

Prologue

When I was approached with the idea of writing another book on marriage, I deeply considered whether I really had something unique to say that has not been written among the thousands of already-published marriage books—including my own previous two. Frankly, I was not enthused about rehashing or repackaging well-used anecdotes, communication techniques, conflict-resolution skills, and cliché Scriptures that are far too common among secular and faith-based marriage resources. I do not say this to disparage any existing books. I simply want to point out that if this is the type of book you seek, there are many other books from which you can choose. This is not *that* book.

I sought God with one simple request: “Father, if it is Your will for me to write another book on marriage—a book that promises to *touch the heart* of Your people—please show me a clear message.” With an already full schedule, I only wanted to sacrifice the time and energy to write a book that was unquestionably guided by the Holy Spirit to touch people’s hearts. With my petition before the Lord, I waited for His guidance. As commonly happens, however, the Lord’s response did not come as I expected. His answer came to me in three discrete stages.

Within a relatively short period of time, the Lord gave me the book’s main title, *The Unfair Advantage*. Although I knew this

was confirmation that the Holy Spirit was indeed nudging me to write this book, I thought the title was odd for a marriage book. I thought to myself, “What exactly does ‘unfair advantage’ have to do with marriage?” Wanting a scriptural basis to clarify the Lord’s intent, I again waited for God’s answer.

In time, the Holy Spirit led me to a somewhat familiar chapter, Second Peter 1, as the book’s scriptural source. The first time I read this chapter, I thought, “What does this have to do with marriage?” So I read it again and again; and with each reading, my excitement grew as the marriage connection crystallized.

I have read many marriage books, and written some too. Over the years, I’ve also conducted counseling sessions and seminars with thousands of couples. It’s truly a privilege to be among a community of Christian marriage educators. Yet, with all of my experiences in this marriage vineyard, never before had I heard such a nuanced synthesis of faith and marriage as the Holy Spirit unveiled during the writing of this book.

As my days of writing turned into weeks and months, I gained increased clarity into why so many Christian marriages fail to reach God’s promise for them. I realized that the Lord had directed me to a passage not typically associated with marriage to convey a cardinal truth—that marriage’s ultimate promise lay in wholeheartedly living an authentic God-centered faith.

With this enriched understanding of faith and marriage, the Holy Spirit positioned me for the final unveiling. In fact, you probably noticed it in this book’s subtitle, *A Grace-Inspired Path to Winning at Marriage*.

Indeed, faith and marriage are fraught with disappointments and hurts. It is only through a grace-laden lens that we’ll see a marriage ever reach its promise because, as the apostle Paul so

eloquently captures in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

I began writing this book with a simple request to God—to give me a message that would touch the heart of His people. I believe the Father’s response is captured in these pages; but just putting words on paper was never my ultimate goal. My prayer is more personal. I pray that you will see how your own personal struggles and victories give you the inalienable right to lay claim to your unfair advantage. With faith and grace as your guides, I believe the Holy Spirit will seal His promises in your heart.

The Unfair Advantage’s Key Scripture Verse

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the

more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:3–11)

Part 1: A Marriage Mindset

1

A Tale of Two Marriages

Sometimes you don't realize your own strength until you come face to face with your greatest weakness.

—Susan Gale

More than twenty-seven years ago, I stood tall at the altar confidently staring at the beautiful young woman to whom I was about to pledge my life. When I'm most honest, I can admit that I had little idea what I was actually doing. Oh sure . . . in front of family and friends, I was full of bravado that my mother was wrong in her claim that at twenty-two years of age I was too young to marry. "It is not about age but faith," I thought. My fiancé, Dalia, and I were a young Christian couple who felt quite secure in our faith. Yes, our faith *then* felt unshakable. We believed that God had brought us together for a purpose. We felt secure that our love for God—and one another—would empower us to stay monogamously faithful to one another for a lifetime. We were convinced that our Christian convictions would sustain us through the ups and downs of what we knew, even at our young ages, was a covenant relationship.

The ceremony had its flaws; but inside the small brick church in southern New Jersey, among extended family, college friends

and well-wishers, we exchanged loving smiles, the best rings our meager budgets could afford and solemn vows. After the lighting of our unity candle and the requisite kiss of the bride, the pastor officially pronounced us husband and wife as licensed by the State of New Jersey. By all accounts, it was a joyous day, full of promise for young Christian lovers who were full of faith—or so we thought.

*In Eden, to be married was to experience God.
But then sin happened.*

Trouble in Paradise

It didn't take long for trouble to brew. Dogged by differences in personality, life priorities, marital presumptions and the assumptions of our extended families, we seemed to face one minor conflict after another. Sometimes silly things morphed into significant confrontations. "Why didn't you make up the bed since you were the last one in it?" sounded harsher from my mouth than it should have. "Why are you on the computer all the time?" Dalia questioned in a slightly too condescending tone.

I'm not suggesting that things were all bad. We definitely had good times too. Many of our struggles were the typical adjustments that couples make for harmonious living. One thing was for sure—the marriage we'd imagined was *not* the marriage we were living, and that took a toll. Dalia would later reveal that our first year of marriage was the worst year of her life. "I don't deserve this," she told me. For Dalia, marriage felt unfair—a far cry from the dream she'd embraced.

Admittedly, I was less frustrated than Dalia, largely because my dominant personality style usually resulted in me getting more of what I wanted and leaving her holding the proverbial “short end of the stick.” Dalia admits that she wasn’t blameless either, as her unbridled emotions often ignited firestorms intended to burn me.

Sometimes she’d upset me so much that I’d try to manipulate the situation by emotionally shutting down. In fact, weeks went by when I literally refused to even speak a single word to her—until I ultimately spoke the piercing words, “We are not a team.” Even as I’d listen to her sobs in an adjacent room, my calloused heart refused to empathize. It’s no wonder that Dalia eventually admitted to me, “Harold, I love you, but I don’t like you.”

I was stunned. This was one of those moments when both air and words escaped me. I felt like I had received an unfair, ego-bruising punch below the belt. My analytical mind frantically raced with sobering questions. What happened to that young Christian couple so full of faith and love? How could we have fallen so far, so fast from such a promising start? Had my mother’s caution that we were just too young to marry been right all along?

Repeat Offenders

It is humbling to reflect on those early years of marriage. Yes, Dalia and I had many admirable qualities, including a staunch refusal to abandon our marriage. Looking back, however, one thing is unequivocally clear: we were both disobedient and dishonoring to the covenant with God to spend our lifetime serving one another. “Disobedient and dishonoring” may seem a harsh critique, but a close look at Scripture’s admonition in Ephesians 5:33 succinctly posits the standard to which God holds our marriage: “Let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the

wife see that she respects her husband.” We, beyond a shadow of a doubt, behaved as if our marriage belonged to us rather than to God, whom we had committed it to just a short time ago. Like the unrepentant felon who returns to his criminal ways upon release from incarceration, we too were repeat offenders, frequently exchanging barbs of disrespect and disapproval to manipulate situations in our own favor.

*We quickly forget that our spouse
is not our problem.*

God designed marriage to be a garden full of sensuous beauty, much like the garden of Eden where the first marriage was consummated. Even amid the beauty of Eden, and having created Adam as His masterpiece, God deemed it “not good” that Adam should be alone (Gen. 2:18). God responds by creating a “helper,” which transliterated from the Hebrew word *neged* means “counterpart.” Only when Adam (part) and Eve (counterpart) are united does God introduce the one-flesh relationship, symbolizing what would become His bridegroom-bride relationship with the church. In Eden, to be married was to experience God. But then sin happened.

Through interactions with hundreds of couples since my early years of marriage, I now know that Dalia and I were not the only repeat offenders guilty of disobedience to this godly covenant. Since Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God, the institution that was designed to be like a garden has devolved into an active battleground for a war of attrition. The evidence of this struggle surrounds us.

Our culture is littered with an alarming number of marriages in some state of legal, emotional and spiritual dissolution. In a *Woman's Day* survey of 35,000 married women, 72 percent have considered leaving their husbands, and more than half have admitted that they sometimes regret marrying at all.¹

I recently appeared on *Marriage Beyond the Vows*, a weekly Christian radio call-in program based out of Philadelphia.² I was surprised to hear that many husbands are convinced that their wives deliberately withhold physical intimacy. These husbands believe that their wives, in a perverted effort to keep their own Christian consciences clear, hope to manipulate them to file for divorce.

Culture is awash with Christian couples who feel emotionally abused and are teetering on the verge of collapse under a barrage of minor to major repeat offenses. Even an untrained eye can see the frayed fabric of traditional marriage, where the odds of divorce among Christians are about fifty-fifty and where even marriages that survive are failing to thrive.

Many spouses immediately “get it” when their marriage is compared to a battle, but who exactly are the combatants in this eternal conflict?

Although you might believe that your husband or your wife is to blame, they are not—and neither are you. So, what is happening to our Christian marriages?

Collateral Damage

Whether addressing communication challenges, trust deficits, financial woes, intimacy lapses or other marriage maladies, the root issue is not a human one at all. The truth is that since the first covenant relationship between Adam and Eve, marriage has

been a spiritual battle between God and Satan. Let's think of it this way—marriage is a spiritual battle with relational consequences.

Jesus gives powerful imagery of Satan's "take no prisoners" approach to spiritual warfare when He tells Simon Peter of Satan's desire to sift him like wheat (see Luke 22:31). In our nonagrarian culture today, we often underestimate the violence in the sifting imagery Jesus offers. Sifting wheat is a violent action, separating the grain (wheat berry) from the stalk and the chaff. Through this metaphor, Jesus clearly conveys Satan's singular objective against us as spiritual separation from God with all of the collateral damage that it implies.

Like a domino reaction, Satan knows that if he separates you from your spiritual source, your Christian marriage will fall in time too. Satan wants to manipulate husbands and wives as expendable pawns in his battle for the hearts and minds of our culture. But, like a magician deftly using misdirection to sell the trick, Satan's insidious strategy hinges on keeping couples distracted from his true intentions.

How long can Satan keep husbands and wives blaming one another for their unhappiness? How deeply can he mire each spouse in self-centered pursuits? What must he do to encourage Christian couples to depend on their own strength rather than draw from God's supply? From my own firsthand experience, my message to you is that Satan is a master of distraction, a nefarious illusionist bent on your individual and mutual destruction.

As he successfully did with Dalia and me for too long, Satan plants seeds of discord that first manifest themselves as little seedlings (minor conflicts), but grow like wild weeds (major conflicts) that threaten to separate us from everything we hold dear. When embroiled in our emotionally taxing daily struggles, we quickly

forget that our spouse is not our problem. If we fail to see these challenges as opportunities to mature our faith, our marriage suffers. With blatant disregard for fairness, Satan's goal is that your marriage suffers spiritual and relational separation by any means necessary.

These conflicted couples prioritize image management over heart restoration.

The apostle Peter best captures our real Adversary's persistent hunt for your marriage in First Peter 5:8: "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Satan is the one who is keeping your marriage from reaching a higher level with God. In chapter 3 of this book, we will examine in greater detail the psychological warfare Satan levies against your marriage. For now, consider Peter's admonition contained in the first sentence of that same verse: "Be sober-minded; be watchful" of your real adversary (5:8).

There is, however, a greater caution. You cannot, of your own accord, withstand Satan's relentless assault on your marriage. The pressure is too great for your human capacity and mine. Your marriage may withstand it for a season; but eventually you will stumble in your faith, and your marriage will suffer its effects. Left to your own devices, Satan's divisive strategies will prevail.

Of course, the beauty of your faith is that Christ, through His death and resurrection, has already defeated Satan. You need not rely on your own strengths. Satan's idle threats are powerless against Christ's providential plans for your marriage. Satan knows full well that he is a defeated foe against all who carry the Lord's

banner. Therefore, he concocts a game plan to keep us behaving in a stupor—as if we are ignorant of Christ’s already accomplished work. In other words, Satan’s strategy for spiritual and relational separation is to strip our faith of its true power.

A Form of Godliness

The Adversary does not care if you have a washed-out faith. In fact, he encourages this, because it lulls us into a false sense of security. The apostle Paul warns against such hypocrisy when describing those “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5). Evidences of these powerless marriages are all around us.

Consider how so many Christian couples, with a clear love for Christ, seem totally inept when it comes to marriage. Countless marriages among the faith community languish under a wave of doubts and disappointments. I have seen couples walk out of an amazing and worshipful service, clearly touched by the Lord’s presence, only to find them unleashing a barrage of criticism at one another just ten minutes later.

I have sat with couples in ministry leadership who strain to have meaningful conversations with one another when they are out of public view. A faithful marriage requires more than attending church, reciting Scripture or praying the rosary (for my Catholic friends). A thriving marriage requires an active and progressive faith, where spiritual and relational maturity happen in parallel. Spiritual and relational maturity are inseparable.

Too often, however, Christian couples struggle with hypocrisy as they compartmentalize their spiritual walk from other areas of their lives. Thinly veiled smiles plastered across faces in church quickly give way to scowls before the car even gets out of

the church parking lot. Sadly, these conflicted couples prioritize image management over heart restoration. The longer the deceit continues, the higher the stakes feel and the deeper the emotional chasm becomes.

As a result, a large segment of the Christian community's integrity and gospel witness is diminished under a shroud of lying, stealing and other sinful atrocities. Not surprisingly, their marriages languish as well. Many divorce when the frustration overwhelms them.

Others stay unhappily married because the consequences of divorce seem too difficult for them or their children to bear. Sin leaves so many of our marriages with deep emotional and relational battle scars that are constant reminders of Satan's disdain for us.

With a quiver of dangerous terms like "irreconcilable differences," "incompatibility" and "hopeless" at his disposal, Satan strives to convince you that the scars of your marriage are too deep for God to heal, proof of its inevitable defeat. He hopes to shame your faith and marriage by pointing out your failures. Satan wants you to believe that the distance between where you are today and where God promises it to be is too great.

True to form, Satan is a liar. God has a different plan—one built on a foundation of grace. A.B. Simpson says it best: "It is not that God will make the good better, but that He will make the bad good, and the utterly and hopelessly bad divinely pure and holy."³

Whether your marriage is soaring or sullen right now, God desires to strengthen your faith and lift your marriage as a witness of His glory. Your plight is not your peril but a compass toward the pleasure of God's promise.

Covenant Love

This chapter began with a young Christian couple at the altar, and so it shall end in similar fashion. This is the simultaneously heart-warming and tragic story of Ian and Larissa Murphy, a western Pennsylvania couple. Like Dalia and I, this young couple also met in college.

They, like us, were head over heels in love. After only ten months of what Larissa calls “dating very intentionally,” the plans were crystallizing for a short engagement and then marriage soon after finishing college. Ian had dutifully been shopping for the highly anticipated engagement ring. They felt on top of the world, much like Dalia and I felt on our wedding day nearly twenty years earlier. Tragically, everything was about to change.

*A thriving marriage finds love equally resilient
in the dark places.*

For Larissa, it began with a phone call a mere three months before their much-anticipated graduation. On his way to work, Ian was involved in a horrendous car accident that left him with a traumatic brain injury. As Larissa later writes, we “watched our future crash with him in that white station wagon.”⁴

The severity of Ian’s disability left him incapable of even basic communication. Was all lost? No one would have questioned Larissa’s decision to move on to pursue her dreams for career and family. She had every right to want a “normal” life. She and Ian were not even yet engaged. But rather than run, Larissa chose to face uncertainty and her fears to do what many might deem

unthinkable. She moved into Ian's parents' home to help care for her best friend. It took four years before Ian could sufficiently communicate for them to feel confident with marriage. Then, as if they had not endured enough, they had to convince the court that Ian was even capable of independently making the decision for marriage.

Marrying Ian meant that I was signing on to things that I don't think I ever would've chosen for myself—working my whole life, having a husband who can't be left alone, managing his caregivers, remembering to get the oil changed, advocating for medical care, balancing checkbooks, and on. The practical costs felt huge, and those didn't even touch on the emotional and spiritual battles that I would face. But in light of all the practicals, and emotionals, it was so very simple: we love each other. And we love God. And we believe He is a sovereign and loving God who rules all things.⁵

As I consider the beauty and sorrow in Ian and Larissa Murphy's amazing story, I am inspired by the true power of love in the midst of circumstances that seem so unfair. It is not the love of story-books or fairy tales, nor is it the love of convenience or neediness. Rather, it is love that conquers all because it flows from a divine source. It is love that believes.

As I wrestled to bring to life the immense power of this book's underlying message, the Lord directed me to *This Momentary Marriage*, a book by John Piper. Piper offers a simple yet powerful thesis that our responsibility as a married couple is "mainly about displaying the covenant-keeping love between Christ and His church."⁶

Covenant-keeping love suggests that as we “make of marriage mainly what God designed it to be, no sorrows and no calamities can stand in our way. Every one of them will be, not an obstacle to success, but a way to succeed.”

Therein lies the irony. Our Adversary wants you, the Murphys and me to believe that our suffering, difficulties and failures are proof that marriage is hopeless and doomed. Satan wants you to accept the mediocrity of your marriage’s comfort zone rather than pushing for supernatural growth. I want to encourage you that nothing stands in the way of your successful marriage except that which you believe—your faith. If you as a couple believe that your marriage is destined for greatness, so it is.

Conversely, if you believe your marriage is maxed out, well, you have indeed set its ceiling. So, what do you believe? My prayer is that your faith will be strengthened to believe that God has more for you.

During the good times, it feels easy and natural to love God and your spouse, but what about when things go wrong? What about when everything seems so unfair? A thriving marriage finds love equally resilient in the dark places.

Despite our vast differences and our history of emotional wounds, Dalia and I are blessed to joyously celebrate more than twenty-seven years of marriage because we share a love and a faith that are not of this world. As explained so well by Larissa Murphy, “We are able to love each other . . . with a more Christlike love.”⁷ Therein lies the ultimate purpose and tale of two marriages. Marriage with its highs and lows is a God-sanctioned tool to develop success in life and in faith by embracing Christlike love a little bit better.