healthy and vibrant marriage. Some have been trying for decades. But when you discover the better way, you'll refuse to accept anything less.

I think I just want you to know that there's a better way than the status quo. God loves marriage. God loves singleness. God loves dating. God loves friendship. He's all in. And if He loves something this much, He wants

you to love it also. It doesn't have to be "all downhill after that."

When I was a kid, I thought I might be a painter when I grew up. I took a lot of art classes in school, and the more I played around with watercolors and acrylic paints, the more I appreciated a great painting when I saw it on display. One of the most intriguing things about painting is that there's an endless supply of color options. Sure, there are primary colors that everything is built on—red, yellow, blue, black, and white. But from those simple five colors, you can create any color imaginable. There's no limit. No end in sight for what beautiful shades and tones you can create. And what's the magic that makes that possible? How can a few simple and primary colors unfold into literally billions of color palettes? The magic is in finding colors that complement each other.

Take a little red and little yellow and what do you get? The most gorgeous orange. Drag a little blue paint into a mound of yellow—you'll find a stunning green that can be used to paint leaves that blue or yellow alone could never conjure.

See, marriage is meant to be as thrilling and creative as painting with complementary colors. Sure, you are

your own color, your own being. You are uniquely you, created perfectly by God and for God. And your spouse, or future spouse, is her own color, her own being, created by God and for God. But when God forges two lives together through the sanctity of marriage, those two colors complement each other in such a powerful and purposeful way that something crazy happens. A new color emerges.

Marriage is not simple arithmetic. It's not one plus one equals two. It's not Aaron plus Jamie equals Aaron and Jamie. No, it's something better than that! Marriage is one plus one equals *one*. A new one! A new identity is created—a color that didn't exist before. Aaron plus Jamie equals something much more powerful and vibrant than either of us could be on our own. Just like

Marriage is
one plus one
equals one.

painting, one color plus one color equals one brand-new, bold, stunning color. This is what a healthy marriage looks like. And just like a brilliant

painting on display at an art museum, this kind of complementary marriage has the unique ability to

display to the entire world just how good, and kind, and creative God is.

This is what happens when spouses choose to complement each other. Not change each other, not compete with each other, and definitely not fall into indifference with each other. Instead, brilliantly forming something much more beautiful than either person could be on their own. When that shows up on the canvas of your married life, people will be awestruck to see what's produced—something brand-new, something much better, something with purpose and insane beauty.

We decided early on to build our marriage on this: No matter what we do, who we become, what we run toward, what we work for, who we are ministering to, or where we are serving, we are going to do it *together*. *We are going to spend our lives complementing each other.* Bringing out the best in each other. Forging ahead with an earnest desire to bring out from the other person their best. To stand alongside, propping up, affirming, offering to the other what may be lacking, doing the hard work of complementing red with yellow, and yellow with red, until finally a beautiful hue of orange emerges—a color and tone much more vibrant than either person could be on their own.

When you lock arms with a spouse and decide to fight for that, your marriage will become salty and colorful in the way God intends. Not only will you find life and joy in marriage, but so will anyone who comes close. That's what God has in mind for every single marriage.

There have been a few times throughout the early years of marriage when I've wondered if we would end up like Tom and Betty, or my Uncle and Aunt. A few times it has seemed too good to be true, and I've found myself waiting for that little hiccup or bump in the road to spiral us into becoming merely committed roommates. But you've just got to believe I'm telling you the truth when I say this: Even in the hard seasons, we've been *together*. Even in the boring seasons of ministry, or what seemed like unfulfilling years of just treading water, we did it *together*. We were broke together. We were bored together. We've had thrills and failures together. We've won awards and embraced hurtful public criticism together. We've done it all together. Dedicated to complementing each other through it all.

This book isn't a treatise on how to have a perfect marriage—there's no such thing. And it's not a deep-dive into Aaron's and Jamie's perfect marriage, because that just ain't true. But we do want to plead with you to

believe there's an alternative to a bland, lifeless, "it's-all-downhill-from-here" kind of marriage. It's the kind of marriage that Jesus really loves. It's the kind of marriage He wants you to have.

CHAPTER 1

Love

I don't remember the first time I told Jamie, "I love you."

I realize that makes me a pretty bad husband. Those are the things you're supposed to remember, right? Where you had your first date, the day and month of your wedding, where the first kiss happened, and that moment you asked the big question, "Will you marry me?" I remember *most* of those things, but I can't for the life of me remember saying for the first time the game-changing words that hurled the relationship into the *I love you* stage.

I'm sure when Jamie finally reads this chapter, she'll roll her eyes, recalling the exact moment, what she was wearing, the temperature of the room, and whether or not I seemed nervous or insanely confident. But I can't remember.

All that aside, I do know this with absolute certainty: I didn't know *how* to love.

I assumed loving someone was as natural as breathing oxygen, but it's not. We don't show up on the planet knowing how to love someone. Sure, we know how to like things such as food and comfort and safety. No one has to learn that. We know how to cry, how to laugh, how to complain, and certainly how to sin. And, even though we all have a *desire* to love, God designed humanity in such a way that *we'd have to learn how to love*.

During our engagement, Jamie broached a difficult subject with me. I could tell she had been brewing over something for a while. She seemed nervous as we sat in my Pontiac Sunfire in the driveway of her parents' house. I put the car in park, and although she reached for the door handle, she paused and sunk back into her chair. "I think we need to talk about something." Those are never the words you want to hear from someone you're dating, much less your future spouse, but I sunk into my chair and braced for whatever she had to tell me.

"I'm not getting from you what I need," she said without anger or judgment. "I feel like there are times where you just don't seem present. I don't *feel* like you're

in love with me. I mean, I know that you say you are, but it doesn't always feel that way."

I knew exactly what she meant. I felt it, too. I mean, I was crazy about her. There was no doubt in my mind that I loved her and wanted only her to be the partner I ran with for the rest of my life. But I often felt like there was a giant wall between me and, well, not just her, but everyone. A wall too large to scale, and too thick to burst through. I undoubtedly wanted to love her, but I just didn't know how.

I knew enough about treating someone with kindness and respect. I was pretty good at that. I planned out dates with immaculate detail, making sure we had the most fun and the most epic experience each time. I got my car washed before each date night. I often showed up with flowers. I walked her to her front door at the end of the night, fought for purity in our relationship, said kind things from time to time, and had eyes for only her. But, that wasn't enough. And that's certainly not *love*.

It's possible to do all the right things, all the right actions, and not truly possess love. Love is certainly not less than action, but it's more. You can be faithful to someone without love. You can be nice to someone

without love. You can even be engaged to someone and still need to learn how to love.

That was me.

I think love in recent decades has gotten much more confusing for us. In our over-sexualized age, it's become common to confuse attraction or infatuation with love. We assume love has to do with something we feel.

On the flipside, some Christians have rightly pushed back against that idea. Bible teachers and authors and marriage counselors have argued that love isn't merely a certain feeling, but a commitment—regardless of whether the feeling is there. But I think this falls short too; love isn't simply making a commitment to someone in a relationship.

The Author of Love has a lot to teach us about what love is, and what love isn't.

When Jamie finally got out of the car that night, I walked her to the door, hugged her with a tight grip, then drove home wondering how the heck I was going to figure out what love really was. I knew I didn't know how to do it on my own, but throughout the following weeks and months, as I began searching, the Holy Spirit started working a thought into my heart: I began to realize that it was going to be impossible for me to truly love Jamie

until I believed I was truly loved by God. Truthfully, at the end of the day, I didn't believe God loved me.

Throughout my life, all of my biggest struggles shoot out from the same root. Whether it was years of being addicted to pornography, or years of feeling extreme loneliness and insecurity, it all came from the same place—not truly believing God could love me. And until that root issue was addressed, there was no way for me to love Jamie, much less anyone else.

I read a book while we were engaged that helped transform and correct my view of God and His love. A. W. Tozer's book *The Pursuit of God* helped shine a light beneath the surface of my heart, exposing the root that God so badly wanted to do surgery on. "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us," wrote Tozer. So many of my identity issues and love issues and sin issues stemmed from what I thought about God.

I assumed God was angry all the time, and when you think about God being angry, you can't help but live with a fear that he'll snap and suddenly crush you.

I assumed God was disappointed with me, and when you think this way about God, you'll spend every day

of your life trying to out-work and out-impress every human you encounter.

If you think God is indifferent toward you, you'll be indifferent with yourself, and everyone else you're in a relationship with as well.

But when you begin to think rightly about God, everything changes. I think Tozer was right: what you

It's impossible to truly love anyone else if you don't first understand that God is love.

think about God is the most important thing about you. And it's impossible to truly love anyone else if you don't first understand that God is love. He's not only the author of love, but He is love itself.

First John 4:7-9 helped immensely as I was learning to understand God's love for me.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of

God was made manifest among us, that
God sent his only Son into the world, so
that we might live through him.

There is so much packed within those few verses. God is love. And love (true love) only comes from knowing and receiving the love of God. The Scripture is pretty clear that it's impossible to truly love someone without receiving and choosing to believe the insane love with which God has loved you. You can't muster up love. You can't conjure up love. You can't fake love. God's love has to be the root of your soul, the compass of your life, the rudder of your boat. Without it, you're just an action-based, performance-driven, feeling-fluctuating drifter. I was learning how true this was of myself. You can't truly love unless you are loved.

But there's also something specific about the love ascribed to God in 1 John. It says that He made His love known by sending His Son, Jesus, into the world.

There's never been anyone like Jesus, and there never ever will be. When Jesus burst onto the scene of the human story line two thousand years ago, it changed everything. There couldn't be another question as to *if* God loved people. That question had hung in the air for

generations, as the people of God waited around for a Messiah to show up. Even if they believed in the laws of God and the truths of God, it was hard to know the love of God before they saw Jesus with their own eyes. As His feet strolled through dusty city streets and darkened alleys, His very existence proved that God's love was not merely a theory or religion, but it was active and on the move.

The Scripture says that “the love of God was made manifest among us” (1 John 4:9). Plainly put, the love of God showed up. It crashed through the walls of what everyone had ever thought about God. And when they got a glimpse of Jesus, they were peering into the very heart of God. And inside that big, beautiful heart is outrageous love.

One of the most distinguishing marks about the love of God is found in the *way* Jesus displayed His love. Sure, His love was spoken with His own words, it spilled out from everything He said, every parable and every peculiar story He told. But He chose an even better way to express His love, and this one is perhaps the most intriguing and countercultural thing about Jesus. It's the thing I'm most caught off guard by when I think

of the King of the Universe coming to Earth and wrapping Himself in human skin.

Philippians 2 tells us that “though [Jesus] was in the form of God . . . [he] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant. . . . And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (vv. 6–8).

What? Jesus? The guy who was fully human and fully God, the Word made flesh, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the King of kings, the Lord of lords? The form He deliberately chose as the greatest display of His love for us was being a *servant*? Countercultural. I told you. There could be nothing more humble than a servant. And nothing more humbling for Deity to do than take on the lowly role of serving people, all the way to death on a cross. And although I’m not fully sure why God would write the story this way, I do know this: There’s no greater display of *love* than servanthood.

There’s no greater display of love than servanthood.

If we’re ever going to learn what true love is, we have to get to the place where we are awestruck and

deeply moved by the God who is Love. The One who came to serve us, not be served by us. When we think rightly about God, when we think this way when God comes to our mind, it will change us. Every relationship becomes about serving the other person because we've been served by God. Every dating relationship revolves not around *what can I get from that person*, but *how can I serve her*. Every marriage becomes not about getting our way, but about laying down our life, considering our life less important than the other person's, putting our own love on display through the form of humble servanthood. This is how Jesus did it. This is how He calls us to do it.

What about you? Do you know that you are loved? When you think about the cross of Jesus, does God's full and complete love grab ahold of you and shake you to the core?

This became a game-changer for me as I learned how to love. Slowly over time, God began to uproot the old disbelief that He didn't love me. He kindly replaced it with a better root. The more closely I looked at the person of Jesus, the more undeniable it became that I was fully and completely loved by God. And the more

I believed that, the more I could give my whole self to others, to Jamie.

I think that's what she was trying to say in the car so many years ago. She loved the fun date nights, the flowers, and the kindness and respect I showed her. But there was more she was after. She wanted *me*. She wanted to know me fully, to peer into my heart and soul as much as she could. And the only way I could ever give that to her was if I first understood the depth and width of God's love for me. On the cross, Jesus doesn't just say, "Here's all the things I've done for you," but rather, "I'm giving you all of me . . . I'm not holding back anything!"

One night in my apartment, I stumbled upon 1 John 4:11 and it shook me. And I've actually never gotten over it. It seems so simple at first glance, but like an iceberg in the ocean, the best parts are way below the surface, and it could take decades to fully explore and appreciate.

"Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." There it was. In plain view. The wall that stood between myself and Jamie, that wall that seemed too high and too deep, slowly began to crumble. It's like the more I leaned into God's love for me, the wall began to tremble and fall into rubble. If I were able to ever love Jamie in the way that she needed and deserved, I had to

just make a choice to believe that God so loved Aaron. And if God so loved Aaron, I could finally be freed up to love without restraint, without fear, without hiding, without reservation.

Say it to yourself right now. "God so loved _____." Isn't that beautiful?

Whether you find yourself single, dating, or married, you'll never be able to love as fully as God intends until you rightly receive His love for you.

Do you realize how much God loves you? No one else compares to Him. No one can complete you or affirm you or like you quite like Jesus does. He has served you in the most radical way possible. He left heaven, wrapped Himself in human skin, stepped into an old busted town, then got His hands and feet dirty as He served every person He encountered. He served with His words, with His actions, but more importantly with His whole unbridled servant heart. Then, as if that wasn't enough, He served you by taking on every bit of your sin, shame, and sadness, and carried it to a cross, where He nailed it and Himself, then died. And then God raised Him from death making you clean and righteous before Him forever. Now, God sees you the way He sees Jesus. You are as secure as Jesus, as loved as Jesus, as cherished

as Jesus. In doing all of this, Jesus forever sealed this incredible truth into your human story: He is love, and He loves you.

If He loves you this much, and if He lives in you, then you possess the uncanny ability to love someone in a way that the world has never seen. You have the ability to love someone relentlessly, forgivingly, through thick and thin, through miscarriage and infidelity, through disappointment and dysfunction, through sickness and tragedy. But only if you embrace the kind of love that comes from someone other than yourself.

“Jamie,” I said on a date night a few months later. “I don’t know how to love. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve *ever* known how to love. But, I’m willing to learn. Because you’re worth it. So, I’ll put in the hard work, if you’ll be patient with me along the way.” That conversation was nearly two decades ago. And although I’m further along today than I was back then, I’m still learning how to love.

Maybe you too need to do some digging. Maybe you need to ask the God who is Love to give you a new root. A root that says, “I am deeply loved by God. And because of that, and only because of that, I can love in a way that looks like Jesus—a humble, dusty servant, relentlessly

giving Himself away so others can find life and joy and love.”

Imagine a marriage like that. There is no better way to complement your spouse than to come alongside her with the love that can only come from Christ Jesus.

We love because he first loved us.

(1 John 4:19)