

JOHN & STASI
ELDREDGE

Bestselling authors of *Wild at Heart* and *Captivating*

LOVE

&

WAR

A silhouette of a man and a woman holding hands and standing on a rocky cliff edge. They are looking out over a vast landscape of rolling hills and valleys under a sunset sky with soft, warm colors. The man is on the left, wearing a hat, and the woman is on the right, wearing a long-sleeved top and pants. The cliff they stand on is rugged and dark, contrasting with the bright, hazy background.

Find Your Way
to Something Beautiful
in Your Marriage

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LOVE AND WAR

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INTRODUCTION

It Can Be Done



“Dearly Beloved, we have gathered here today in the presence of God to witness the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony. The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation, and our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. . . .”

And so the ceremony begins.

It is a ritual ancient as time and young as the hearts of the man and woman standing before us. (These brides and grooms look younger every year.) John is officiating. The bride and groom are dear friends. They are in love. We, their family and friends, are here to support them, celebrate them, all dressed up in our Sunday best. The church is glowing with candlelight; the flowers are so lovely. The groom looks terrified but happy; the bride is nervous and radiant. Suddenly I wonder, *Did I sit on the proper side? Was it bride's side on the left, groom's side on the right? Or the other way around?* The bridesmaids are stunning. *Oh dear. They won't be wearing those dresses ever again!*

John continues, “The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy. . . .”

He looks so handsome in a suit and tie. I remember how he

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looked on our wedding day in that fabulous black tux with tails. *I hope he asks me to dance at the reception.*

“Therefore marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God.”

The liturgy begins to settle us in. The church quiets, the coughing subsides, people are paying attention.

“Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

No matter how many weddings I attend, there is something inexplicably stirring about all this—the ceremony, the making of vows, the great cloud of witnesses, something about this remarkable act feels—how does one describe it? Mythic.

“Daniel and Megan, you are about to abandon yourselves to each other, throw caution to the wind, forsake independence, isolation, and all others. You will vow to each other your undying love. Before you do, we must call this what it is—this is perfect madness.”

That got the crowd’s attention.

“As an aspiration, how lovely. As a reality, how rare. Everyone wants love; everyone is looking for love. Few seem to find what they are looking for; fewer still seem able to sustain it. Why in heaven’s name would you come to church to publicly dedicate yourselves to something so risky, so fraught with danger, so *scandalous*? ‘The heart has its reasons,’ Pascal confessed, ‘that reason knows not of.’ Deep in the wellspring of our hearts there is a desire—for intimacy, beauty, and adventure. And no matter what anyone might say, we look for it all the days of our lives.

“Friends, I know what you are thinking. As you watch this today, there is something in your heart that says, ‘Well, maybe. Maybe this time. Maybe this couple.’ But what if, what if Daniel and Megan, in all their frail humanity, are living out before us right now a picture, a metaphor of something far more real and substantial. I’d like to suggest that this is no common passion play. Things are never what they seem. If you would see things clearly you must see with the eyes

of the heart. That is the secret of every fairy tale, because it is the secret to the Gospel, because it is the secret to life.

“Scripture tells us that we might at any time entertain an angel simply by welcoming a stranger. The serpent in the garden is really the Prince of Darkness. The carpenter from Nazareth—there is more to him than meets the eye as well. Things are not what they seem, and so if we would understand our lives—and especially our marriages—we must listen again to the Gospel and the fairy tales based upon it. There are larger events unfolding around us, events of enormous consequence. A lamp is lit and love is lost. A box is opened and evil swarms into the world. An apple is taken and mankind is plunged into darkness. Moments of immense consequence are taking place all around us. Especially this.

“Dearly Beloved, you see before you a man and a woman. But there is more here than meets the eye. God gave to us this passion play to reenact, right here and now, the story of the ages. This is the story of mankind, the one story we have been telling ourselves over and over again, in every great myth and legend and poem and song. It is a love story, set in the midst of desperate times, set in the midst of war. It is a story of a shared quest. It is a story of romance. Daniel and Megan are playing out before you now the deepest and most mythic reality in the world. This is the story of God’s romance with mankind.”

I’m curious what the audience is thinking. When John speaks of love and marriage as deeper than fairy tale, what does our heart say in reply? I know the young women listening just said in their hearts, *Oh I hope that is true! I long for that to be true!* The young men are wondering, *If that is true, what is this going to require of me?* The older women filter this through the years of our actual marital experience; they are thinking, *Hmmm.* (It is a mixture of *Yes, I once longed for that,* and, *Perhaps it will come true for her; I wonder if it still might come true for me.*) And the older men sitting here now are simply thinking, *I wonder if the reception will have an open bar.*

“You don’t believe me,” John says. “But that’s because we don’t understand fairy tales and we don’t understand the Gospel which

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they are trying to remind us of. They are stories of danger; they are stories where evil is very, very real. They are stories which require immense courage and sacrifice. A boy and a girl thrown together in some desperate journey. If we believed it, if we actually saw what was taking place right here, right now, we would cross ourselves. We would say desperate prayers, earnest prayers. We would salute them both and we would hold our breath for what happens next. Daniel and Megan, it is time to make your vows. After this, there is no turning back.”

I find myself wondering, *What did the ancients know, that they placed vows at the core of this ceremony?* Did they understand that the crushing weight of all our desire would break a marriage, that we needed something far more substantial to secure this frail union? It makes me think of the Special Forces, vowing their lives to one another as they embark on a perilous mission in dark lands, the outcome of which remains quite uncertain. Vows.

“. . . from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God’s holy ordinance, and forsaking all others, I will be yours alone as long as we both shall live.”

The church is now very, very quiet. Only the older couples have any idea what these lovebirds have just promised, bless their hearts. They really believe that their marriage will somehow avert the darker side of the pledge; surely what they have in mind now is all their hopes and dreams of the “for better, richer, in health” parts. We all believed that. But Cortés has just burned his ships, and a good thing, too.

Next comes the rings, and John’s charge to the couple. I love this part. What do you say to the young man entering marriage? What do you say to the young woman?

“Daniel, you are about to give your life away. You are stepping up, you are volunteering for the toughest assignment a man will ever be given: to offer your heart and your strength to Megan, time and time

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and time again, for the rest of your days. You have some sense of the weightiness of it. That's why you have that nervous grin on your face. But there was a reason they chose young men to send to the beaches at Normandy; they did not for the most part know what was coming. Older men would have been harder to recruit. I will not lie to you—nothing will be harder. And nothing will be richer. My words to you today are: It can be done. And it is worth it. To discover that because of your strength and your sacrifice Megan can become the woman she was meant to be, that somehow your fierce love can free her heart and release her beauty—that is worth whatever this may cost you. By the grace of God, you can do this. You have what it takes.

“Megan, you have dreamed of this day for a long, long time. And now you, also, are about to give your life away. It might seem easy and natural at first, to offer your feminine heart and your vulnerable beauty to Daniel. But do not be deceived. Nothing requires more courage than for a woman to truly offer herself to her man time and time and time again. Look around. Do you see many older women risking this? But I also say to you: It can be done. And it is worth it. To discover that because of your beauty and your sacrifice Daniel can become the man he was meant to be, that somehow your fierce love can free his heart and arouse his strength—that is worth whatever this may cost you. By the grace of God, you can do this. You are that beautiful woman.

“Daniel, Megan, in choosing marriage you have chosen an assignment at the frontlines in this epic battle for the human heart. You will face hardship, you will face suffering, you will face opposition, and you will face a lie. The scariest thing a woman ever offers is to believe that she is worth pursuing, to open her heart up to pursuit, to continue to open up her heart and offer the beauty she holds inside, all the while fearing it will not be enough. The scariest thing a man ever chooses is to offer his strength without knowing how things will turn out. To take the risk of playing the man before the outcome is decided. To offer his heart of strength while fearing it will not be enough.

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“A lie is going to come to both of you, starting very soon, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. It can’t be done. It’s too hard. We had unrealistic expectations. It isn’t worth it. The lie to you, Megan, will be, ‘You are nothing more than a disappointment.’ And the lie to you, Daniel, will be, ‘You are not really man enough for this.’ And so, I have two words for you today. Words that I want you to keep close in your hearts as you go forward: You are. Megan, you are radiant, you shimmer, you shine, you are a treasure of a woman, a gem, you are. Daniel, you are a man, you are strong, and you are valiant. You have what it takes. Hold this close to your hearts. It can be done. And it is worth it.”

John pauses to let this all sink in. I know what he is doing—he is speaking to *us*, to the men and women watching, far more than to dear Daniel and Megan who are too excited, and weary, filled with adrenaline and hormones and somewhat delirious by this point that they will only remember these words if they watch the tape later. Like premarital counseling, so much of the wisdom of this moment cannot be appreciated until we have a few years of “life together” under our belts. Then we have ears to hear. So John pauses for us to take it all in. A breeze blows through the sanctuary. The candles flicker in reply with a higher flame. I hope that is what is happening in every heart. May the fire within each of our hearts leap to the hope of this message.

And then he prays. *We need* to pray by this point; we have been practically holding our breath. We need a release for the tension and somewhere deep in our souls we know help is needed from higher places.

“Father, we believe in you. We believe you are God, the creator of life and love and the only one who makes it all possible. We come to you, more desperate than we know, to ask your Presence here, your favor upon Daniel and Megan, to ask your deepest blessing upon their marriage. Give them courage. Give them a clear heart and mind and will for all that they have just now pledged. And give to us, their witnesses, eyes to see and ears to hear what you are saying to

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each of us, through this passion play. Let hope arise. Let love prevail. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

Then comes the kiss (*okay, maybe I love this part the most, it's so romantic*). And the presentation of the new couple. Cheers. Music. Somewhere in the heavens, I imagine trumpets sounding and white doves being released. How God must love this!

As we join the recessional and walk out of the church into the warm summer evening, we are all caught up for a moment in a joyful sobriety. The timeless ritual, the courage and love of the young couple, and the deeper mythic story are having an effect upon us. As well they should. Desire is stirring within us. Longing calls to us. This is what we all were made for.

A warm breeze swirls among the crowd, and we instinctively turn our faces into it. The exotic perfume of magnolia and jasmine are in the air, mingling with the music coming from the reception party. The words linger in our midst. Even the older couples sense the beckoning. John and I are holding hands. I notice that a number of the couples are holding hands. It can be done. And it is worth it. Of all the things a man or woman needs to hear about marriage, this is perhaps the most important of all.

It can be done.

And it is worth it.

ONE

Remembering What We Wanted



See! The winter is past, the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come. . . . Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.

—SONG OF SONGS 2:11–13

Where do you pick up the story of a marriage? With the first kiss? (It was intoxicating.) The late-night phone calls? (They went on for hours.) With an evening picnic on the beach? (It was romantic.) Getting caught by a college roommate making out? (Now that was embarrassing.) When is that moment you decide, *I want to be with this person for the rest of my life?*

Maybe the best place to pick up this story is two years after “I Do,” when we are talking divorce.

It was a Sunday. John and I were sitting at our hand-me-down card table having breakfast, in a tiny little matchbox of a house we rented. It was a pretty spring morning in southern California. The hydrangeas were blooming pink and blue on our front porch. I remember the sun filtering through the windows; a beam of light falling across the table between us. But it felt like a wall of glass. I was on my side, John was way over there. It was only a foot or so, but he felt miles away to me. Again.

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The day was fresh but I was tired. Tired of trying. Tired of feeling like an utter disappointment to my husband who not that many months ago had pledged his heart to me for life. In front of everybody, I might add. Did he even mean it? It wasn't working. Our marriage wasn't anywhere near what I had imagined it would be.

I broke the familiar silence. "Maybe we should just get a divorce."

We had been married less than three years; our marriage had been full of promise, hope, and possibility. Heavens, I had known the man for five years before we even started dating, and we dated for three years before getting married. We were bright and rising stars. John worked on the staff of a church; I was working for a Christian ministry reaching out to troubled teens. Everyone thought we were the ideal couple.

How did we wind up here? What had gone so terribly wrong?

At the time, I would have said that I was utterly lonely—and to be lonely in your marriage is the loneliest feeling on earth. John was busy with his life and getting busier every day. It was a good life; he was involved in good things. The problem was, I didn't feel a part of it. I felt unnecessary to him. I, too, was working full-time, putting him through college. I came home to a man who was too tired to hear about my day, my world, all the dramas of the workplace. And I was too tired to care much about his. Sure, I would type his papers—but what happened to the shared vision? The desire to live life *together*? Two being better than one and all that?

I knew John was no longer smitten by me. I wondered if he even saw me. Almost as soon as we said our vows, I began to overeat. Within a few months of our wedding, I had put on twenty-five pounds. Something was up; something was broken. I needed comfort and relief and I turned to the drive-thru to find it. Packing on the weight sent a message to John that was clear and strong: *I am leaving you. You are not worth being beautiful for.*

And the weight continued to pile on. Diets began. I lost weight. I gained more. I lost weight. I gained more. Many of you know this dreadful cycle. Finally, seventy pounds heavier and almost three years

married, I was desperate. A good friend had had success losing lots of weight through a medical fast, so I tried that. I stuck to it with perseverance and determination, hoping that once the weight was off, our marriage would heal and become everything I longed for it to be. At the end of the program I weighed twenty pounds less than when we got married. Ta-da!

It didn't help.

My suggestion of divorce came up months after finishing the fast.

What We Now Understand

Looking back, I see what a broken young woman I was—a little girl, really, longing to be loved and nearly certain I never would be. I didn't deserve to be loved. When I was young I just wanted someone to delight in me, but it never happened. I wasn't seen, and I wasn't wanted.

I brought that wounded heart into my marriage. *Hurrah, John—you get to be the one to delight in me and love me and fill this broken heart.* But even when John *did* love me, I didn't believe him. There was always a part of me waiting for the other shoe to drop. All my friendships growing up were tales of betrayal and abandonment, including every boyfriend before John. I was just waiting, believing I was a deep disappointment, and when you walk around like that, you are afraid all the time.

I see now how I looked to John to fill me. When he didn't come through, I blamed myself. I turned to food because I didn't know how to handle the hunger and disappointment in my heart.

Let me [John here] tell you what was going on for me that Sunday morning when Stasi brought up divorce. *Divorce.* I was a deer in the headlights. The word caught me completely by surprise.

What!? *Where did this come from?* *Did she just say "divorce"?* Something in me panicked. Alarms started going off. But had you asked

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me for my take on the suggestion, “Maybe we should get a divorce,” I think at the time I would have said, *What is she talking about? I’m a great guy. We have a great marriage. This has to be about her. She’s asking too much. She’s looking to me to be everything.*

I’m embarrassed to admit that had you pressed me right then and there at the kitchen table, I don’t think I could have named one issue on my part that played into Stasi’s unhappiness. I was bewildered (something men seem to have a unique proficiency for). I found myself wondering, *How did we get here? When did this happen?*

But looking back now, I see what was going on. (Hindsight is 20/20, as the saying goes.) I entered marriage a frightened boy in a young man’s body. A confusing mixture of self-centeredness (*Stasi, you lucky girl, you get to marry me!*) and vast insecurity (*I don’t know if I can handle this.*). I had been so hurt by wounds I received in my youth and in previous relationships that I’d come to believe love never really lasted. So I had made a vow, years before, forgotten but still unyielding, that *I would never need anybody*. That vow became a source of lasting sorrow in our marriage.

There is a settled assurance a man comes to possess when he knows he is a man, and it enables him to enter his world with courage and kindness. The experience could not have been more foreign to me. I was scared. So, I faked it. I played the part of the great guy. I put on an air of bravado, like a boy wearing Superman pajamas. I overcompensated for my fears and landed in perfectionism. I became a driven, demanding overachiever with a generous dose of narcissism. Now, perfectionism is something you want in your tax attorney or your oncologist, but it is a horrible thing to be married to.

To be fair, a man needs to feel like a success, wants to feel like, “I have what it takes.” He wants others to agree—especially his wife. I found myself in a marriage I didn’t know squat about, with an alive and loving and broken woman, and I knew I was in *way* over my head. I didn’t know anything about how to love a woman. I didn’t know how to deal with her brokenness or mine. I was twenty-three. I was as ready for marriage as I was to take up the presidency. And so, I did what most men do—I ran. To work.

I was leading a small theater company at the time, and frankly, I was fabulous. A natural. I could write, act, and direct. I understood set design and construction. I shimmered; I was in my glory. Theater was my passion, my gifting, my calling. What makes the story messy is that it became my *mistress*. I began to spend more and more time at work, giving *it* the best of me, and all the while withdrawing from my wife. It was nothing short of an affair, but worse for the fact that it couldn't be so easily named. Folks thought I was amazing. I believed them.

It was a disaster waiting to happen.

This should have been our announcement in the Sunday paper wedding column:

Will Anyone Ever Love Me? was joined in marriage to I Will Never Need Anyone last week. The groom, Mr. Insecure Perfectionist, wedded his bride Miss I Know I'm a Disappointment at the Congregational Church. The lovely train wreck has taken up residence in Monrovia. A public reception and private disaster are soon to follow.

What made our story confusing—and delayed our breakthrough—was the fact that we were really involved at church. We had gone through premarital counseling. We had read a few marriage books (okay, maybe just one). Someone had kindly given us one of those marriage weekend seminars in our first year (did they see something?) and we'd gone, enjoyed it, aced all the exercises. We were in a weekly married couples group, for heaven's sake! We had all the tips and techniques.

But those tools apparently missed the issues of the heart. Like rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*.

Romance Meets Reality

Maybe we ought to just start this book here: Marriage is fabulously hard.

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Everybody who has been married knows this. Though years into marriage it still catches us off guard, all of us. And newly married couples, when they discover how hard it is, they seem genuinely surprised. Shocked, and disheartened, by the fact. *Are we doing something wrong? Did I marry the right person?* The sirens that lure us into marriage—romance, love, passion, sex, longing, companionship—seem so far from the actual reality of married life we fear we have made a colossal mistake, caught the wrong bus, missed our flight. And so the hardness also comes as something of an embarrassment. (Don't you feel embarrassed to admit how hard your marriage is?) *Maybe it's just us.*

Nope. This is everyone. We might as well come out and say it.

The sooner we get the shame and confusion off our backs, the sooner we will find our way through. Of course marriage is hard. For heaven's sake, bring together a man and a woman—two creatures who think, act, and feel so differently you would think they'd come from separate solar systems—and ask them to get along for the rest of their lives under the same roof. That is like taking Cinderella and Huck Finn, tossing them in a submarine, and closing the hatch. What did you think would happen?

Now, while you are at it, toss into that constantly-in-your-face experience all our fears, our wounded hearts, our self-centeredness, our self-doubt, and our resolute commitment to self-protection. Good Lord. Anyone looking for undeniable proof in the existence of God need look no further—the fact that *any* marriage makes it is a miracle of the first order. Bona fide proof that there are forces in the universe working on behalf of mankind.

All those fairy tales about a boy and girl who find themselves thrown together into an adventure in a dangerous land, and how they must come to work together if they have any hope of making it through, but they are both carrying a tragic flaw, an Achilles' heel that pricks the other constantly and they barely *do* make it through—those fairy tales pretty much have it right.

In fact, if you look back at the first marriage, that almost fairy-

tale-like story in Genesis, you will see that Adam and Eve had a pretty rough go at it. And they didn't even have parents to screw them up as children or friends giving them ridiculous advice. My goodness, the Fall of man seems to come during the honeymoon, or shortly thereafter. (And how many honeymoon stories reenact that little drama?) They hit rough water as soon as they set sail, poor things. If this is the story of the first marriage, it is a bit sobering.

But it also gives us some encouragement, too. It is normal for marriage to be hard. Even the best of marriages.

I [John] wish some older man had pulled me aside a few weeks before our wedding, and said,

Now listen, son. You're a fine young man; Stasi is a wonderful girl. I think you two are made for each other. I'm very excited about this marriage. But now listen to me, lad—are you paying attention? You are also, both of you, deeply broken people. And all that brokenness is going to start coming to the surface as soon as you say, "I do." Don't let this throw you. It happens to everyone. It doesn't mean you've done something wrong. But what would be wrong would be to ignore what surfaces. God is going to use your marriage to get to issues in your life he wants to address. You've got a way of making life work, and you're going to discover that Stasi does, too. That's all going to collide sooner or later. You might make it a year or two on young love, and thank God for it. But don't ignore this stuff when the fairy tale hits the fan. Get some help.

Very few of us ever receive—or listen to—this kind of counsel, even years into our marriage. Things become hard; we are at first surprised, then dismayed. Eventually, if the situation doesn't improve, we fall into resignation. We check out, we disappear—emotionally, mentally, sometimes physically. He watches television all weekend; she eats or goes shopping.

I was trying to think of a good operating definition of marriage the other day and this is what I came up with: *Two guarded people*

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managing their disappointment, negotiating for better terms through a DMZ they call marriage. Thank you, Adam. Thank you, Eve.

Now, what is so hopeful about their story—Adam and Eve’s, that is, which is our story, too, all of us—is that God came looking for them. They had made a real mess of things, those two, and now they were holding up a fig leaf with one hand and using the other to point an accusing finger, and God got down on his hands and knees and came looking for his children. In order to rescue them. “Adam, where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). Why, you could retrace these steps in every marriage that has ever followed: Some sort of Eden-like romance, or at least the promise of Eden in young love, and then a hard fall, followed by hiding, blaming, and reproach.

And the grace of God offering a second chance.

Hope

Fast-forward from the scene at the kitchen table—now twenty-two years ago—to October eighth, our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Friends and family gathered to celebrate with us. We felt a celebration was in order. One after another, people offered the most beautiful toasts—thanking us for our marriage, telling us story after story of how our love had changed their lives. Our sons also spoke, and this is what they said:

Dad, Mom, we are gathered here to celebrate your twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, not because we have to or because we should, but because your marriage is worth celebrating. It has only been as we have gotten older that the impact your marriage has had on us really became clear. Standing here now we want to thank you both for being who you are, and for loving each other in a world where most parents don't. You gave us the opportunity to grow up in a loving home, with loving parents. That is amazing. St. Augustine said, "Love is the beauty of the soul." You really are two beautiful people in love, and it is and has been such a gift to grow up knowing

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that is a possibility. So, not only do we congratulate you, but we thank you.

Stasi and I were speechless. And just a little embarrassed.

We had no idea that our marriage had been *noticed*, let alone had such a powerful effect on the lives of the people we love. Because the journey is taken step-by-step, we had not realized just how far we had come. I found myself wondering, *How did we get here? When did this happen?*

There is of course a story to tell, a wild and redemptive story that has at its center the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For if it is anything at all, the Gospel of Christianity is an offer of restoration. God knows that the human race is in bad shape. He knows our lives are nowhere near what we once dreamed of. He knows what it's like, living as we all do now, so far from Eden. It breaks his heart. So he comes himself to planet earth, this vale of tears, comes to do for us what none of us could accomplish on our own. He comes as Immanuel—God *with* us—and look what begins to happen. The blind receive their sight, the outcast is brought home, families are reconciled, the lame walk, and the dead are raised. These aren't just Bible stories; they are illustrations. God is demonstrating his power and his *intentions*.

He comes to heal. He comes to save.

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

(LUKE 19:10)

This is how Jesus describes his mission; this is how he sees it. Notice the choice of words—he says he came to seek and save “*what* was lost.” All that was lost (and O, how much has been lost). Including all of the beauty and power of a marriage. Marriage was *his* idea, after all. God created marriage, and put the desire in our hearts. However else it is you think you came together, what other forces you think were at work, the hopeful truth is that marriage is something God

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cares deeply about—including *your* marriage. When through the prophet Malachi the Lord God of Israel says, “I hate divorce,” we hear it with a shudder. But it ought to be with a surge of hope—the passion conveyed in those three words reveals how deeply he *loves* marriage, how strong his vested interests are in its success.

Therefore, we have all the resources of God’s heart toward us, and all the resources of his kingdom for the restoration of what was lost in our hearts, our lives, and our marriages. We have no idea how couples make it without God’s help. That is not a book we could write. Asking for your marriage to flourish without God is like asking a tree to blossom without sunshine and water. Some sort of tree might grow, but you are not going to like the looks of it. The hope we offer is that the Christian Gospel brings with it restoration and *life*.

Most of you have heard of the famous Cross, the assurance of forgiveness (and Lord knows we’ll need buckets of that as we go along). In the Cross God undergoes utter forsakenness so that we will never be forsaken. He understands sorrow, pain, rejection, misunderstanding, and abandonment. But what follows is for some reason, less well-known or at least less understood—the *Resurrection*, the triumph of the life of God. This is as central to Christianity as the Cross, perhaps even more so. Because it is that *life* he offers to us.

George MacDonald explains that “the whole history is a divine agony to give divine life to creatures. The outcome of that agony . . . will be radiant life, whereof joy unspeakable is the flower.”

Letting that life into a marriage is the sunshine and water for the parched tree; it is like opening all the doors and windows of a house long boarded up. Light and fresh air pouring in. Or it is like a rain shower coming to the thirsty desert. Everything bursts into bloom—the flower of joy unspeakable. The life of God brings Resurrection—a return of real love, genuine companionship, romance, joy, long suffering, and a shared mission. This is what the Scriptures mean when they tell us that “we shall be saved through his life,” the life of God come into us through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:10).

Stasi and I have become best friends. We started out that way, long ago, before we married, but we lost it somewhere along the road. More than once. God has helped us find it again. We have a shared life now. We are on the same page, living for the same things. We have found our way to something beautiful. We have found that the promise of the Gospel is true.

Let Desire Return

What would it look like for the two of you to find *your* way to something beautiful?

Don't start with, *How can that happen?* How will come in time; we can help you with how. You have to begin with *desire*. Start with what is written on your heart. What was it that you once dreamed of as a young man or woman? What was it you wanted when you first fell in love?

As a woman, I [Stasi] know what I want. I want to be seen and valued for who I am, to be truly *known* by my husband. That is why I loved the movie *Titanic*. Rose's fiancé doesn't "get" Rose. He recognizes that she is unhappy but doesn't "pretend to know why." Nor does he even ask her. Jack, on the other hand, understands Rose's heart—he sees both her *outward* beauty and her *inward* beauty and because of that, he values her, cherishes her, fights for her. He sees Rose for who she truly is, and delights in her, giving her the courage to throw away a future that seemed secure for one that is completely unknown. Being deeply known by John and still loved by him, delighted in—that is a deep desire of my heart.

I also want to live my life *with* my husband, to share in the adventure of life. I don't want to be alone in my life. I want to share the inward workings of my heart and the outward details of my life—the joys and sorrows, the small ones as well as the big ones. Life can be hard, sometimes cruel, and often dangerous. To share it with my husband helps give me both the courage and the desire to rise to the occasion. In *The Scarlet Pimpernel* the hearts and lives of

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Sir Percy Blakeney and his wife, Marguerite, become one when she understands the truth of his identity and joins in the higher call of his life. As she rises to play her irreplaceable role in the story and they *share* in the adventure, his life is saved and good triumphs over evil. I want to do that for John. I want to do that *with* John.

And finally, I want to lean into John's strength. When the going gets tough and the tough get going, I want to know that John is not going anywhere; that he will be there for me to lean on when I need to. And I have needed to many, many times. Just as the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* learn the immeasurable gift of being able to lean into the strength of Colonel Brandon's character, I too want to rest in my husband's strength. I think these are the things every woman wants.

As a man, I [John] read what Stasi just wrote and say, *Hub. Wow. That's good to know.* Because my desires are a little different. First, I want to be believed in. There's a scene in the movie *Cinderella Man* that almost brought me to tears. It's a come-from-behind story about a boxer no one thought could return. James Braddock is about to face his most brutal opponent, a Goliath who has killed men in the ring. This is the match of his life. His wife, Mae, makes her way across New York City, down into the basement of Madison Square Garden, finds "Jimmy" in the locker room simply so she can say, "Remember who you are. . . . I'm always behind you." I love that scene.

I also want Stasi to ride with me in some great adventure. You might remember the movie *The Man from Snowy River*—there's a scene I can still recall, even though it was more than twenty years ago when I first saw it. The beautiful young Jessica has gone missing; she is in danger. Her horse threw her high in the mountains. The strong young cowboy Jim finds her and rescues her. Suddenly there they are, just the two of them, miles from nowhere out in the wild beauty of the mountains. I love that scene—wild, untamed beauty, and a shared adventure.

Finally, I want beauty. I want the love described in the Song of Songs when the woman says to her lover, "Come away, my lover, and

be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains” (8:14). She thinks he is amazing; she offers her beauty to him; she invites him to be the man with her. I think men will know what I’m talking about. There’s a scene from the movie *Hook* that caught me off guard. Peter Pan has returned, after many long years, to Never Land. He is a grown man now. Tinker Bell—played by Julia Roberts—is thrilled to have him back. She uses her magic to zap herself into a full-sized woman, absolutely dressed to kill. Peter asks, “Wow, Tink—what’s the celebration?” “You,” she says.

I think these three desires are shared by every man reading this. And you, Dear Reader—what scenes have captured your heart over the years? What songs, what stories, what moments have awakened the deep desires of your heart?

You see, somewhere along the way we all lose heart in marriage. We all do. It happens to the best of us. As Dan Fogelberg sang,

*Joy at the start
Fear in the journey,
Joy in the coming home
A part of the heart gets lost in the learning,
Somewhere along the road.*

(DAN FOGELBERG, “*Along the Road*”)

We might find a way to manage our disappointment and we might do our best to fight off resignation, but it works its way in. We let go of what we wanted, what we dreamed of, what we were created for. We begin to settle.

Because marriage is hard, sometimes painfully hard, your first Great Battle is not to lose heart. That begins with recovering desire—the desire for the love that is written on your heart. Let desire return. Let it remind you of all that you wanted, all that you were created for.

And then consider this—what if God could bring you your heart’s desire? It’s not too late. It isn’t too hard. You are not too far

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along nor are you and your spouse too set in your ways. God is the God of all hope. He is, after all, the God of the Resurrection. Nothing is impossible for him. So give your heart's desire some room to breathe.

What if the two of you could find your way to something beautiful?

That would be worth fighting for.