

CONTENTS

Foreword	9
Acknowledgments	11
Introduction: What More Can Be Said About Marriage?	13
1. When Marriage Doesn't Go According to Plan	23
2. Before We Say "I Do"	37
3. Sealed with a Vow	67
4. The Role of a Wife	93
5. The Role of a Husband	129
6. Pulling Weeds	163
7. Planting Hedges	193
Conclusion	211
Notes	221
Study Guide for Spouse and Group Discussion	225

Chapter One



When Marriage Doesn't Go According to Plan

Karen waved good-bye to her husband and kids. As she closed the garage door, she added yet another item to the “to do” list in her mind: call the Genie service man. It wouldn't be long until that noisy, vibrating door refused to work at all.

She walked through the laundry room, ignoring the perpetually growing stacks of white and colored clothing. Coffee first and then she would climb those mountains.

She had been up since six o'clock, but this was the first moment she had had to herself. Even though the twins were high school seniors and could fend for themselves, they had grown to expect Mom's packed lunches, which

were far superior to cafeteria food. Dave also depended on her. His shirts and dry cleaning, needed for another four-day business trip, were ready for him.

The routine was automatic after so many years of practice. In the early days, she would drive Dave to the airport, often with the twins still in their pajamas. The three of them would be back on Friday evening, awaiting the return of the conquering hero and hoping he had enough energy left to talk, listen, buy them ice cream after dinner, and take them to the park to push them on the swings.

These days, though, Dave left the car in Park and Fly. If he could catch the early flight on Fridays, he would usually drive directly to the golf club. Karen knew he needed the “space” those nine holes provided, yet she secretly wished it was more like old times. He was a good provider, didn’t miss the school conferences, and certainly hadn’t developed one of those potbellies like many of her friends’ husbands.

It had been a while since romance caused her heart to race and her breath to become short, but there was a lot to be said for good old faithfulness. She knew imagination had never been Dave’s strong suit, and predictability was better than nothing. Still, it would be fun just once to . . . She suspended her wishful thoughts and reheated her coffee in the microwave. If only it were that simple to put the warmth back into their marriage.

Dave seldom boarded his flight until the last minute. He was on the phone as usual. “If we wrap things up by, say,

two o'clock, I'm sure we can get in eighteen holes before dark." As he spoke he smiled at his traveling companion, who was finishing her first Evian of the morning. When his company hired a woman as the marketing director for his territory, her responsibilities had originally been fulfilled from the home office. But for the past year she had begun to travel with him at least twice a month.

She was eleven years his junior, and at first he felt a sense of brotherly protection for her, especially when he saw the stares she attracted from other men. But over time he had developed an attraction to her. He couldn't remember exactly when it happened—perhaps the morning they were jammed together in the back of an overcrowded 727 en route to San Antonio, pressing their knees together as they attempted to keep their lunches from sliding off the foldout trays into their laps. He could not deny the sensation he felt that day, unsure whether he was imagining that she felt it too.

But by now he was looking forward to his trips with her. She was someone to talk to who had a life beyond laundry and lunches and homemaking. He had begun to compare and contrast Karen with his colleague, and although he had not fallen off the cliff, he fully realized just how close he was getting to the edge. And with every inch his anticipation mounted.



From all outward appearances, Jack and Cathy were the ideal couple. They had been friends since childhood. Their families vacationed together. They were like brother and sister in high school, and only in college realized the depth of the feelings they had for each other. Neither could bear to think of spending the rest of a lifetime absent the companionship of the other. Everyone seemed delighted when they married.

The first twenty years of marriage went as expected: two healthy children (Danny and Carla), coping with the challenges of schools and business, and eventually a cottage on the lake. Cathy and the kids would move to the lake as soon as school was out, and Jack would join them on weekends and for three weeks in August.

One summer Carla was away at school, so Cathy suggested they rent her room to a college lifeguard named Rick. Jack was impressed with Rick—the firmness of his handshake, the way he would look you in the eye, and his winning personality. He immediately considered Rick a candidate for a sales position in his company. Danny also got along well with Rick, and they went sailing together many evenings when the pool closed and Rick got off work. Rick had a knack for getting things done. He would form a plan and follow it through.

Yet, eventually, Danny started to get a strange unsettling feeling about Rick. It began one night when he awoke in the middle of the night and heard voices on the porch. He picked up snippets of conversation through the screen door. He heard his mom saying, “I haven’t always felt that

way. There used to be a lot more excitement.” The responding voice was Rick’s: “When did things begin to change?”

“What’s this? A midnight feast?” Danny interrupted, trying to disguise his sense of internal disquiet with joviality.

“Oh, no,” said his mom. “Rick and I just started talking about everything. We must wrap it up, but I haven’t had such a good conversation for some time.”

When Danny awoke the following morning, Rick was already at the pool. *Probably was nothing*, he thought as he looked at his mother. She was forty-five and aging well—very well, in fact. She seemed to be improving with age. Her daily routine of running with their golden retriever and her discipline with the abdominizer allowed her to face *Shape* magazine at the grocery checkout without any feelings of inadequacy. Danny’s college buddies frequently told him that his mom was “hot,” and they joked about how his portly, balding dad had attracted her.

“He didn’t always look like that,” Danny would tell them. “He just kind of let things go.”

The next weekend when Jack arrived at the cottage, he was greeted by a sleepy stare from their faithful retriever.

“Hello!” Cathy’s voice sounded a bit odd as she came from the other room to give him a kiss on the cheek. “How was the traffic?” she asked. “Would you like some spaghetti?” “Did your father reach you at the office?”

As Jack began to answer her questions one by one, he thought he detected a kind of flush about Cathy’s face and

neck. He knew she hadn't been running because the dog was in his usual spot in front of the wicker rocker.

"I've been helping Rick tidy the pool," she volunteered. "He works so hard and those lounge chairs are such a hassle to wipe off and straighten. Nobody seems to have a care. They just walk away and leave him to clean everything up."

"That's what he's paid for," growled Jack, surprising even himself by the tone of his response. He couldn't put his finger on any one thing, but by the time he left on Sunday evening, he was sure there was something strange going on with his wife. Was this a physical change in Cathy? Or something else?

His fearful suspicions intensified on Monday when he received a call from his longtime friend, Henry, who owned a cottage across the lake from his. Henry wanted to have lunch with him, and they set it up. Jack wondered what was so important, since they had spent part of the previous day together.

Jack was in his usual booth when Henry arrived. Henry wasted no time as he leaned forward and fixed his gaze on his dear friend. "Jack, I do not know how else to approach this, so I'll just come straight out and say it. Helen and I have strong reason to believe that Cathy and the summer lifeguard are developing a relationship that is destructive and wrong." He then went into details that ripped a gaping hole in Jack's emotions which Jack could neither cover nor control. His shoulders heaved under the

weight of the news. Somewhere in the distance he could hear Henry assuring him that he and Helen would do everything they could.



Danger Signals

These two fictitious stories emerge from countless conversations I have had with couples who failed to recognize the danger signals and plunged headlong into disaster. Usually they arrive dreadfully embarrassed and reluctant to unfold their story. But most of their comments are things I've heard numerous times before:

- “We never thought it would happen to us.”
- “How can God allow such things?”
- “We probably were never right for each other.”
- “Why didn't someone say or do something?”

And the list continues. Sadly, in the majority of cases the couples do not work out their problems and stay together. They fail to put in the effort necessary to climb the mountain of forgiveness and restoration, choosing instead to settle in the plain. And from my observation, the plain is overcrowded with tents.

The Original Plan

After a husband and wife confront problems of the magnitude of those described in these opening stories, they are quick to see that their marriage hasn't gone according to plan. Yet they aren't always so quick to identify exactly what that plan is. Each of the partners usually has some idea of what he or she expects, yet frequently those expectations aren't clearly expressed to the other person.

The original plan of marriage was God's idea. Marriage is of divine origin. It is not, as many young people choose to believe, an institution that human beings dreamed up. If it were, then of course it could be revamped or even set aside. It is therefore imperative that we begin by understanding and submitting ourselves to what the Bible teaches concerning the origin of marriage. At the same time it is vital that we understand the purposes for which God has ordained marriage.

In the preamble to the wedding ceremony, it is usual to hear these purposes stated succinctly. Marriage was created for the lifelong help and comfort which husband and wife ought to give to each other. It exists for the well-being of family life so that children, who are gifts from God, might be brought up in the instruction of the Lord. Marriage strengthens human society, which remains healthy only when the marriage bond is held in honor.

When God created Adam, He said that it was not

good for him to be alone. God made Eve as a human complement and partner for Adam. It is immediately apparent that humans were created to be social and sexual beings. God's blueprint for marriage calls for an exclusive relationship between one man and one woman as they enter into a lifetime covenant. The concept of a *covenant* is vastly different from a contractual agreement that may be set aside at the whim of either party. When God entered into a covenant with Abraham, the solemnity of it was emphasized with a "thick and dreadful darkness" (Genesis 15:12) and a number of animal sacrifices (15:9–11, 17). The covenant promises were made under the pain of death.

Similarly, marriage, says Jay Adams, is a "covenant of companionship."

Marriage involves a covenantal agreement to meet all of your spouse's needs for companionship (on every level: sexual, social, spiritual, etc.) for the rest of your life. It is, therefore, a final act. Christians, unlike non Christians today who enter into trial marriages, annual, renewable marriage contracts, and the like, need not live daily under the threat of divorce. The binding nature of the divine covenant assures them that divorce is not an option. That is a wonderful difference that Christians possess. The covenant is a life commitment.¹

In marriage, a man and woman are joined in a way that cannot compare with any other relationship. It is not a tenuous arrangement that may be forsaken at will. Rather, it is a binding commitment involving the legal, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of becoming one.

Despite the clarity with which the Bible speaks to this matter, many Christians appear to be confused. Recent surveys reveal that as many as two-thirds of those interviewed considered divorce “a reasonable solution to a problem marriage.”²

While we may not be surprised by such a perspective among non-Christians, it is tragic to consider the extent to which the salt has lost its taste when it comes to sexual purity and marital fidelity in the Christian community. If we are going to be at all successful in avoiding marital failure, it is imperative that we exercise our minds in the truth of Scripture and yield our wills in submission to God’s clear directives.

Our submission to God’s design must be total and wholehearted—whether we can see the pragmatic benefits or not. For example, in an environment riddled with sexually transmitted diseases it is not difficult to commit to the ideal of monogamy. People may care little about the divine mandate, yet they consider the human benefit. If we adopt this approach, we will only do as we are told when we are able to identify our immediate rewards. So if wives do not see the benefits of submitting to their husbands, they will seek loopholes through which they can

escape the obligation instead of submitting to the truth of Scripture. God's Word is to be obeyed whether we find it to be immediately to our liking or not. It is in becoming obedient to His Word and His will that we discover true freedom. Consider the benefits:

- Making a lifelong commitment focuses our attention on “staying the course” rather than on short bursts of enthusiasm.
- The freedom of marriage “in the Lord” is similarly rewarding. To be able to share with one another at the deepest levels of spiritual understanding is a great joy.
- As husband and wife learn to put each other first, they discover the pleasures that come only when they get past living for themselves. Wives are challenged to “submit to your husbands” (Ephesians 5:22) and husbands are told to “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church” (Ephesians 5:25).

If these intense obligations are defined in purely negative terms, they may seem deplorable. But seen from God's perspective, these commands provide order and joy in a relationship. Attempting to continually put oneself first never works. But learning to put a spouse first can become a lifelong pleasure for those with hearts for God's Word.

- Rejecting divorce as an option allows for great security in marriage. It means that when problems arise—no matter how great those problems may be—the couple will learn to return to the instruction manual of God’s Word and rely upon the help of God’s Spirit.

Some time ago in my *Tabletalk* daily Bible reading program, I found the following comments to be most helpful.

In their commitment to the unity of marriage, the couple promises to be faithful to each other if poverty and disease should come upon them. They vow before God and man to be faithful if they meet a more attractive, a more intelligent, a more compassionate person. The wife vows to be faithful if her husband loses his high-paying job, his esteem before men, his mental faculties, or his youthful vigor. She commits to him even when he doesn’t measure up to the standard God has set for him, even when he does not love her as Christ loves the church. The husband vows to be faithful if his wife loses her beauty, her charm, or her tenderness. His commitment remains steadfast even when she is unsubmitive, disrespectful, and unable to manage the household well. Through it all, the two remain one flesh.³

Without an underlying covenantal commitment between marriage partners, it is too easy to find “deal breakers” that will negate the marriage contract. So, since the covenant is so important, we need to take a closer look at exactly what it is that marriage partners agree to do.