

*"Nothing short of a masterpiece."
- Ann Voskamp*

Letters
TO MY
Daughters
THE ART
OF BEING A Wife

BARBARA RAINEY

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Letters To My Daughters: Discussion Guide

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5800 Ranch Drive

Little Rock, Arkansas 72223

1-800-FL-TODAY • FamilyLife.com

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WELCOME TO

Letters To My Daughters Book Club

Marriage should be enjoyed, not endured. It is meant to be a vibrant relationship between two people who love each other with passion, commitment, understanding, and grace. So secure is the bond God desires between a husband and a wife that he uses it to illustrate the magnitude of Christ's love for the church (Ephesians 5:25–33).

Do you have that kind of love in your marriage?

Relationships often fade over time as people drift apart—but only if the relationship is left unattended. We have a choice in the matter; our marriages don't have to grow dull. Perhaps we just need to give them some attention.

Whether your marriage needs a complete makeover or just a few small adjustments, we encourage you to consult God's design. Although written nearly two thousand years ago, Scripture still speaks clearly and powerfully about the conflicts and challenges men and women face. Letters to my Daughters will help you see these lived out in a practical light.

Do I really need to be part of a group? Couldn't I just go through this study alone?

While you could work through the study as an individual, you would miss the opportunity to connect with friends and to learn from one another's experiences. You will find that the questions in each session not only help you better understand marriage, but they also create an environment of warmth and fellowship with other women as you study together.

What does it take to lead a book club?

Leading a group is much easier than you may think, because the leader is simply a facilitator who guides the participants through the discussion questions. You are not teaching the material but are helping other women discover and apply biblical truths.

The discussion questions you're holding has all the information and guidance you need to participate in or lead a group. The sessions in this study can be easily led without a lot of preparation time.

What is the typical schedule?

The book club discussion is nine weeks long. The sessions are designed to take sixty minutes in the group with reading for the participants to complete between sessions.

Isn't it risky to talk about your marriage in a group?

The group setting should be enjoyable and informative—and nonthreatening. **THREE SIMPLE GROUND RULES** will help ensure that everyone feels comfortable and gets the most out of the experience:

1. Share nothing that will embarrass your spouse.
2. You may pass on any question you do not want to answer.
3. If at all possible, complete the reading between group sessions.

What other help does FamilyLife offer?

Our list of marriage and family resources continues to grow. Visit FamilyLife.com to learn more about our

- Weekend to Remember® and other live conferences and events;
- slate of radio broadcasts, including the nationally syndicated FamilyLife Today®, Real FamilyLife with Dennis Rainey®, and FamilyLife This Week®;
- multimedia resources for small groups, churches, and community networking;
- interactive products for parents, couples, small-group leaders, and one-to-one mentors; and
- assortment of blogs, forums, and other online connections.

Marriage Is a Masterpiece

Welcome to a conversation. These questions are designed to help you think deeply and share honestly with another woman or a group.

In my book, I speak often of the diligent, even painful work required to create a strong, beautiful marriage. In fact, my husband expressed concern during the editing of the manuscript that perhaps I was painting with too few happy colors. We talked about this together, because I wanted him to honestly endorse every word I'd written. As I explained that I was crafting with such realism in order to give women hope that their discouragements or sufferings or difficulties aren't unusual, he understood and agreed.

I invite you to grab your artist's smock and engage honestly with these questions. Together with your friend, it's my hope that you'll gain a new vision of the masterpiece God wants to create in your marriage. It is not beyond His strong, sculpting arm.

At the end of each list of questions is a prayer. It's easy in our fast-paced lives to skip it entirely or skim the words quickly, say amen, and move on. My encouragement is that you will boldly come before God's throne with these words. Have someone read this prayer out loud on behalf of your group and then if you desire others can pray personal requests. God delights in hearing His daughters' voices coming to Him. He loves you deeply and wants your joy to be complete. Take the time to go to Him. It is always time well spent.

We'd love to hear about your group and guide you in finding answers to especially tough questions. May your conversations be helpful and hopeful.

Questions

1. If you don't already know everyone in your group, introduce yourself. Tell how long you've been married and, briefly, how you and your husband met.
2. I'd love for you to take a minute or two to study the painting Golden Pine (page 17) and its description (page 16). I describe the multi-faceted nature of a woman's role in marriage as "helper and lover, one who respects, believes, and trusts," as it relates to this amazing painting. "Yet all must work together, connected, intertwined daily—like the roots of a tree that dig into the ground and the limbs on the branches that forever twirl and twist outward" (pages 17–18).

Women, indeed, encounter so many faces of marriage! This might include the odd assortment of "hats" we wear, or the conglomeration of tasks for a thriving partnership. Talk about some of the facets of being a wife that you personally manage—as well as which aspect draws most of your attention right now. How have these changed in the seasons of your relationship?

3. Here is another quote to discuss: "Many see His design as if it were diabolical, a piece of art they find ugly. They don't see the loveliness of His Word to us, of His names for us, and instead call them restrictive and distorted" (page 21). Calling good evil—or irrelevant—is certainly not new. How have you seen this in society at large? Are there specific strokes of God's design for marriage that you struggle to understand or find beautiful? Explain.

Is there a portion of His design you've come to appreciate more as you've been married?

4. I frequently compare our expectations entering marriage with the reality we find further down the path. Unmet expectations can feel painful. But some can reveal our own naïveté. Describe an errant expectation you had before marriage that now makes you laugh.

5. For fun (optional): If your marriage were a painting, what would it look like? The style? The artist? The subject? The palette?
6. Discuss what you hope to find in this study. As you feel comfortable—and without disparaging your spouse!—share one way the group can pray for you as a wife.

Prayer

Sovereign God, thank You for knowing and seeing all things—and for Your perfection as the Creator of marriage. Thank You for wisely and lovingly choosing husbands for us, and for crafting us and our spouses for each other. Lord, we want more of You in our marriages! We acknowledge that in Your passion for unity and sacrificial love, You want marriages that reflect who You are. And we want our marriages to point our world to You. Would You renovate the broken places in our relationships? We need You to overcome what is lacking, to teach us how to love. We ask You and trust You to change us at the heart level in the weeks to come. Thank You, Lord. Amen.

Marriage Is Like Fine Cuisine

I hope you've had good conversations with your friends and your husband since your group last met. My hope in these discussions and occasionally intimate questions is to help you view the artwork that is your marriage with new eyes. I hope to lend you God's perspective—and in some cases your husband's—so you can rightly evaluate what changes or actions are needed. It's also an opportunity to worship God for what's going right.

Comparing marriage to cooking has been helpful for me. As the many culinary competitions and tantalizing demonstrations on TV have shown us, combinations of ingredients and flavors can be beyond what most of us can reasonably execute at home. Marriage is intended to be a one-of-a-kind feast with the ingredients God has mingled. But unlike television's mistakes in execution which lead to one chef being "chopped" from the competition, God delights in patiently blending with us, placing His hands over ours with flawless technique.

Sharing with one another helps us know we are not alone and can give us courage when we encounter those ingredients our palettes initially reject. I've prayed for your group and for you to become all that God intended for you when He called you to marriage.

Questions

1. I relate the story of my daughter's lesson from culinary school that we "eat with our eyes first" (page 29). List five traits that initially drew you to your spouse. Then, articulate how some of those "ingredients" immediately positioned themselves as a complement to your own.
2. Describing marriage as fine cuisine elevates our view of its goodness and possible richness. Expert chefs know that an excellent dish requires careful technique combined with the melding of flavors and patient simmering. In your mind, what are the advantages to this kind of learned, patient "technique" in marriage?

To carry the analogy a bit further, contrast this with creating, say, a more "fast-food marriage"—with convenient, quick interchanges that satisfy immediate needs. What would be lacking?
3. What crazy things have you done in the name of love? Why? Discuss whether you still do some of them—and why or why not.
4. Our good friend Tim Muehlhoff shares often about a marriage study which estimates that approximately 69 percent of conflicts couples face are irresolvable because no one is actually wrong (see page 38). Can you describe an issue like this in your own relationship?
5. How are you and your spouse fundamentally different? (Remember to steer clear of disparaging your spouse.)
6. Read Genesis 1:27. Together, man and woman portray the image of God! How has your appreciation of your spouse deepened as your relationship "simmers" longer? How have you learned to more artfully blend—and savor—your differences?

Prayer

Lord, thank You for our husbands, in all their strengths and weaknesses, in all of their differences, and particularly, in the ways you created them in Your image. Create in us a growing and continued gratitude for the ways we complement each other. We need You to open our eyes so that we can more

deeply appreciate Your good gift in our spouses. Help us to be patient as we both grow and mature. Fill us with great faith in You and Your ability to knit us together, to change us to be like You. We trust You, Lord. Amen.

Marriage Is Like Grand Architecture

In many ways this chapter is the most important one of the book. The topic is one that is a daily need, an ongoing challenge—and also our greatest hope for breathtaking beauty in marriage. Of all the lessons I’ve learned about myself, about my husband, and about life in general, the most important one is this: I cannot successfully sculpt a thriving marriage or the Christian life on my own. As I learned from my watercolor class, then my oil painting class: Until I willingly absorb guidance, my work promises to remain amateur, its colors muddied, its image poorly rendered.

Marriage is God’s elaborate, intricate, stunning design. I am completely unable to form a lovely relationship structure. You will discover in this chapter the analogy of your marriage as a chapel or cathedral. And I don’t see this at all as a leap of imagination, but as an apt description of how God views us as we carry in us the life of Christ—His worship resounding against the rafters of our lives, pouring from our doors, and emanating its rich tones through the windows of our souls.

May you discover the strength and power only He can supply for your life and your marriage. It is both a great joy and a great relief to learn your complete inadequacy.

Questions

1. Let’s start our conversation with this quote: “My marriage and yours must be filled with the Spirit of Christ, each spouse humbly following His leadership, if we want it to be all it was built to be” (page 48). Have you witnessed marriages that could be described like this? From your observation, what characteristics does a marriage “alive with the life of Christ” exhibit as markedly different? Would you say your marriage is like this?
2. If you are a follower of Christ, I know you’ve learned as I have that marriages can get off track when they cease being built on the Cornerstone, on a solid foundation. What particular “fissures” in the bedrock of your marriage separate you from your Cornerstone? (Perhaps it’s exhaustion, or different subcultures in your families of origin, or varying opinions on a key issue, like money.)
3. Many of us can identify with the sentiment of getting off track without being able to pinpoint the exact source of that foreboding feeling. To reveal the source, I want us to think about the things in our lives that are critically important to us ... the things that are so crucial that they can actually usurp Jesus’ rightful place on the throne in our lives. I’m not just talking about material things. I’m talking about values, goals, dreams—desires that actually begin as healthy longings in our lives that can stealthily, silently morph into demands. Desires over which we are willing to punish others or become bitter when we don’t receive them. So I want to ask a few questions to help us consider whether there are things that may have become idols in our lives—anything other than God from which we believe our happiness, peace, or fulfillment will come. For example:
 - a. What do you most fear?
 - b. Finish this sentence: If I only had _____, my life would be incredible.
 - c. What do you most expect of yourself? Of your husband?
 - d. What do you pray for? Wish for? Dream about?
 - e. What promises do you make to yourself? (For example, _____ will never happen to me or to my kids; _____ is the kind of life I want.)

A story I don't tell in the book, and which is too long to tell here, involves both the first and last of the above questions—something I deeply feared for my daughters that I thought would crush me or them if it ever happened. But when it did happen I learned that even in the anguish that came, God was sufficient for me.

Fears and promises can lead us to attempt to control, meaning we run our lives instead of letting Christ rule, all to ensure everything goes as we think it should. Our marriages are affected by our inner longings, hopes, and promises. God wants us to surrender all to Him—including, and especially, that which we cherish as most precious. He wants transparency between the two of you, which keeps the windows of your chapel clean with His redemptive washing.

Take a few minutes of silence after your discussion on the above questions. Are you expecting more of your husband than God intended? Are you controlling your life or your marriage out of fear that trusting God or trusting your husband would fail? Pray and give up those things to which you are clinging. Ask Him to rule your life and tell Him you want to trust Him as sufficient.

4. I write in this chapter, "God wanted me to cling to Him, to feel His truth, to be intimately acquainted with His power to redeem me and my circumstances for His good. God has taken me from the early years of self-effort which said, 'I can do this,' to a deep consciousness today of my inability to do life on my own" (page 64).

Describe a time when you felt like you were ready to quit—perhaps not in the form of divorce, but as a decision to simply stop building, to stop trying, to settle for less.

Talk about this deep consciousness of personal inability or inadequacy. Have you come to experience your own inability to do marriage on your own? If you have, it's a good place to be. Spend some time when you end your session praying together for one another's perseverance and for penetrating humility as you look to God for the radical strengthening of your marriages.

5. Late in the chapter, I tell you what I must frequently choose: "Be honest about your selfishness with each other. It's worth the risk. Confess your sin every time and grant forgiveness freely. It keeps the windows clean and clear" (page 70). What makes this kind of nakedness, this kind of honesty, so difficult? How do you think this kind of vulnerability and confession changes a marriage?

Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden, suddenly ashamed and blaming one another, even God ("this spouse you gave me!"). In what ways does Satan (and our own sin) deceive us into thinking that this actually betters our relationship?

Prayer

Almighty God, without You as the Cornerstone, our marriages topple—or become a monument to something false. We confess our utter need for You to bind us fast to Yourself. As we inevitably witness our husbands' shortcomings, we ask You for the wisdom to respond graciously, patiently, and wisely—even in our minds. Give us Your power to cling to You in trust and profound humility at all times, but especially when we feel we can't go on. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit for it is Him who will give us all we need for our unique marriage. Thank You, Lord, that those who trust in You are never put to shame. Amen.

Marriage Is Like Elegant Music

I have been encouraged recently to hear young married women speaking about their God-given title, “helper,” in a positive, welcoming way. It hasn’t always been discussed in terms that make a wife sense her value.

My goal in this chapter was to tell the stories of how I learned God’s masterful, 360-degree perspective and intentions for the place He created me to occupy in relation to my husband. Yes, Dennis and I have had and continue to have our misunderstandings and challenges in this aspect, but feeling unimportant, lesser, or marginalized in our marriage because I am his helper is, by God’s generous grace, not a struggle for me anymore.

I hope and pray that this conversation will loan you God’s eyes on this exquisite role instead of the eyes of the world. I hope you will grow in striking confidence as you see your place for what it is: crucial, lovely, and supremely valuable. May each of you become women who know deeply that God’s intentions for you are always good.

Questions

1. Our understanding of the word “helper” can be enhanced when we appreciate its Hebrew roots. It’s what God called Eve in Genesis 2:18 when He said, “I will make a helper suitable for him.” That word “helper” is translated from the Hebrew word ezer.

This title is no less important than the titles of “queen” or “co-regent.” In fact, one of God’s biblical names is Jehovah Ezer, which was often used in referring to military strength! The word is used 13 other times in the Old Testament, usually referring to military helpers or heroes. Check out some of the Scriptures that refer to God as Helper: Deuteronomy 33:29; Psalm 10:14, 37:40, 54:1, 70:5, 72:12-14. Then read Hebrews 13:6. Together, try to articulate this portion of the vision for “helper” that God likely had in mind for Eve, based on her reflection of His own image.

Is this different from the concept you’ve had for what a helper is? Is there a way your own idea of your role might be expanded or changed? Talk about this in your group.

2. What do you think the idea of “helper” in the Scriptures above looks like practically in our marriages?
3. Articulate what you understand about what I’ll call “the Esther principle”—the careful wisdom, discernment, and courage Esther showed to influence her husband on behalf of millions of people. What particular wisdom did Esther utilize that helped correct her husband’s world-altering mistake, thereby saving her people?
4. “Helping is not instructing. It is not mothering. It is not enabling” (page 89). How do women tell the difference? What are practical ways that a woman can empower rather than enable?
5. I tell the story of suggesting an alternative eating location to my husband to show how giving a choice helped us resolve a potential conflict. It’s easy for me to just point out the mistake or error and assume he understands why it matters to me. But I realized that speaking to something that I know matters to him (“Saving money speaks to him!” [p. 91])—and thereby understanding his interests—is also important. And I continually find benefit in the beauty of pausing in silence to allow the Holy Spirit to work. What practical techniques from this chapter do you find helpful as we seek to work as empowering teammates to our husbands in the midst of conflict?
6. A very overlooked but extremely important principle in any healthy relationship is “presence matters” (page 99). Think about ideas you have for being more present with your husband and more present in your relationship, and then share with your group. Also talk about the hindrances and interruptions

today that reduce or threaten our presence. After the discussion decide on at least one way you can demonstrate to your husband that “I’m with you” this week.

Prayer

Father God, thank You for the incredible value You have placed upon women, and upon the vital roles You’ve carefully crafted for us. As we look to be the women You want us to be, we thank You that You have given us everything we need for life and godliness, through our knowledge of You (2 Peter 1:3-4). As individuals, teach us how to grow as unique and powerful teammates to our spouses—to be the intelligent and wise helpers You made us to be. Please give us discernment and understanding in areas of conflict; and ultimately, craft our marriages to honor You. Amen.

Marriage Is Like Beautiful Dancing

I hope you're feeling inspired by the insights and understanding you're gaining. Are you seeing a higher, lovelier view of all God longs for your marriage to be? I'd love to hear the stories of what God is showing you of Himself and of His intricate work in you and your marriage. Email me at letters@familylife.com.

This chapter is all about who leads and who follows, a topic that we women have often likened to fingernails on a chalkboard. This is the nitty-gritty of marriage, the reality of your everyday life with this man of yours. I find that my response to God's (and my husband's) authority distills so many of the true questions in my soul, questions as old as Eve—of trust and faith, of humility, of being truly loved.

I pray you will be brutally honest with yourself and God. Then may you have the courage to bravely share what you are learning with your group. Encourage one another to be radical believers in the choreography He planned for marriage, that your individual marriages might display the dance of light, calling others who are watching to follow Him too!

Questions

1. Throughout life, we face a myriad of authority figures: teachers, coaches, policemen, government leaders, pastors, bosses; no one, in truth, is exempt from authority. In your mind, what are the benefits of authority in any relationship? I write about the truth that we can't dance well unless we pay attention to the music, and to our partner. How does this help us as wives? How do you think it's easier to follow when you pay attention to your partner? How would you articulate the "music" I refer to?
2. "Interestingly, during that summer of classes, we often switched partners, and I found that following was not the same with each man" (page 105). It's easy to let our minds embellish another woman's journey with her own husband, even, perhaps, to imagine how much easier her marriage must be. How can this undermine your own marriage? Verses you might want to read aloud in your group are: Proverbs 3:5-6; 14:30; 1 Corinthians 7:17; Philippians 4:11-12, 19; 1 Timothy 6:6.
3. "During one lesson, our instructor had the women close their eyes and practice feeling the tension changes in his hands, one on her back and the other holding her hand. Inherent in following his lead is a large measure of trust, which became crystal clear during our eyes-closed lesson" (page 106). I included this story because I learned that an increased sensitivity to my husband's leading was necessary in order to respond fluidly and in unison. It was a lesson in another level of trust. How do you think a wife's trust changes a husband's ability to lead?
4. There are no perfect partners in dance, or in marriage. Read the following Scriptures, and discuss them in light of the difficulty we experience in following a poor leader: 1 Corinthians 7:13-16; 1 Peter 3:1-6.
5. "The best dancers keep moving even when one partner makes a misstep. Together they trust each other to correct it on the next step or two. When a wife practices these steps of graceful trust, mistakes can become part of the beautiful whole" (page 107). Discuss the power of a gracious woman, like Abigail in 1 Samuel 25. Recall a time when you were thankful your husband covered over your weakness or failure and share it with your group.
6. "Femininity is a matter of the heart, as is submission ... [Donna's] heart is what makes her feminine, not because she performs certain tasks" (page 112). How would you define femininity? What makes femininity attractive?

7. In this chapter, I share a quote from John Piper which explains this topic more clearly than I ever could: “Biblical submission for the wife is the divine calling to honor and affirm her husband’s leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts.” I later add, “When he improves, I win, for we are a dance team for life” (page 115). Let’s get down to it. Do you see submission as a win-win? Why or why not?
8. I write openly about our susceptibility to emotional deception. Can you recall a time in which this has happened to you? What do you do, or could you do, to be more aware and protective of this kind of vulnerability?

Prayer

Lord, thank You that women carry the privilege of reflecting Your image just as men do—and that we display You better together when called to marriage. Through Your Holy Spirit, would you give us hearts that yearn to honor You in the way we respond to our husbands? Give us Your vision for femininity, for the beauty of a couple that embraces Your powerful, wise design. Help us not only to respond graciously to our husbands, but also to empower them for the good works You’ve prepared for them—and for our relationship. You are good, Father, and we trust Your plan. Amen.

Marriage Is Like a Secret Garden

We've come to the chapter that any discussion of marriage must address. Its intimate and delicate nature dictates sensitivity in any discussion.

What I pray you will gather here are the shimmering, holy intentions God has for you and your husband in sex. It can be the most dazzling flower in the garden of your marriage.

Recently my niece told us she wanted a marriage like ours. Even though we only see her once a year at our annual family Thanksgiving gathering, she has been observing us into her own adulthood. It was a reminder to me that all our marriages are telling a story. She has seen a love flame in us that is still burning, still reflecting His passion even after 40 years. Though we have suffered much over our decades of marriage we are committed to watering and nourishing our cherished secret garden. And it shows—even to those who venture only around the public grounds.

May it be so for you now and always.

Questions

1. I describe sex as “the holiest place in marriage. We come near to the oneness of God Himself when we are there” (page 137). What do you think I mean by this? Explain whether you agree and why.
2. “When we take our clothes off, we are exposing far more than our physical bodies. It’s as if our ability to hide falls on the floor with the clothing ... Our insecurities ask, ‘Will you still love me if you know or see this?’ They clamor to be hidden again, and we wish we could dismiss them easily, but they must be named and exposed to each other. Will you be forgiven, will you be understood, will you still be loved?” (page 140). Compare this with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:25. How does sex pull us closer to God’s original design for marriage? In what other ways can marriage be holistically “naked and unashamed”? How does our sin threaten this?
3. “In the safety of a committed marriage, the miracle of healing and wholeness by the Spirit of God works its redemption power slowly ... step by step ... over time” (page 140). How can sex actually bring healing to a marriage?
4. I quote my husband’s oft-stated declaration, “women are powerful” (page 145). Then I elaborate, “This is a very practical way you as a wife can and must show him respect. If you belittle or shame his male sexuality, any other attempts at showing respect will feel hollow to him” (page 145). How could this “power” be used in either incredibly destructive or staggeringly constructive ways in a man’s life? How would you describe the strength he gains, or loses, in the bedroom?
5. I tread on the painful, broken ground of sexual pain—but also healing: “What a wonder it is to be welcomed in love, to not be alone with your losses but to be with another who loves in spite of the loss. Love does cover a multitude of sins. God delights to redeem and rescue, and He’s at work in this aspect of your marriage, too” (page 151). Sexual choices—both our own, and those who have scarred us—plunge to the soul level. What does whole, accepting marital sex offer for restoration, for rebuilding what has been broken? (Note: A number of tremendous resources can facilitate healing from sexual pain, including *The Wounded Heart*, by Dr. Dan B. Allender, and *Every Woman’s Battle*, by Shannon Ethridge. If you are struggling in this sensitive area, please consider seeking the help of a trusted Christian counselor.)

6. I offer several practical ways to plant constructive “hedges” around your marriage emotionally and sexually. What are some helpful techniques you’ve heard to effectively protect a modern marriage’s “secret garden”?
7. I divulge some of the “maintenance” work (page 160) we must cultivate in our sexual relationships to keep them thriving in the varied seasons of life and their demands. What problems can crop up when sexual closeness isn’t a priority? What can wives do practically to keep physical intimacy thriving, particularly in the “winter” of a difficult stretch?
8. I relate the beginning of a vulnerable conversation I had on a road trip with my husband, which allowed the opportunity to simply communicate openly about sex. Why do you think this is challenging for couples? What do you perceive can be some of the lingering rewards from conversations like this?

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank You for being the Mastermind behind something so intimate, holistic, and powerful. We ask You for complete and lasting healing in our marriages, our own souls, and our spouses from sexual brokenness. In the areas of our marriages where sex brings anger, pain, regret, and loss, we pray that you would bring us to a place of trust, wholeness, and restoration. Show us patience, wisdom, and protective jealousy toward our sexuality. Help us to meet our husbands’ needs, to bring them the strength, acceptance, and security You created sex to offer. We ask You to make our sexual intimacy a place of secure, thriving freedom in every season of life. And in the end, Father, we pray for patience to trust you for Your timing in our healing and desired transformation. We pray for grace and mercy as we wait on You. And we give thanks for the difficulties we all face knowing each one is an opportunity to see You redeem and restore and make our secret garden beautiful and of great value to us. Amen.

Marriage Is Like Masterful Photography

My husband has often said, “Communication is not what is said but what is heard.” Meaning matters more than words because most communication is non-verbal. The words you say can be less telling than what you don’t say.

I find that the stories we capture in the still, telling moments of photography are a mirror of marriage. What you leave out of the image you share is as important as what you choose to say: Does it “build ... fit the occasion ... give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29)?

This chapter is the essence of how to become a grace-filled wife and woman. Our words always emanate from our hearts (Matthew 12:34). I pray God gives you the grace to look intently, honestly evaluating the transparency in your marriage and in your own heart. May your greatest desire be to see your husband as God does and to portray to others that image: as loved and valuable enough to die for.

Questions

1. I advise in this chapter, “I believe that much of what people think about my husband is based on my opinion. If I communicate that I don’t trust him, why would anyone else trust him? If I complain to others about his faults, what will others see when they are around him? They will see him as I’ve portrayed him” (page 181). And then later, “So how do you help your family know and love this man you married?” (page 182).

This can be a sensitive topic in a culture where we value “authenticity” and ridding ourselves of what we view as outdated, irrelevant values. Together, examine Scriptures such as Proverbs 31:25-26; Ephesians 4:15, 29; Ephesians 5:33. Discuss their implications about our speech. Can we be honest when we talk about our husbands or marriages but still portray gratitude and respect? Talk about this together.

2. In Genesis 2:18 God creates woman as Adam’s helper, as we’ve discussed. Part of this role as helper involves some fierce protectiveness of our husbands. Of the suggestions to protect and uphold them in social situations and in reputation, which did you find most helpful? And why?
3. Centering on our husbands’ flaws with a “zoom lens” is all too easy to do. Is it wrong to identify a spouse’s shortcomings? At what point does identification evolve into the critical, fault-finding attitude that I’ve described? How should a Christ-centered wife deal with what she inevitably sees lacking in her husband? Discuss healthy ways to deal with a spouse’s faults, in a way that helps both of you to grow to be like Christ. (Remember: Keep this conversation spouse-honoring!)
4. I write, “Photography is a creative form of communication, of telling a story, of sending an important message. So, too, are words” (page 172), and then later ask you to grade your verbal self-control (page 182). If you were to focus on one area of your speech that God desires to purify, what would it be? What practical steps could you take to prevent any corrupting talk from coming out of your mouth, but give grace that fits each occasion (see Ephesians 4:29)?
5. Proverbs 31 says of the wife subsequently described, “The heart of her husband trusts in her.” And I affirm, “One of the greatest needs of every man is a wife he can trust implicitly” (page 181)—no matter with whom his wife has spoken. Read Genesis 2:25 together. How is this trustworthiness part of protecting the private kingdom or garden that is your marriage? When you think about how you hope your husband speaks about you to his friends, family, and co-workers, what comes to mind?

6. In the story about Russian photographer Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii, I explain how “in an untrained, unknowing hand, Sergei’s raw exposed plates could have been discarded, and the world would have missed the glory of their transformation into a positive full-color image ... The negative places in any man’s life, or woman’s, for that matter, are opportunities for God’s transformative hand to work. When we as wives find those places and shamelessly expose them to the eyes and ears of friends or family we are destroying the opportunity to see glory” (pages 184–185). What helps you to wait in anticipation of what God is doing, rather than exposing and robbing your husband’s undeveloped areas of potential “glory”?

Prayer

Holy God, thank You for the ways that You submerge us beneath Your grace, for the ways You cover our shame and patiently wait for us to be made beautiful in Your time. Let Your grace penetrate us to the core in ways that it can't help but be reflected in even our most intimate relationships—and especially as wives. Cause us to be places of trust, security, and refuge for our husbands. Help our words, too, to give grace, to build up those who hear, as fits each occasion. Help us have ears to hear how we sound to our husbands and to You our Father. Let us speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), and to faithfully wait and work for You to be revealed more and more in our marriages. Amen.

Marriage Is Like Watercolor Painting

My first love in art was watercolor. The transparency, the layered washes, the delicate and often difficult nature of the medium on paper—all converged to make it my favorite medium for decades. When I was 16 I discovered Andrew Wyeth and purchased my first art book. His practiced, light-of-hand skills both inspired me and filled me with awe.

Painting was the analogy I used in the first pages of this book, and it is now the last. Marriage is, to me, unquestionably an art form—and in that way, a statement of its Master.

No matter which comparison I've used that speaks most clearly to you, the overriding theme I've hoped to craft is that God is the divine Artist: of your life, your marriage, your story.

This chapter articulates the trust required when He dabs on dark colors we don't like, acknowledging He has skillfully, precisely placed those colors on canvas for us. He is not indiscriminate, nor is he unintentional. Nor are His strokes cold or heartless as He bends over us with His own brush.

Choose to welcome His brush strokes as perfect for you and your man. Give thanks for what He is doing even when it makes no sense. In time you will see that the divine Artist is both unequivocally trustworthy and masterful.

Questions

1. In my analogy of watercolors, each of our marriages—no matter how young they are—have wide swaths of dark paint: times of pain and difficulty. As you feel comfortable, talk about some of the murkier tones that have met your marriage.
2. Again, as you feel comfortable—how have times of suffering changed your own marriage?
3. “I was afraid in the deep recesses of my heart of [an unpredictable] God, though I would never have said so. But God is not a bit afraid to add dark to our lives, because He knows He can work rich beauty in those places” (page 198).

Gazing at the dark areas of your life, take a minute to reflect privately: What do you fear most? As you're able, discuss aspects of your experience that offer the most significant challenge to trusting God. What Scripture can you think of that will realign your fear into faith? A verse I repeat throughout the book is Luke 1:37. Perhaps it will turn your eyes back to Jesus.

4. “Life feels unfair anytime we let our eyes view [another] couple's canvas from afar” (page 207). How do our “drifting eyes” affect our relationship with God? For further thought, check out John 21:18-22.
5. I discuss the loneliness of suffering, even when couples talk with and care for one another. What practical things can suffering spouses do to continue to move toward one another, rather than away, in painful times?
6. I mention author Jerry Sittser—who lost his wife, daughter, and mother in a tragic accident. In his book *A Grace Disguised*, he writes, “It is not ... the experience of loss that becomes the defining moment of our lives ... It is how we respond that matters.”

Do you believe this? Does this seem cold or unfeeling to you? Why do you think Sittser says this? Consider Romans 5:1-5; Hebrews 12:2-3; and 1 Peter 1:3-9.

7. I've written this sentence because I've learned it is true: “The angel appearances, the multiplied oil, the miraculous victories only occurred when God's people were at the end of their rope but still full of faith. May it be so of you” (page 212). Talk about a time when you were at the end of your rope and God showed up in ways that you could have never anticipated.

8. I share this thought from Ken Gire's book *The North Face of God*: "C. S. Lewis noted the paradox when he asked, 'Why are so many holy places dark places?' They are holy because, even in the dark of night and the cold of March, God is at work, breaking through the husk around our hearts and bringing life from under the dead leaves." Have you found this to be true? Discuss a time that your suffering found you remarkably near to God. Everyone in your group will be encouraged to hear when you share. We all need to hear every story of His coming near for our faith to grow and remain strong.

Prayer

Good Shepherd, Your Word tells us to rejoice in times of suffering. So right now, we choose to trust You, and even thank You, in the greater picture You are painting for Your glory and for our truest good. When we find ourselves at that continued choice for either fear or faith, help us to repeatedly and increasingly choose You—the Faithful One, the Alpha and Omega. Please hold us, shape us, and comfort us in the deep and dark places of our pain. Drive us closer to our spouses rather than leaving us in isolation. Gently reveal to us the areas where we are not trusting You, and please remind us over and over of Your trustworthiness. Open our eyes to Your faithfulness, goodness, and greatness everywhere we look. Help us to cling to You even in our unbelief. Amen.

CHAPTER 9

Marriage Is for Ever After

Daughters of Eve, we have reached the last chapter together. Thank you for reading, for working on these questions to help apply these biblical principles to your life and marriage. I hope you have been encouraged and strengthened, and I hope that my prayers for lives changed by greater faith and trust in Jesus are emerging in striking reality within you.

The questions below contain verses for you to look up and discuss, so grab your phones or Bibles and take turns reading out loud these divine words of God to you. It is this living and active Word who transforms our lives and extends unshakable hope for tomorrow.

I pray you will celebrate the changes you've seen with your group. May your marriages reflect the light, the love, the beauty, the music, the taste, the dance—and eventually, the happily ever after—of glory in which God longs for you to revel.

Questions

1. What effect can an unyielding vision of heaven have on our marriages? Read these verses together: 1 Peter 1:3-9, 1 Corinthians 15:42-58; and 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.
2. How would you describe the role of our marriages in the meantime? Read Matthew 5:16; 1 Corinthians 2:14-17; and Ephesians 5:29-33.
3. How has your vision for marriage and the art of being a wife changed and developed in this study? What are the main ideas you believe God would like you to meditate on and live out?
4. Are there ways as a group you can continue to encourage one another? Would each of you or two of you as partners be willing to lead another group of wives in this book study knowing that teachers and leaders often learn the most? That is reason enough to find a group, perhaps of younger wives, that you can mentor and lead.
5. How can this group best pray for you?

Prayer

Together, consider praying this benediction for your marriages from Jude 1: 24-25:

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.