

What people are saying about ...

# MAKING MARRIAGE BEAUTIFUL

“With careful precision, Dorothy Greco examines the complexities, pain, and beauty inherent in our marriages and guides us chapter by hope-filled chapter into the wisdom needed to cultivate marriages that overflow with love and beauty.”

**Marlena Graves** (married 16 years),  
author of *A Beautiful Disaster*

“A remarkably honest and profoundly wise road map for real marriage—the kind that survives relational ups and downs, twists and turns, and disappointments and doubts long enough to become a beautiful reflection of the life-changing, love-giving Christ. Greco paints this real-marriage landscape with uncanny skill, deft insight, and fearless power. Five stars!”

**Patricia Raybon** (married 41 years), award-winning  
author of *I Told the Mountain to Move* and *Undivided*

“Dorothy Greco offers deep yet extremely practical ways to build a Christ-honoring, thriving relationship. This book will speak life-changing truth straight into the heart of your marriage.”

**Jeffrey P. Bjorck, PhD** (married 26 years),  
psychology professor at Fuller Theological  
Seminary and licensed psychologist

*“Making Marriage Beautiful* is full of goodness and truth, and is one of the wisest and most comprehensive books on marriage I’ve ever read.”

**Karen Swallow Prior, PhD** (married 31 years),  
author of *Booked* and *Fierce Convictions*

“I tend to avoid marriage books. Often, their idealism sends me into the sloughs of ‘guilt’ and ‘despond.’ Not Greco’s book. She offers an honest, literate, and biblical marriage playbook that is as inspiring as it is doable. Because of this lovely book, I’ll be looking for outbursts of beauty in marriages everywhere. Even in mine.”

**Leslie Leyland Fields** (married 39 years),  
author of *Crossing the Waters*

*“Making Marriage Beautiful* is a unique, remarkably engaging, and vulnerable treatise. It shows me how, even after thirty-one years of marriage, I’ve got more to learn.”

**Rev. Ray Kollbocker** (married 31 years),  
the senior pastor of Parkview Community  
Church in Glen Ellyn, IL

“This book is honest, humbly written, and wise. Rather than formulas or edicts, Greco has given us a gospel-centered theology and ethic of Christian marriage. But it’s about more than marriage—ultimately it’s about the good news that Jesus rescues and transforms sinners like you and me.”

**Amy Simpson** (married 23 years), inner  
strength coach and author of *Anxious*

“Greco uses her brilliance as a writer and a creative wordsmith to convey a winsome and challenging message about marriage. This is just not ‘another book on Christian marriage.’ This is a

must-read for anyone wishing to gain insight and instruction on their marriage journey.”

**Dr. Virginia Friesen** (married 40 years), author of *Raising a Trailblazer* and coauthor of *The Marriage App*

“*Making Marriage Beautiful* offers readers a wise book that veers wide of clichéd fixes. Dorothy Greco tackles the kinds of issues that sabotage real relational growth. This book will benefit newlyweds as well as couples who’ve been together for decades.”

**Michelle Van Loon** (married 37 years),  
author of *Moments & Days*

“Dorothy Greco’s wise and pastoral book offers probing questions at the end of each chapter, which I particularly like. These questions (and this book) will be a tool for self-understanding, spiritual formation, and by God’s grace, marital growth.”

**Jen Pollock Michel** (married 20 years), author  
of *Teach Us to Wait* and *Keeping Place*

“With humor, warmth, and honesty, Greco calls us to be not only better spouses but better individuals and better followers of Jesus.”

**Dorcas Cheng-Tozun** (married 11 years), Inc.com  
columnist and *Christianity Today* contributor

“Dorothy Greco has generously opened her heart and her marriage for us to mine her hard-won wisdom. Her gospel-centered perspective combined with real stories of couples makes me recommend this book to anyone who longs to build a beautiful marriage!”

**Suzanne Burden** (married 8 years), coauthor  
of *Reclaiming Eve* and pastor

“Dorothy Greco wades into a myriad of marriage challenges with a candid discussion of her own marriage. Readers who long for a

stronger, more meaningful marriage partnership will find plenty of wisdom, help, and encouragement here.”

**Carolyn Custis James** (married 36 years),  
author of *Half the Church* and *Malestrom*

“Dorothy’s smart and sensitive words direct me to Jesus for grace and offer tools and testimonies to spur me on to love my wife better.”

**Andrew Comiskey** (married 35 years), pastor  
and author of *Strength in Weakness*

“Dorothy Greco invites us to see how marital challenges become invitations for spiritual transformation.”

**Kelli Trujillo** (married 17 years), editor of *Christianity Today*

“Dorothy Greco brings a refreshing female voice to the marriage conversation: candid, thoughtful, wise, and well researched, with helpful examples from actual marriages, including her own. A solid resource for couples, pastors, and congregations.”

**Sarah Arthur** (married 16 years), coauthor  
of *The Year of Small Things*

“Dorothy has done us all a great service by inviting us into her marriage journey with insight and courage. Christopher’s vulnerability and stories make this book *required reading* for men who want to experience deeper delight in their marriage.”

**Brian Doerksen** (married 32 years), pastor,  
worship leader, and songwriter

“In *Making Marriage Beautiful*, Dorothy Greco offers a grace-filled, clear-minded, and motivating look at modern marriage.”

**Andrea Palpant Dilley** (married 11 years),  
contributing editor of *Christianity Today*

MAKING  
MARRIAGE

Beautiful

LIFELONG LOVE, JOY, AND INTIMACY  
START WITH YOU

DOROTHY LITTELL GRECO

*with contributions from CHRISTOPHER GRECO*

David©Cook®  
*transforming lives together*

MAKING MARRIAGE BEAUTIFUL

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*To Mary, Kate, and all of my Redbud sisters:*

*Maybe it doesn't always take a  
village, but it did this time.*

*To Christopher:*

*None of this would make any sense without you.*

*Thank you for letting me finish the hat.*

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# FOREWORD

When I got married, I gave little thought to how marriage might change me. The one exception was that I thought it would make me happier. I don't think it crossed my mind that God would use my marriage to make me more like Christ. I knew I had much room for spiritual growth, but I thought God's method would be Scripture and the convicting, empowering work of the Holy Spirit. I never thought He would reveal so many of my flaws through my marriage.

Having counseled couples over the last four decades, I have discovered that I am not the only one who has experienced this reality. The good news is that God changes hearts. When the attitude of Christ begins to consume us, we become the loving, supportive, caring people we thought we were in the beginning. It takes the challenges and the pain of marriage to reveal the truth: we are all sinners in the process of being redeemed.

In *Making Marriage Beautiful*, Dorothy Greco vulnerably shares the journey she and her husband have traveled through brokenness to beauty. Whether you are newly married, feeling the growing pains of middle age, or looking back over many decades together, you will find this book both inspiring and

insightful. My prayer is that God will use *Making Marriage Beautiful* to encourage you and help you interpret the events of life from His perspective.

*Gary D. Chapman, PhD, author  
of The 5 Love Languages®*

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# INTRODUCTION

*God's will was for us to be made holy  
by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time.*

Hebrews 10:10

*We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it.*

*The process is not yet finished, but it is going on.*

*This is not the end, but it is the road.*

*All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.*

Martin Luther

I have two confessions to make.

I am not a marriage expert.

I do not have a perfect marriage.

So why would I spend a year of my life writing a marriage book? For two reasons. First, my husband, Christopher, and I agree that creating and sustaining a healthy marriage is one of the most challenging (and wonderful!) endeavors we have ever embarked upon. We know we're not outliers, because for the past twenty years, we have counseled, taught, and prayed with hundreds of other couples. During that time, we've witnessed how passionately they want their

marriages to flourish and how overwhelmed and under-resourced they sometimes feel. Regardless of whether your marriage is thriving, struggling, or somewhere in between, we strongly believe there's no such thing as too much encouragement or wise counsel.

The second reason for writing this book is that we needed it. I started working on *Making Marriage Beautiful* during the most difficult season of our life together. Due to several crises (outside of our marriage), our world unraveled, leaving us angry, hurt, and confused. We prayed and processed for months but then began to feel increasingly numb and started retreating from everyone, including each other. In that fragile place, we sensed the Holy Spirit challenge us to renew our commitment to love.

Ultimately, what enabled us to obey God's directive during that destabilizing season was not our willpower, not some awesome conference, and definitely not our winsome personalities. It was our devotion to Jesus Christ and our desire to be saved.

Too often, Christians assume that salvation is a singular, defining event. This mentality may result in living our "entire life 'saved' but relatively unchanged."<sup>1</sup> As much as we might want it to be true, saying yes to Christ does not instantly eradicate all of our sin patterns and make us holy overnight. We *become* Christians in a process that begins the first time we turn our faces toward Him and ends the day He calls us home. Author and spiritual director Ruth Haley Barton describes this journey in *Life Together in Christ*:

Salvation is not merely about knowing where we are going when we die; it is also about the possibility of kingdom living here and now. It is about

being fundamentally changed in the depths of our being so that the will of God can be done *in our lives* on earth as it is in heaven.

Spiritual transformation is the process by which Christ is formed in us—for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives and for the sake of others.<sup>2</sup>

This process of being fundamentally changed and allowing Christ to be formed in us should influence the nature of who we are and then benefit every one of our relationships, first and foremost our marriages.

There are probably only a handful of times when we make an earnest but innocent commitment that leads to radical transformation. One example is pledging our lives to Jesus and another is pledging our lives to our spouses. Provided you have been married for more than forty-eight hours, you know that marriage changes you. We cannot expect two fully formed, egocentric adults to suddenly occupy the same square footage without something having to give. That something needs to be our immaturity and self-centeredness, for marriage, according to author Mike Mason, is “an unrelenting guerrilla war against selfishness.” He says,

Amidst all our pleasant little fantasies of omnipotence and blamelessness and self-sufficiency, marriage explodes like a bomb.... It attacks people’s vanity and lonely pride in a way that few other things can.<sup>3</sup>

As marriage attacks our vanity and pride, it beckons us to turn away from the mirror so we can move toward Christ and our spouses. Over time, the explosions diminish, the mirror becomes less compelling, and the turning becomes easier. The humbling yet glorious process of being transformed so that we can love is what this book is all about.

Christopher and I have always felt prompted by God to share our lives honestly and vulnerably. We do so not to draw attention to ourselves, but because we believe that telling our story reveals God's faithfulness, goodness, and mercy. To keep quiet is to deny His work in our lives.

That said, an inherent challenge in writing a marriage book, particularly an honest one, is that my spouse is coming along for the ride. It's one thing to write my story and quite another to write *our* story. I have not included any details or anecdotes without Christopher's blessing. So that you have a distinctly male perspective, his point of view and experiences are woven throughout the text. He shares some initial thoughts below:

In a very real sense, nobody other than Christ taught us how to live out our lives together. No couple intentionally mentored us or helped us track our progress. This is a calling of the Lord—a vision of what marriage might look like if we regularly and humbly submit our hearts to Him and choose to grow.

This book is not a statement that we know all there is to know about marriage. But this

much we do know: The Lord has honored our choices, exceeded our expectations, and revealed His attentive and compassionate presence to us during our darkest moments. This book is a gesture of thanks to Him and a fool's hope that it might serve others.

It's important for you to know that I wholeheartedly approve of everything Dorothy has written, even the places where she articulates my limitations. In fact, the parts of this book that make me laugh the hardest are where she precisely captures my foibles. We included many specific and vulnerable examples to make it clear that this book was written by real people in a real marriage.

(See why I love him?)

In Jen Pollock Michel's book, *Teach Us to Want*, she confesses, "My real trouble as a writer isn't trying to mean the words that I write; it's living into the words that I mean. Nonfiction writing can feel like the high art of hypocrisy."<sup>4</sup> Indeed. According to Christopher, "There are often cavernous and treacherous discrepancies between who we say we are and who we actually are, and nobody knows that better than our spouses." I am acutely aware that within any conversation about marriage lies the possibility of fraudulent claims and self-deceit. Every fight we had during the past year caused a tsunami of doubt to crash over me, making me question my integrity as well as my credentials.

In an attempt to check any hypocritical tendencies, after finishing each chapter, I asked myself two questions: *Were these concepts actually helping me love Christopher today? And, historically speaking, have they helped us and our marriage grow stronger and healthier?* The answer was always yes. Perhaps the real measure of this book's efficacy is that writing it actually helped me to become a better, more loving spouse. If you read it and apply the concepts, I believe the same will be true for you.

*Making Marriage Beautiful* will be relevant regardless of how long you have been married, your ethnicity, or your socioeconomic context. In the hope of representing the diverse world in which we live, I have interviewed eight couples from various ethnic backgrounds. Their names have been changed, but their stories have not been altered.

Though the best scenario would be to read this book with your spouse, it will be constructive even if only one of you is actively working on your marriage. I cannot guarantee that it will save a broken relationship, but I can guarantee that choosing to follow Jesus more intentionally will benefit you and your family.

At the end of each chapter, incisive questions will help you process and apply what you've read. The questions will also provide a starting point if you want to study this book with other couples. Additional resources, including suggestions for further reading, can be found on my website, [www.dorothygreco.com](http://www.dorothygreco.com).





Though it was not my intention when I started this project, about halfway through, I realized I was not simply crafting a book; I was also creating a prayer. For all of us. Please read the following pages with an open heart. Incline yourself in hope toward Christ and toward your spouse. Wait and see what the Lord will do. He is faithful and good. All the time.

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# MARRIAGE WILL CHANGE YOU

*What Do You Want That Change to Look Like?*

Christopher and I got divorced before we got married. Several months into our first engagement, he abruptly severed the relationship and refused to communicate with me, crushing any hope of reconciliation.

Two years passed. While typing a document at work, he had a seemingly random thought: *Maybe I made a mistake*. Not long after, he called me to ask if I would consider getting together to discuss what happened. Eight months later, he proposed a second time and I said yes again, to the consternation of many friends and family members.

As the wedding date drew near, the forecasts we received from these friends were soberingly consistent: “Be prepared. You guys are going to have a hard first year of marriage.” They weren’t aiming to discourage us. They had witnessed our tumultuous premarital

relationship and knew us to be strong willed (read *obstinate*), articulate (*opinionated*), and determined (*inflexible*). Despite their well-grounded concerns, we did not cancel our nuptials. Nor did we forget their warnings.

After we officially became husband and wife, each minor disturbance caused us to hold our breath and scan the horizon for the predicted storms. Fortunately, our friends were wrong about year one. It wasn't until year ten that the tornado hit, but by that time our roots were deep enough to withstand the wind.

What gave us the courage to try again when the first version of our relationship ended so poorly? Though we had both been actively following Christ for nearly a decade, our breakup revealed a depth of brokenness and immaturity neither of us had been aware of. Instead of simply moving on or denying these painful revelations via numbing, self-deception, or blame, Christopher and I chose Jesus. As we regularly turned toward and embraced Christ, His unflinching love and steadfast faithfulness began to set us free. The slow and gradual transformation emboldened us to reengage and has subsequently resulted in a rich and satisfying marriage.

## Not Even on the Radar

Because of my various vocational roles, which include lay pastor and professional photographer, I've officiated and photographed hundreds of brides and grooms as they promised to love, honor, and cherish each other. You have probably not witnessed as many weddings as I have, but perhaps you have also noticed that marriage

vows lack specificity. How, exactly, are we supposed to love, honor, and cherish our imperfect spouses for the remainder of our lives?

During those giddy months leading up to our weddings, we tend to be so intoxicated by oxytocin-fueled love and so distracted by choosing the DJ, venue, and reception appetizers that we rarely dwell upon what it takes to execute these lofty promises. We assume the present euphoria will carry us through sickness and health, poverty and wealth, and everything else in between. If you have not already experienced this for yourself, based on twenty-five years of marriage and almost as many years supporting other couples, I can assure you that the prewedding bliss will dissipate, leaving you confused and disoriented. Those destabilizing feelings actually serve us because they reveal the truth that we need much more than strong emotions and good intentions to faithfully fulfill our vows.

Making a beautiful marriage depends on something seldom covered by premarital classes, which tend to focus on tangible concepts such as communication, in-laws, finances, and of course, sex. Marking these and other potentially hazardous areas with fluorescent orange spray paint is useful. It can prompt proactive conversations that will help us better understand one another and navigate our differences.

However, knowledge and navigational skills are not enough to get you to your tenth anniversary, let alone your silver. What differentiates a loving, joyful, intimate marriage from a disappointing, frustrating one is the willingness and commitment to be changed, to say yes to God's transforming work, and to become increasingly holy with each passing year.

## Like It or Not, We Need to Be Willing to Acknowledge Our Sin

Oddly enough, we cannot move toward holiness unless we recognize and admit our sin. We dare not deny or be vague about that sin if our goal is to become more like Jesus Christ. Here's the challenge that all of us currently face: we live in a culture that discourages us from confessing and taking responsibility for our sin. To some extent, this has always been true (see Adam and Eve, Genesis 3), but it looks notably different now than it did just thirty to forty years ago, when I first decided to follow Jesus.

In the late seventies and early eighties, college students like me who believed in Jesus were encouraged to regularly share our faith with others. We approached total strangers, handed them a simplistic pamphlet, and proceeded to tell them that if they did not repent of their sin, they would be separated from God for all eternity. It was by no means subtle or culturally sensitive, but by God's grace it often resulted in lively conversations and the occasional spontaneous conversion. Today this approach would be judged as inappropriate, in part because our culture is much more sensitive to any dialogue that lacks nuance.

During the Cold War, nuance was not a national priority. Because we had recently participated in two horrific wars and continued to live under the looming threat of a nuclear apocalypse, we endeavored to protect ourselves by creating a binary world of good guys (those who practiced democracy) and bad guys (the Communists). Regardless of one's theological beliefs—or lack thereof—there was general agreement about mankind's depravity

and life's fragility. Even the clergy shied away from nuance by emphasizing the destructive power of sin and the terrors of hell.

The winds of social change that were blowing in the nineties, when Communism crumbled, began howling at gale force by the beginning of the twenty-first century. Modernism's black-and-white framework was gradually replaced by postmodernism's fifty shades of gray. The shifting winds have deeply affected many aspects of the culture at large as well as individual expressions of faith. Those of you who are millennials typically have a thirst for justice (as demonstrated by the movement to end all forms of slavery), an inclination to share rather than own (think Zipcar), and a growing passion for protecting the environment—all outworkings of the desire for a more holistic lifestyle and a more integrated faith. These are welcome and needed corrections to the previous generations' sometimes disintegrated understanding of Christian life.

There is a hidden downside to the changing ideologies. Even though we now have a more robust picture of what our faith could look like, these seismic cultural shifts have pushed an essential component of Christ off to the side. The postmodern propensity toward tolerance, combined with every generation's avoidance of shame and responsibility, now inclines us toward a Messiah characterized predominantly by grace and mercy. Although these are both facets of Jesus, Scripture affirms that He also has a sword-like tongue and will judge us according to our deeds (Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:5–10; Rev. 19:15).

Like everyone else, I prefer grace and mercy to judgment. But if we routinely dismiss or minimize our sin—for any reason—we have no impetus to change. This leaves our marriages vulnerable

to failure. Jen Pollock Michel sagely writes, “Without the doctrine of sin, we are led toward being unusually optimistic about our humanity. We will refuse to face the viciousness of our capabilities and will trust our desires too much and fear ourselves too little.”<sup>1</sup> Being mindful of our sin and how it affects others is not meant to crush or disempower us; it’s meant to motivate us to be less self-centered and more Christ-centered.

## **Transformation Begins When We Admit Our Brokenness and Need**

Shifting our center toward Jesus is not a onetime event; it’s a process that begins when we acknowledge our need to be saved. As we make this life-changing confession, we recalibrate our internal GPS to Jesus. He becomes our “anthropological North Star,”<sup>2</sup> beckoning us toward Him and revealing our sin and brokenness in the process. Thankfully, as Jesus helps us to see those areas where we need redemption, He also invites us to lean on Him.

For those of you like me who prefer self-sufficiency over dependence, admitting need and allowing others to help creates tremendous disequilibrium. Because we have been hurt and disappointed so many times, it’s terrifying to give up control and trust anyone—including God. In an effort to avoid fear and insecurity, we prefer doing everything ourselves.

Until fairly recently, I not only assumed independence was the mark of maturity, but viewed neediness as a character flaw. I dismissed verses such as “Let the little children come to me, and do

not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Luke 18:16 NRSV) and instead favored ones that exhort us to grow up and wean from our mother’s breast (Heb. 5:11–14). It’s embarrassing to admit, but I actually believed that self-sufficiency made me better than those needy people. Apparently, I’m not the only one who holds this warped logic.

A friend recounted the story of going to speak in a church where he knew no one. This man, a prominent leader and author, always worships with physical abandon. As the band played their last note, he walked from the sanctuary floor toward the podium, only to be stopped by the senior pastor, who asked, “Where do you think you’re going?” He introduced himself and said, “I’m your speaker.” The pastor breathed a sigh of relief and added, “Oh good. I thought you were one of those needy people.” Without missing a beat, my friend candidly assured him, “I am one of those needy people—and I’m also your speaker this morning.”<sup>3</sup>

Neediness offends us. We prefer not to depend on others because they might fail us, think poorly of us, or cause us to lose the respect and affirmation we so desperately want. Autonomy reinforces our self-perception of competence and strength. Conversely, depending on God and others confronts us with the reality that we are weak and can neither fulfill our marriage vows nor satisfy the command to love, apart from ongoing assistance and divine intervention. If we discount our need for God’s daily bread or ignore our perseverant self-deception, our faith becomes corrupted with pride and self-importance—what the Greeks called hubris.

Scripture corrects this heretical mind-set. According to the prophet Isaiah, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has



turned to our own way” (Isa. 53:6 NIV). The apostle Paul writes, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23 NIV). No matter how deeply it offends us, we must confront our inherent waywardness as well as our impotence to reach God apart from Jesus.

We might be fooled into thinking that we need Christ only when we’re in the midst of a crisis. The truth is, any patience, kindness, or love I show to Christopher originates from God, not me. And even if I could take credit for these traits, none of them bridges the gap between me and the Almighty or helps me become the kind of wife that I truly long to be. If I want to be more Christlike and love my husband well, I have to push off from the myth of self-sufficiency, bow my knee to Jesus, and ask for help. Repeatedly. It doesn’t matter if you struggle with the same besetting sins that I do. All of us need transformation and all of us need Jesus in order to be transformed.

## What Does Transformation Look Like?

It’s not always obvious to us why we need to change. Mike Mason explains:

Marriage, even under the very best of circumstances, is a crisis—one of the major crises of life—and it is a dangerous thing not to be aware of this. Whether it turns out to be a healthy, challenging, and constructive crisis, or a disastrous nightmare, depends largely upon how willing the partners are to be changed, how malleable they are.<sup>4</sup>

I was largely unaware of the malleability factor until we were married for several years. In my teens and twenties, I had deeply embedded control issues. (In other words, I was definitely not malleable.) What enabled me to function with some degree of competence was living like an emotional agnostic. I pretended that nothing affected me. I shut down the anger and turned off the tears. And then at age thirty-three, I became a mother. The energy that I previously directed toward holding it all together and propping up my mask was redirected to more primal activities, such as preventing our three sons from destroying the house or impaling one another with their homemade weapons. I felt like a character on a televised reality show, constantly exposing my imperfections to the world. Pretending to be perfect and hiding my weaknesses no longer worked. It was time to change.

In the book of Ezekiel, God promises the Israelites, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (36:26 NIV). When I decided to make that initial step toward Jesus thirty-five years ago, God pried open my chest cavity to begin extricating the rock. During certain seasons, the process of change has felt messy, painful, and slow—sometimes so slow that I despaired. But then when I least expected it, God broke through.

Often these God-breathed breakthroughs profoundly improve our marriages. Perhaps after months of resistance, you finally feel able to forgive your spouse for lying to you. Or maybe you discover the grace to not simply overlook his most annoying habit but also love him even as he spreads his belongings over every flat surface, misplaces his car keys (again), or loudly slurps his morning beverage.

Such internal shifts remind us that God is at work and that real change is indeed possible. If in the process of change we consistently orient ourselves toward Him, our vertical relationship will empower us to love horizontally. We see the clearest example of how this happens “in the one person who lived his whole life closely and consistently in relation to God—Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

This movement toward Christ and holiness is meant to influence every component of our lives and of our marriages. As we become like Jesus, we willingly and continuously sacrifice for our spouses rather than protect our self-interests. We extend grace and mercy rather than judgment or retribution. We love lavishly rather than withhold in self-protection and fear. This kind of transformation will sometimes feel elusive and will always force us to confront the abject poverty of our souls. Paul poetically describes this mysterious process: “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18 NIV).

As I let go of control, admit my brokenness, and allow others to see me, it feels more vulnerable than glorious. But it’s also incredibly liberating. I now ask for help all the time. I no longer think of myself as better than those needy people because, like my speaker friend, I know I’m one of them. This process of becoming more emotionally alive as I mature spiritually has deepened our marriage. I know there are moments (perhaps seasons) when Christopher wishes I would regress and stop sharing my feelings, but in general he appreciates my transparency. This change frees him from having to guess what’s going on in my head. His

steadfast love and acceptance allow me to trust him more fully, which increases our emotional *and* sexual intimacy.

Such profound change does not happen magically or instantaneously. We have to want to grow, want to love more consistently, and want to regularly bless our spouses. Athletes don't become world-class by standing up and making a onetime commitment. They train. They dedicate their lives to reaching their goals. Likewise, we will not become awesome wives and husbands simply by speaking earnest vows before our family members and friends.

Pastor and author Timothy Keller concisely states in *The Meaning of Marriage*, "Nothing can mature character like marriage."<sup>6</sup> The depth of maturation largely depends upon the desire to grow and willingness to humbly submit to and rely upon God. After two and a half decades together, Christopher and I have changed. Profoundly. And in the process, we have forged a deep bond of trust and created an incredibly rich relationship. We're not special. We simply refused to settle for mediocrity and chose to believe that God had the goods to back up His promises.

Christopher and I believe that God wants all of us to experience loving, joyful, intimate marriages. As we say yes to Him, He will be our greatest advocate and our most dependable resource, providing whatever we need to do the work. Are you ready?

## Going Deeper

1. Name several of the most satisfying, life-giving components of your marriage. How would you describe an ongoing frustration or struggle? As you read through *Making Marriage Beautiful*, ask God to help you grow in at least two specific areas.
2. Do you typically embrace or resist change? If the latter, do you know why? Think of a recent situation that necessitated change. How did that go? Is there anything you could have done differently?
3. How comfortable are you with the doctrine of sin? Can you easily identify your sins, even the less obvious ones?
4. Are you aware of how your sins and limitations affect your spouse? If not, ask your spouse. (But don't ask until you are able to listen without getting defensive or angry.)
5. Consider making this a daily prayer: "God, help me to see my spouse through Your eyes and love with Your heart."