

CONTEND



FOR YOUR BRIDE

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JEFF HOPPER

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*to my bride,
God's bonus prize to me,
Laura*

BEGINNING A BIG, LITTLE BOOK



THIS IS NOT A BIG BOOK. But it is packed. Which I hope means that I am meeting both of my writer's goals for the book:

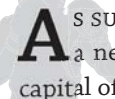
- It won't overwhelm you.
- It won't let you off the hook.

Something many teachers don't like to admit is that often it doesn't take very many words to get the job done. Jesus knew this. Most of his stories and teachings were quite short. Even his longest one—the Sermon on the Mount—can be read aloud in far less time than the average sermon in a church today.

What we probably need far more than words to read are ideas that make us think. I hope that you go through this book thinking...that you take some “time off” after every page or two to reflect on what's been said...that you act on what you learn... that you live it out as a man changed by what you've read.

If all that happens, then not only will I have met my goals, but God will have met his. For here is what I know to be true about God: he is in the business of change. He wants to blow away what is old and worthless in our lives and replace those things with fresh excellence. My one big hope for this little book is that you will allow God to do that kind of work in you and through you as you read the words printed here.

1 MEN WHO ARE DIFFERENT



AS SUMMER WEATHER BEGAN TO HEAT UP THE SOUTH IN 2009, a news story of a familiar variety arose from Columbia, the capital of South Carolina.

The state's governor, Mark Sanford, was briefly reported missing. Then the story was updated: Sanford had been on a getaway hiking trip along the Appalachian Trail.

As a guy who appreciates the outdoors, I thought this made perfect sense. If anyone deserves a chance to spend some time where “no one knows” your whereabouts for a night or two, a chance to be miles from the masses of people but right below the masses of stars, it is someone whose every decision is closely monitored by staff and media. I will never begrudge a man a few breaths of wonderfully fresh air!

But I, along with thousands of others, had been duped. Someone *did* know where Sanford was: his mistress, the woman with whom he had secretly rendezvoused a continent away.

Sanford came clean about the truth of his weekend away once suspicions arose among those close to him. That is, he admitted the affair. His confession was anything but clean, with plenty of dissembling joining his apology. And sadly, the more Sanford opened his mouth, the less people were willing to forgive.

Part of the reason for that hesitation was that Sanford tried to blend his admission of immorality with what he “really believed”

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about God and life and marriage. Sanford said that he had consulted with some of his trusted religious advisors and they had led him to understand again that Christian love is not about feelings. “It’s a choice. It’s an action,” Sanford told the Associated Press.

At least one AP reporter, Allen Breed, was left with thoughts undoubtedly shared by South Carolinians if not many Americans. Breed suggested that such a pragmatic approach to love “might seem cold...but it is perfectly consistent with the born-again Evangelical Christian world that Sanford inhabits.”

It was a searching insight, but it may have misapplied the adjective “cold.” At least that was the response of blogging observer Mollie Ziegler of GetReligion.org. Look:

Maybe it’s because I’m in a marriage and have contemplated marriage a bit, but I can’t help but laugh that this sentiment might seem cold. To me, cold is cheating on your wife with an Argentine bombshell because you feel like it. Cold is messing up your sons’ view of marriage, romance and love through your narcissism and lack of foresight. Cold is breaking the heart of your wife and partner. Cold is telling the world that you so callously disregarded your marital vows that you somehow managed to pick up a “soul mate” who lives 5,000 miles away. (<http://www.getreligion.org>, 4/3/09)

OK, Mollie, I can’t speak for every man, but I hope I am speaking for a lot of them in saying that we share your perspective. I hope that we stand with you not only in word, as Mark Sanford might have, but in deed as well.

And yet I would say that it is not easy. I have watched many good men make grave mistakes. Their consciences and their cultures shouted loud warnings, and they went ahead anyway. Ahead in their own “wisdom,” ahead in their own “strength.” Ahead in disaster. We might be coaxed to say that these men deserve the consequences of their actions. They reap what they have sown.

But I also have known men—and many more of them—who have made small errors that turned grave. They may or may not

MEN WHO ARE DIFFERENT


have understood that the one last drink, the one extra word, the one unguarded look would lead to a collapse of the structure that was their life, effecting virtually every important relationship they have ever had. Had they known, they may have chosen to go ahead anyway. But I am convinced that the majority of them would have cried out for help—to friends, to ministers, to God.

This small book is intended to be an answer to that cry for help. I certainly believe that there are thousands of men who love their wives in emotional and sexual ways, and who want desperately to love them in some of those “cold” ways that make a marriage last. I believe that there are some who are not yet married—like my own sons—but who want some excellent lead-up insight that will help them build the best households possible on the “one foundation” that has already been laid in their lives. These men, both those now married and those yet to be married, want to do it right, balancing the feelings side of love with the fierce side of love. When it comes to marriage, these men want to be contenders.

THINK ABOUT IT

- How committed are you to the marriage that God has placed you in? What would need to happen for that commitment to increase?
- Are there errors you have made that have led to difficult circumstances that challenge your marriage’s health? If you have never done so, you can do nothing better here than to stop here and turn those errors over to God, requesting His forgiveness and restoration from those errors.
- The final paragraph of this section refers to the “one foundation” on which a man’s marriage should be built. In anticipation of the next section, what do you think that foundation is, and why would it be so important?

2 THE ONE FOUNDATION



IF YOU HAVE EVER WORKED A CONSTRUCTION SITE, you may have something of a head start on the rest of us when it comes to the discussion we are about to have. Whether or not you have poured the foundation, you know how critical it is to the rest of the project. If the foundation is insufficient or not true, every piece of work that follows will be compromised. A poor foundation shows up in the level of the walls and ceilings in the best of times, and it shows up in the building's inability to stand up through time, especially when the structural integrity of the building is tested.

If you are going to build a solid building, you must start with the right foundation. The same is true for marriage.

You may or may not realize at this point that this book is coming from a particular perspective, what some might call a worldview. This is the perspective that there is a God who has created and who governs the universe, that he once came to earth in the form of the man Jesus of Nazareth—for the express purpose of performing the torturous reconciling work that would allow us to be reunited with Him—and that he has provided us all access to knowledge of him and his plan through his revealed word, which is contained in the Bible.

If that last sentence overwhelmed you, you may not be to blame—unless, of course, you were trying to read it during the fourth quarter of a well-contested college football game. But if you weren't, you may be overwhelmed because that sentence contains

a lot of powerful information. You may need to read it again.

Upon reading it again, you may feel overwhelmed for another reason. It seems so *religious*. And while you are almost certainly a lot of things, religious may not be one of them. Any talk of God leaves you shaking your head and wondering why you're caught in this kind of conversation instead of the kind where guys circle around the barbecue and swap classic grilling techniques. Theology is better left to guys with stout brains and stiff round collars.

If you will stick with me for a few minutes, though, I hope to show you that Jesus was no such man. As a matter of fact, he spent a good bit of time showing up men who thought they had God in their pocket. His words for them were even what we might call brutal. That may be the very reason why he spent much more time around regular folks and often communicating not by lecture (neither the informative kind nor the put-you-in-your-place kind) but by story. Here's one of them:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7:24-27)

Most everyone knows that Jesus was a carpenter. He was one of those guys who knew the value of a good foundation. In fact, it could be—though we have no way of knowing for sure—that his expertise was door frames. If that was the case, or maybe roofing or window headers or any sort of framing that had to be absolutely true, then he was utterly reliant on the foundation below his work. Because if that foundation was shaky, all the best work in the world could come crashing down in an instant.

When Jesus told this story of the house on the rock and the

house on the sand, the foundation he was referring to was the foundation of obedience to his own words. It mattered, he said, whether you did what he was teaching. He knew that instruction means nothing if the teacher is teaching but the learner isn't learning. And learners show they understand the value of a teacher's lesson by doing what is taught.

So one thing we will be keeping in mind throughout this book is that the building of our marriage has a much better chance of long-term survival (and occupants' enjoyment) if it is built on obedience to God's word as it is found in the Bible.

Now here's a surprise: Jesus did not come primarily to teach. He came, he said, to serve. And he went forward toward the same service he called "ultimate": laying one's life down for his friends. Jesus' primary purpose, because he was the promised sacrificing Savior on behalf of God's people, was to shed his blood in death for us. We could dig very deep here for a large number of pages, but for now let's just say:

- You and I are not perfect
- God is perfect
- We desperately need a way to be pulled from our imperfect state into God's perfect presence
- We needed a perfect substitute to do this for us
- Jesus was that perfect substitute
- Through him alone we can be saved

I don't want to race on too quickly from that line of powerful truths, so take some time to think here for a minute if you need to.

For those who are ready to go on, realize that since Jesus did not come primarily to teach, he left some of that work to others, a group of men he called his apostles. (Jesus' many disciples, which increased in great number after his resurrection and ascension to heaven, included men, women, and children. But he did select men to be the writers of the history and instruction that would make up the New Testament. These men were apostles. They traveled throughout the Roman Empire, spreading the news about Christ.)

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One of these apostles was a man named Paul. For some time, he had contended against Jesus' followers, persecuting them even unto death. But God took hold of Paul's life (you can read that remarkable account in Acts 8), and the man spent the rest of his days teaching the news of Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul became so convinced that Jesus was who he said he was—that is, Paul believed wholeheartedly that Jesus was the prophecy-fulfilling Savior—that he was beaten and imprisoned on multiple occasions for daring to say that Caesar was not the God we must worship. And while he was jailed, Paul wrote letters to the people he met along the way, people who formed the first churches. In one of these letters, Paul too revealed an understanding of buildings and foundations:

...each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

Where Jesus' stated foundation was the words he spoke, Paul's stated foundation was Jesus himself. Therefore, the chief point of obedience that we can adopt in any arena of life is this: build our foundation on Jesus Christ. In your work, build your foundation on Jesus. In your play, build your foundation on Jesus. In your friendships, build your foundation on Jesus. In your marriage, build your foundation on Jesus.

Now let's tackle one very fair question: why does it have to be Jesus? If I am working on building a good marriage, why must my foundation be Jesus?

We can probably best answer that question by considering some of the other foundations on which we might choose to build our marriage:

THE ONE FOUNDATION

- sexual prowess
- handsome looks
- romantic charm
- business acumen
- attractive possessions

For a minute or two, we should examine why these foundations are inferior. Sexual prowess can die with age (though sexual pleasure may last). Handsome looks are in the eye of the beholder and can disappear with one unfortunate accident (not to mention the advances of age). Romantic charm holds value in wooing and keeping a woman, but it does not pay the bills. Business acumen *can* pay the bills, but the winds of economic change can make a smart man foolish in one bear market turn. And attractive possessions, which are evidences of wealth, can increase our pride and greed—both traits that repel the hearts of nearly every woman.

With Christ, we build on a lasting foundation. In fact, we build on an eternal foundation. If you are not sure yet what to make of the man from Nazareth, at least consider the enduring worth of his words. His teachings have held up as powerful and enriching for 2,000 years. That alone suggests that his foundation is far more rocklike than our attempts at building on lesser things.

If it is in you to contend for your bride and your marriage, you will find no surer footing upon which to fight this battle than the foundation of Jesus Christ.

AN EXTRA DOSE OF UNDERSTANDING

The Bible reveals that God represents himself in three distinct but fully intertwined persons: God the Father (the chief creator of all and the enduring inhabitant of heaven), God the Son (who is Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit (who maintains the living and active cord of relationship between God and man). The importance of understanding this concept, which theologians call the Trinity, or the Triune God, is that each of these persons points to the other. When you speak of one you are speaking of the One who is and is in all three.

THINK ABOUT IT

- With the extra dose of understanding in mind, read these words from 1 Corinthians 2:9-14, a piece of Paul's letter to the fellowship in Corinth, Greece:

However, as it is written:

“No eye has seen,
no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived

what God has prepared for those who love him”— but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

How does this passage of the Bible demonstrate the essence of this section—that full understanding of God's word does not come to us until we have relationship with him?

- Where do you find yourself at the end of this section: (a) eager to go on to find out what it means to contend for your bride and marriage under the lordship of Jesus Christ, (b) willing to go on for the sake of your bride and your marriage but not so sure about this whole matter of Jesus Christ, (c) unwilling to go on because you cannot see that Jesus Christ is at all relevant to the health of a marriage, (d) or somewhere in the midst of this spectrum?

- What practical steps might be involved in making Jesus Christ the foundation of your life and your marriage? (You can check your thoughts against the information in the End section of this book.)

3 BUILDING AND DEFENDING

NOT SO MANY YEARS AGO, A WRITER NAMED JOHN ELDREDGE, a man's man who also understands the deeply loving side of God, wrote a provocative and (as it turned out) popular book for men. Its title? *Wild at Heart*. Not a typical title for so-called "Christian men," who were often encouraged toward the more tender traits of Christ, but not typically challenged to "do what men do" in their pursuit of God. Eldredge and his book changed that way of thinking for many men.

Eldredge's thesis is easy to grasp. Once a man, by turning his life over to Jesus Christ, works his way through some of the occurrences and relationships that may have defeated him in the past, he is set for the three-part drama that should comprise our lives. That is, each man has:

- An ADVENTURE to live
- A BATTLE to fight
- A BEAUTY to win

Now if I might presume upon Eldredge's thinking, I would say this: A God-centered marriage is made up of all of these. A man who is contending for his bride and for his marriage will find adventure, will fight battles, and will continually win his beauty. Consider:

Adventure suggests challenge and newness and events unex-

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pected. A marriage doesn't have to be God-centered to be adventurous. But a man whose heart is set on honoring Jesus Christ by contending for his bride and his marriage will revel in this adventure. In fact, he will make it one of his chief goals to keep his marriage fresh, even adding to the adventure.

A man in *battle* recognizes that some of the challenges that do come are not there to build a man up—like the conquest of “the tallest mountain around”—but rather to beat him down, even destroy him. Those who choose to stand with Jesus Christ will thereby meet his enemy, Satan, who is intent on driving wedges between us and Christ. He does this principally by tempting us toward disobedience, because he knows that when we act against the will of God we not only suffer the consequences of our actions, but we cause rifts in our relationship with the One we say we love the most. Don't miss this. Fending off these stratagems of the enemy is very much battle. I intentionally did not write “very much *like* battle.” You will have to fight for what is right, in your marriage and in the rest of your life.

Finally, while a *beauty* (a woman of our desires) may be in the eye of each beholding man, when the one who is our desire catches our eye and captures our heart, we will—if we take this business seriously—do all we can to win her. If we do this right, we will not do this because we want her, but because we want what is best for her. We will see God's plan that a man (you!) should love a woman (her!) in every strong and nurturing way. And when we do this—combine the strength of steadfast and God-honoring commitment with the nurture that notices and tends to even her littlest needs—she will be won, if indeed she is the kind of excellent woman who responds to such a man, and if indeed she is the one whom God has sovereignly set aside for you.

Now let's turn to a remarkable example in the Bible of how this might look, how building and defense may converge in one who is contending for his bride and his marriage.

BUILDING AND DEFENDING

In the Old Testament, God established his people—known as the Israelites, or the Jews—in a particular place on the planet: Israel. This was, in Old Testament vernacular, the Promised Land. At the heart of that land was the capital city of Jerusalem, and at the heart of that city was the temple.

Through the centuries, four progressive things happened that led to the point in time that contains the account we want to consider:

- First, kings were established to lead the people. Though this was the people's request and it displaced God as the lone authority in the people's lives, God met the people's request in order to show them that he really was the one they wanted to serve. The first three of these kings are well-known, even to those who do not know their Old Testament history too well: Saul, David, Solomon.

- Second, with the sons of Solomon, the kingdom was divided. Ten tribes went in one direction, retaining the name Israel. Two tribes stayed together and became known as Judah. Judah represented David's true line and retained the capital and the temple under their jurisdiction.

- Both Israel and Judah fell into disobedience to God, chiefly by worshipping and serving the idols of surrounding nations. The men married across national lines, and the focused following of the One True God went out the door.

- Israel was invaded, defeated and carted off to the north. Later, Judah was invaded, defeated, and carted off to the east, to Babylon, in the region we now know as Iraq. In Babylon, Judah's finest men were trained and put into the service of the king. (If all of this seems like more background than you need to know, trust me, we'll use it now and come back to it later as well.)

We pick up the accounts many years into this exile into Babylon. The kings who rule the land have changed both in national ties and in heart. They have been blessed by the long and honorable service of the Jewish men among them, and their disposition toward these men has developed into appreciation through the decades.

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One such man, Nehemiah, was a cupbearer to the king. God entered Nehemiah's thoughts and desires and moved Nehemiah to boldly request a leave of absence from his work in the king's court so that he might return to his people's homeland and rebuild the walls of the city. Through the remnant of Jewish people that had remained in the land, jointly working with the priest Ezra, the temple had been recently rebuilt. Now God moved through Nehemiah to rebuild the city walls.

Make a note here: the wall of an ancient city was both its glory and its defense. It defined the boundaries of the community that had chosen to dwell together, showed the craftsmanship and determination of its people, and supplied protection against beasts, wildfire, and marauders. Nehemiah understood the great value of the wall around Jerusalem, and he asked King Artaxerxes for extended leave that he might lead the effort to get this important job done. Artaxerxes had some questions for Nehemiah, but he also had great respect for the man and his vision; he let Nehemiah go. More than that, he sent with Nehemiah an order for timber from the king's own forest so that the gates—the key to any good wall—could be constructed well.

But Nehemiah was not naïve. He knew there would be those who opposed God's plan through him. He secured a guard for safe passage to Jerusalem, and when he got there and the work began, he encountered increasing and pointed challenges to his work from the local non-Jewish authorities. More accurately, these challenges came in the form of direct threats: "Stop this work or we will harm your people."

Realize, there may be no greater example of determination in all of literature, let alone all of the Bible, than this leader Nehemiah.

When the opposition came, and the people became downcast with doubt that they could complete the work and fearful that their enemies would sneak up and kill them, Nehemiah offered strong words and practical action. Look:

After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of

BUILDING AND DEFENDING

them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work.

From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. (Nehemiah 4:14-18)

As far as I am concerned, here is the key line: "Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other."

In our marriages, we have a great work to do. Like Nehemiah's work, it requires acute and extended focus. We have to understand both the plan at hand and the opposition to that plan. When we do that, we instantly realize that there are two parts to our work—two simultaneous parts: *building* and *defense*. It is as though we are erecting emergency shelters in a hurricane zone. We must manage our materials and tools and keep an eye on the ominous weather all at the same time.

We have done little up to this point to define our key word, *contenders*. We will make every effort to do that in the next section. But let's begin here: Contenders—those who would contend for their bride and contend for their marriage—are simultaneously builders and defenders. They take to heart the ideas of John Eldredge and the example of Nehemiah. They are bold and busy in their contending.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Consider the key ideas of John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart*. Which of his three quests captures your attention at this point in your life? Which do you think you need to tend to the most right now in your marriage?

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- What captures your attention from the account of Nehemiah? How does his example make sense for you? Are there other examples of men in history, in the public arena, or in your life right now that encourage you to stand strong in your marriage?
- What do you make of the idea that there is an enemy (Satan) who will come against you in your God-centered endeavors? Have you seen evidence of this enemy's work as you have tried to serve God at times in your life (including right now)?
- If being a contender involves both building and defending, for which do you think you are most equipped? How did you gain this equipping? How might you move toward the necessary inclusion of both activities?

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IN THE 1954 MOVIE CLASSIC, *ON THE WATERFRONT*, Marlon Brando plays a young aspiring boxer named Terry Malloy. Considering its enduring notoriety, you should probably watch the movie for yourself, so I won't give much away here. Malloy, however, idly witnesses a brutal crime. For much of the rest of the story he must reckon with a conscience that lays the blame on him. At least he does not do this alone. He goes to his brother, Charley, with his haunting thoughts. And among those thoughts is this forever-famous lament: "I could've been a contender. I could've been somebody."

In those few words, Terry Malloy captured the fear of nearly every man alive—that we will come up short, be found wanting, miss our calling. Many a mid-life crisis has begun at a crossroads such as this.

Have I done what I've been put here to do?

Of course, there is a question that must be asked first. It can be asked by a person of any age, any upbringing, any life experience. It is this:

What have I been put here to do?

If we do not have a sense of the answer to this question, we are no more equipped than the man standing on the bank with a fishing rod in his hand and bait on the line but with no idea what a fish is. He may as well march around that lake for all he knows—or settle in for a nap in the shade. A person who does not know what

his purpose in life is will have a heck of a time picking and choosing which activities have any real value and an even worse time trying to measure any degree of success.

Here's a shock: A man whose intent is evil and whose heart is set on accomplishing that evil stands a much greater chance at success in his life than the man who shuffles between a hundred noble options but never sets his gaze on one of them!

Well, here's some really good news. The Bible is not a book of secrets. In many places, it makes quite clear what God is looking for from us. It doesn't lay out educational direction or job prospects, but it does give us a very strong sense of how we should live out our relationships. And chief among these relationships for men is how we should approach our husbandship as married men:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (Ephesians 5:25-28)

You may still be trying to make sense of some callings in your life, but if you desire to please Christ, you will set forth down the path of loving your wife. You will do all you can to make her holy. You will bring the word of God into her life. And you will actually set her up to be pleasing to you! Don't miss the fact that Paul's words to the husbands in Ephesus included the enjoyable fact that we love ourselves through loving our wives.

So we come to that point where we attempt to define a contender when it comes to marriage. The title of this book is *Contend for Your Bride*. What does that mean?

Perhaps the best way to lay this out is as a simple dichotomy: we may either contend *with* our brides or we may contend *for* them.

When we contend *with* someone, we stand in their way, seeking to stop them from what they are thinking, saying, or doing. These

kinds of contenders are arguers and know-it-alls and brutes. They traffic in pride and never back down. They enjoy a "good fight."

Nearly everyone who has ever had a teenage child knows what it means to contend with someone. Teenagers haven't made it all the way through to maturity. They are still establishing their personal territories as they move toward adulthood, so they are eager to stand their ground. The trouble is that many "adults" still occupy the place of immaturity at times as well. When adults such as these meet up with a teenager, you'll find your "good fight" all right!

But this kind of relationship is almost no one's idea of a healthy marriage. When we back someone into a fight-or-flight corner with our contentious mentality and behavior, they may give us the fight we seek for a time. But eventually, they are going to grow tired of this continuing condition. They will trade in the fight for the flight, and the contender is left all alone. And there is no such thing as a marriage of one!

Yet we know from our earlier consideration of John Eldredge's thinking that men are meant to do battle. For men of Christ this can only mean righteous battle. And there is no such battle against your bride.

A husbandly contender in God's eyes is one who fights the battle *for* his bride, the one who contends *for* his bride.

In a way this might seem like such a simple difference. But it can require a complete change of mind, a whole new perspective. If we keep buying into the sitcom view that men are over here and women are over there and only in bed shall the twain occasionally meet, we may find ourselves somewhat happy every few nights for an hour after dark, but the rest of the time we are going to be pretty miserable people. However, if we are to escape from that view, we are going to have to humble ourselves so much as to allow God to build into us a brand new way of thinking about our brides and thinking about our marriages. And that new way of thinking is going to have to govern our words and govern our actions. Only in this way will we grow up to be and grow into being contenders *for* the women we love and have committed our lives to.

One last note here, for those who may consider themselves the

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“middle men”—that is, guys who don’t want to contend *with* their bride but aren’t sure why they would need to contend *for* her. *Why*, these guys ask, *isn’t it good enough to just hang out?* It is not good enough to just hang out because the world is not neutral and the enemy is not hibernating. You must realize that even if you do not contend *with* your bride, many other things do. And it is your job as builder and defender to stand against these things that would discourage her and disrupt your marriage. More on that coming up.

AN EXTRA DOSE OF UNDERSTANDING

It probably became apparent to you in this section that I am intentionally relying on the word “bride” as opposed to the word “wife.” Even Paul wrote, “Husbands love your wives,” so what gives? Certainly there is nothing wrong with the word “wives.” It indicates the commitment of marriage in the same way the word “husband” does. But we would nearly all agree that there is an entirely different meaning behind the word “bride.” For one, it suggests young, romantic love—and it is a very good reminder for most of us guys that this woman we think of when we think “wife” is the same woman we thought of as “bride” at some joyous time in the past. The Bible draws on analogies like this one: “...as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride...” (Isaiah 62:5). To remember that our wife and our bride are the same woman should stir in us memories of rejoicing and pleasant daydreams of the early affections that spurred us to pursue her. And as we are reminded of these affections, we should be encouraged again to be what God has made us to be for her.

THINK ABOUT IT

- How valuable is it in any pursuit in life to know your purpose and your goals? Consider examples from your own life when you really understood the purpose of your work and when you did not. How vast is the difference between these reflections? How does this section allow us to be encouraged and challenged in this regard as we uncover our purpose as men in (or preparing for) marriage?


- Read Romans 12:2, from Paul’s letter to the fellowship in Rome: “Do

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not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” How does this passage cement the importance of a changed mind in our service to God and our brides? What changes of mind do you think are in store for you?

- This section concludes with a bit of a butt-kicking. Do these words apply to you? If so, how might you gain the fortitude you need to take up the challenges of contending for your bride?

5 CONTENDERS AGAINST YOUR BRIDE



WE ARE ABOUT TO MAKE TWO TURNS, BOTH FAIRLY RADICAL. First, you need to know that this section jumps the line from theory into practice. So far, we have been speaking mostly of ideas. Good ideas, yes, but ideas all the same. And for a lot of guys that really isn't enough. They want to get their hands around how things are done. Sure they want to know *why*, but it's the nitty-gritty of getting to work in practical ways that makes the difference for many guys. How do we know this? Let's put it this way: when you buy a new car, your bride isn't clamoring to read the manual or look under the hood. If the car has a lot of fancy features that can be pre-set, like seat positions and climate controls, she's counting on you to make those things happen. And you're happy to do it. Nuts and bolts, baby!

With this practical information comes an increase in material. The next three sections will be somewhat longer than those before. So we will subdivide these and ask a question or two after each heading. If you're working through this book with a group, you can pick and choose your stopping point at the end of each meeting.

Second, this section is called "Contenders Against Your Bride." This, as we have already discussed, should not be you! But you can't be naïve. Other interests (sometimes represented in other people) will contend against your marriage. And here is the critical piece of understanding you need before we go forward:

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Anything and everything that contends against your marriage contends against your bride.

This truth is so big that it requires us to take a look a number of specific contenders and why it is important for you to battle against each of them. No way is this a complete list, but it was made more complete by the men who first heard this material from me and helped me brainstorm several of the items. Let's begin.

[ANGER]

How many times have you fallen into the traditional line of thinking that women are the emotional ones? It's a common stereotype with a certain degree of merit. Until we mention anger. When it comes to anger, the monopoly seems to be given to men.

When writing to the fellowship in Ephesus, Greece, Paul spoke both of marriage and of fathering. And this is what he said to fathers: "Do not exasperate your children" (Ephesians 6:4). One of the easiest ways to exasperate our children—and our brides, and our friends, and our colleagues, and total strangers—is to unleash an inexplicable fit of anger. In fact, that's probably letting us off too easily. Forget a fit. How about one angry word? Often that is all it takes to do the trick.

Why does anger possess such singular power? Because, writes pastor John Piper, "Anger devours almost all other good emotions." When the room is filled with joyous, friendly laughter and someone suddenly expresses rage, the joy leaks right out of the room. When patience is met with anger, it turns to anxiety. When anger confronts kindness, kindness retreats into self-focus. King Solomon, who thought about these things quite a bit, wrote: "A gentle response defuses anger, but a sharp tongue kindles a temper-fire" (Proverbs 15:1, *The Message*).

Don't get this wrong. Anger has a place. Paul even wrote, "Be angry and do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26). There is a way to express anger in the right context and the right tone. If another man has set his eyes and affections on your bride, you have a right to be angry. We might even say that as the builder and defender of your

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marriage, you *must* display your anger against such a man. (It may not be prudent, depending on his own size and disposition, to do this to his face! It may be wisest to express your anger over this matter to your bride, compelling her to repel this other man's advances in their earliest stages, before trouble mounts. Should such trouble come, you may be the one compelled to physically defend your bride, and under such drastic circumstances your anger may serve you well. But first you should do all you can to employ gentility—and perhaps wit or wiliness—as Proverbs 15:1 suggests.)

Let me reveal a sad finding to you. When I was exploring photographic images that might work for the cover of this book, I entered "boxing gloves" as my search words. For every photo of a man wearing boxing gloves, there were two or three or even four of a woman wearing boxing gloves. How twisted have we become that we think we can act as viciously and as thoughtlessly as we want and our brides will be able to tolerate it because they have the toughness of prize fighters? The reason we resort to such an upside-down reality is because we have not endeavored to control our sinful anger, an anger that contends with our bride and contends with our marriage.

THINK ABOUT IT

- When have you known your anger to "get the best of you" and cause a painful rift between you and your bride? Have you found this to be a recurring battle? What man do you know with whom you might consult about ways to turn from anger and become a man of right reason and gentle, wise answers?
- How do you turn from the traits of an earthly man, such as sinful anger, and yet maintain the masculine characteristics that honor God and how he has made you?

[PERSONAL IDs]

Before you were married, you spent much time establishing some important personal marks of identification. These included both

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personality traits and personal interests. In fact, it is likely that you allowed a number of these things to become so much a part of you that giving them up now would be like having a piece of yourself ripped off. Lose your quirky affection for *Star Wars* movies? You might as well cut off your arm. Stop heading down to the pool hall with your buddies every other Saturday night? You might as well surrender your nose.

You know what I'm talking about. You're the ladies man. Or the golf guy. Or the hard worker. You're the funny dude. Or the entrepreneur. Or the video game geek. You can even be the Jesus freak.

Personal identity is an extremely important part of who we are, each one us, husbands and brides both. Without it, we would have no way of standing out, of maintaining the uniquenesses that—in the beginning at least—attract us to one another. In fact, there are a lot of good reasons to hold on to some of the things that make us different from one another, for our differences often make spouses complementary to each other and strengthen the outward impact of the marriage on the people and world around us.

But as guys we can be—surprise!—stubborn. We can fall into the prideful trap of saying, “I am what I am and you're going to have to live with it.”

When we take a stand based on something that God has not definitively called us to, we might find that we are fighting what God wants us to become. No one wants to be the change resister when the change is ignited by God!

Your pride, your unwillingness to hear God's call to change, your standing on your own personal ID—these things contend for your marriage. You can even say you “stand on principle.” But as we investigated before, you will be building your household of life and of marriage on a foundation that is not Christ. And the harder and longer you fight this battle based on your pride, the more excruciating it will be to eventually swallow that pride when you are exposed or give in to God when he manhandles your life through difficult or unexpected circumstances.

Paul's colleague in apostleship, James, wrote a general letter to the followers of Christ. In it he encouraged his readers to “hum-

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ble yourselves before the Lord” (James 4:10). There is a reason for this. Biblical history shows us that all will be humbled before God in his time. And when God has to do the humbling, the results are rarely pretty. But there is a second half to that verse in James, a promise for those who get to the humbling on their own: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, *and he will lift you up.*”

Many of the personal IDs you bring to your marriage, you will retain. Same for your bride. And you will want this of each other, because these things do make you you. But these IDs must never be sacred, never guarded as greater than God's calls to change, never guarded as more important than the relationship between the two of you.

THINK ABOUT IT

- What are some of the personal IDs that your bride gladly accepts in you? What are others that do not thrill her, but she allows with some contention? Are there others that she begrudges? Among these lists, are there IDs that you now see you have been holding onto too staunchly? What would it take for you to make appropriate changes?

[WORK AND GOALS]

I am not about to denigrate work.

It has become something of a repetitious pattern among Christian leaders in our time to charge men to be ever-interested, romantic, doting husbands and involved, fun-loving, morals-instilling fathers. Husbands are supposed to take their brides out every week for just-you-and-me dates and they are supposed to show up at every child's extracurricular event, if not be involved as a coach or leader. Somewhere lost in the shuffle is the baseline job of husbands and fathers: provision. Men need to work, if they are at all physically able, to generate the income that supports a family. This is the essence of building one's household!

That said, there are aspects of work and the goals it both serves and seeks, that can contend against your marriage:

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1. *Consistently long hours.* Many jobs have their pressure-packed seasons. Ski instructors work long hours in January and February, accountants crunch in March and April, lifeguards and park rangers go at it all summer, schoolteachers put in extra hours in the fall, and retailers take advantage of the year end. And there are times when spouses agree to put in some overtime to pay for a necessary home improvement or a long-desired vacation trip. There's a lot of good in such industry—for a time. But a husband, especially, must be very careful to keep long hours from becoming habitual and seizing chunks of time from his family.

A smart person once observed that “quality time is the by-product of quantity time.” We can't kid ourselves that we can work away from home for weeks on end and make up for it all with one happy evening. This doesn't work for brides and it certainly doesn't work for our children.

I once heard the story of a marriage counselor who was advising a couple with marital troubles. When the counselor asked a few basic questions, he discovered that the husband was commuting as much as two hours each way to work everyday. His advice to the husband? Move closer to your job, even if it means not having the house you most want. The couple took the counselor's advice, and sure enough, their marriage found its way back to health in rather short order. A shorter commute, a smaller house, a bigger joy in marriage.

2. *Financial expectations and stress.* We've all heard the facts: the two most common areas of trouble in marriages are money and sex. For now, we'll tackle the first of these. But first, grab hold of this: the problem is almost never the money or the sex—it's the communication (or lack of it) about the money and the sex. All too often a man works long hours in order to be able to provide “extras” for his bride, extras that he *thinks* she wants. But because they have never sat down together and talked about the priorities of their marriage, he is a slave not to his job or his bride's desires but to the desires he *thinks* she possesses. Sometimes this means that he works extra hours, even extra days. Sometimes it means he

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spends much time looking for and training for a new, higher paying position. Most of the time it means that he feels inadequate. Now I don't know what your bride wants, but I can tell you what she doesn't want: a tired, stressed, insecure, depressed husband. If this is what working for unspoken expectations produces in you, then your job and the anxiety connected with it are contending with your marriage.

3. *Going after what you want.* I've got news for you, pal. If you're married, you're a family man. If you are thinking only about what *you* want (a managerial position, a doctoral degree, a top-end salary, a company car), you might as well stamp GUARANTEED on your forehead—as in, “Guaranteed to mess up my marriage.” I often write for a large group of golfers spread out around the country. These golfers look to integrate their following of Jesus Christ into golf and the rest of their lives. Not long ago, I asked some of these golfers what powerful thing God had taught them through golf. Here's how one guy started his response:

Years ago I made a “bucket list,” before I knew about the movie or what a “bucket list” really was. One of the items was to join a country club. Having played golf since the age of 10, I've been in love with the game for many years. I just didn't understand how much in love I was!

The late '90s offered up a roaring stock market, and with each passing year I calculated how I was going to make this bucket list item happen. By the year 2000, I had figured it out. If I made several financial moves, I could make it happen. I even took my wife on a tour of the club to make myself think that's what she wanted as well.

I wasn't listening to her or to God.

It sure is easy to smooth over our personal desires, painting the picture that everyone else is in agreement with us, or everyone else will benefit from what we are choosing to do, or everyone else will appreciate this “in the long run.”

I hope you understand that I am coming from a position of bal-

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ance here. I have seen some exceptional cases where God calls a man and his bride to uncommon work circumstances, where separation is necessary for the sake of God's work—in the same way it is necessary for military couples to be apart for stretches of time in order for the nation to be served. But this is never a man's "bright idea." Invariably, it is made plain by God and confirmed through the man's bride. Together they agree to do what God has called them do in spite of the "conventional marriage wisdom," and they anticipate his blessings for making such a daunting choice.

But under normal circumstances, work should be placed in balance with other marriage and family obligations. Its purposes and particulars should be discussed openly between you and your bride. We are men, and we want to and need to provide. But part of the provision we give to our wives is our healthy, present selves. Right-thinking women understand the balance and help us keep that balance day to day and year to year.

THINK ABOUT IT

- How strong is work's grip on you? Do you ever find that it is a place to "escape" from your bride or your family? Do you have goals that you now see as figments of an imagination that has arisen out of undiscussed priorities with your bride? How has this section helped you see work and goals in a fresh and healthy way?

- Grab a Bible or jump online (try biblegateway.com) and read 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 and 1 Timothy 6:17-19. How do these passages encourage a healthy understanding of work and wealth?

[HOBBIES]

Under the last heading, we noted that money and sex are two of the great problem areas in many marriages. Let's stick with money for a bit longer.

Here's the thing. Almost no one experiences marital discord over the essentials of living: food, rent/mortgage, clothing...

Oh wait, clothing—that very thing is where you often contend

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with your bride. You come home from work and she comes home from the department store, having bought another wear-it-once dress with matching shoes and handbag.

This might be an accurate picture, except for one thing. You're not usually coming home from work when she's coming home from her fashion excursion, are you? You're coming home from the Auto Gallery or Guitar Center or the power tool crib at The Home Depot.

And this is where the trouble comes from. Not from those essentials. If your bride had holes in her clothes, you would not begrudge her a new purchase. If the faucet is leaking, she does not get upset at you for buying the items—and sometimes the tools—you need to fix that old thing. The trouble comes from all the "little extras." In fact, you both know that this is where the tension is birthed, so you both have become experts at hiding those tender babies you bring home from the stores of your choice. Better to have all those arguments at once, on the day the credit card statement shows up in the mail, than to knock them out one-by-one as you make those personal purchases.

Either that or you bargain. *I'll just get this honey-do list out of the way for her, and then I'll be free to head to the lake with the boys.* (A little free advice on the side: the guy who sets out to hand his wife a honey-done list can beat his bride to the punch—he never even sees a honey-do list!)

Now let's talk openly, guys. Our hobbies are nearly always more expensive than theirs. It takes a lot of lattes with the girlfriends and lingerie at the boutique to add up to one new pickup truck! And their hobbies don't typically send them to the emergency room. We like hobbies that can do some damage. We like hobbies that cost a lot and may cost a bunch more before we're done—did I hear someone say "kit car"?

But here's the tricky spot we find ourselves in. Quite often our brides displayed some real interest in these hobbies before they were our brides. They liked hanging out where we hung out and even asking questions about these crazy things we do. This may even have been authentic interest. But the underlying truth is that

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what they were really doing was spending time with *us*. They liked *us*. And to get to *us*, they took an interest in the things that interested *us*. Usually, we did not do the same—sorry, one Saturday matinee chick flick just doesn't count.

What this means is that we have to step back now and take a look at what we enjoy, at what our bride enjoys, and at the activities we truly enjoy together. And then we have to strike a balance one more time—yes, this is becoming a recurring theme. Your hobbies, when they go unchecked and are kept off the table of discussion between you and your bride, will contend against your marriage.

THINK ABOUT IT

- What are the hobbies that you most enjoy? To what degree is your bride interested in these hobbies? To what degree do you hide from her just how much time or money you are spending on your hobbies? What value do you see in laying these, both your hobbies and hers, on the table of discussion?
- To this point, do you find that it is becoming increasingly bothersome or increasingly instructive to expose so many contenders against your marriage? Why do you think your reaction is what it is?

[WANDERING EYES AND PORNOGRAPHY]

OK, here it comes. Past the money, on to the sex. The truth is that very few of us need to hear much more than we have already heard on the topic of having eyes exclusively given over to your bride. I grew up around some men (not my father) who adhered to a philosophy expressed this way: "Just because you've ordered doesn't mean you can't keep looking at the menu." Of course, we cannot help but look at women other than our bride—and very often, we would be rude not to look at them!—but how we honestly answer the questions, *Where are we looking?* and *What is behind those looks?* is critical to successfully contending for our marriage and our bride.

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A number of years ago, I took a Saturday series of classes for non-profit leaders. The presenter was different each week, and I specifically recall a marriage and family counselor who did much work at the nearby U.S. Navy air base. I am not sure anymore what his topic was for that day, but I do recall that at some point—maybe during the lunch break—we fell into conversation about his work. Poignantly, he expressed an increased sense of defeat with regard to his counseling duties at the air base. He said, "I am finding it almost impossible to help couples overcome their difficulties anymore because the husbands have been away for weeks and months at a time, spending so much of their spare time looking at pornography on the Internet." His simple testimony has remained with me through the years as the most compelling reason I could ever be given to address this contemporary and compounding problem. Men who turn their eyes to other women, especially other women presented in sexually enticing contexts, are inviting the destruction of their marriages; they have turned their eyes from their brides.

The Ten Commandments introduces a theme that is woven throughout the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. It is the theme that we are to have no idols, no persons or objects of worship ahead of God. Sure enough, the first two commandments address this matter directly (you'll find the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20). Yet in spite of this plain instruction, God's people repeatedly turned their eyes from Him to these lesser gods, these idols. While your bride should never occupy a position above God, she should, like God above all other gods, occupy a position above all other women. The rest are only false idols! In fact, those women who are presented through pornographic magazines and web sites, as well as the "soft porn" of advertising in many sports and so-called men's magazines and web sites, are absolutely false. The make-up applied to their bodies and photo enhancements applied to the photographs first taken of them remove them from the realm of reality altogether. Brother, your bride is right in front of you, touchable, knowable—inside and out! The women of pornographic media are digitally false and entirely unavailable to you.

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Every flight of mental fantasy you take with them puts miles between you and your bride.

Now before we move off of this topic, let me be sure to include one story from the *This Had Better Not Be You Department*:

Some time ago I became aware of a man who was in no way walking with God. He made no attempts to live according to the Scripture, and he had become a regular on porn sites and at strip clubs. Meanwhile, his wife was being led by God to live very closely to the instructions of the Bible, even the passage about wives submitting to their husbands. I do not think that God would hold every woman as responsible for this passage as he held this woman, but she adhered to it fully, even when her husband mocked her for it. Finally, this husband, wicked in all his ways and knowing that his wife would submit to him, required of her that she go with him one night to the strip club. I can think of almost nothing more base than that! But his wife did go, despite pleading with the Lord for another way out. When she went, according to her own account, from the moment she sat down, tears filled her eyes. She wept so much that she could not see anything that was happening on stage. And she knew that God was blessing her with these tears. Then, in the miraculous way that God does His work of grace, her husband looked over and saw her, her eyes swollen with tears, and his eyes finally opened. He saw in her face all that he had been doing to her. He stood up and walked her out of that club and walked himself right into a life of repentance and new living before God.

Please tell me, men, that it will not take something like this to make us aware of the leech of pornography that latches on to so many of us. Burn your magazines if you have to. Throw out your TV. Trash your computer. You will not be the first guy who has had to take such drastic measures to save his marriage and his life. You will just be the next guy to reap the immeasurable blessings of a marriage restored by God's ever-ready grace.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Look at Jesus' stunning words in Matthew 5:27-30: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that

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anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." Most Bible scholars agree that Jesus did not mean these words literally, but He most definitely meant them seriously. How do these words support the radical measures that might be necessary as suggested in this section?

- Look at Jesus' words in Matthew 6:22-23: "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" How do these words add to the validity and strength of the words in this section?

[SEEDS OF DISRESPECT]

I never want to be accused of cursing a marriage and giving it no hope. But I am convinced of this: where divorce is an option (this is certainly common), many marriages are doomed before they ever begin. Of course, no one would say they have divorce in mind on the day they walk the aisle—and for this reason, every divorce is a failure. But these marriages are doomed because the seed for divorce is planted even before the knot is tied. What is that seed? Disrespect.

Increasingly, marriage experts trace marital failure to the day when one spouse began to disrespect the other. This can happen in one of two ways:

1. One spouse sees something in the physical or emotional make-up of the other, or in their personality, or in the way they go about their daily life, or in their choices, and that one spouse says to himself (or herself), "I do not respect

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that.” This does not throw up a red flag at this early stage because the spouse may go on to think, *I can change that in him/her or I can forgive that little fault for all the other good things I see.* But the seed of disrespect has been planted.

2. One spouse commits an act of “treachery” that the other cannot dismiss from their mind. This may be something very serious, like adultery or use of their joint savings for a risky business venture, or it may be something rather typical, like a lie about where he had spent the evening with the guys or her secret purchase that suddenly shows up on the credit card statement.

Obviously, the severity of the “crime” may vary greatly here. And the time it takes for this seed of disrespect to grow may vary greatly as well. One side may forgive the other easily in words at the time of the incident but not forget so well, and when another attraction comes along, they can point back to that “crime” and justify their own (re)action. Or one can compound one “misdemeanor” on top of another, constructing a full-grown tree of disrespect out of a thousand tiny seeds.

How do you overcome this toxic tendency? You have to snuff out the seeds of disrespect the moment you recognize them. When a weed is small, it takes only a single shot of Roundup to knock that baby out; but when a weed has grown to knee-height, you have to spray it up and down and wait some time before you see whether the remedy has done its work.

Divorce is a legal breeze in our time. Hop online and you’ll get it done in rapid speed and for little cost. All you need now is a good excuse. Disrespect, when it is allowed to grow, will give you every excuse you need. That’s why you must contend against disrespect almost everyday in your marriage.

Offense is always a received characteristic. The worst bigot, the rudest relative, the cruelest enemy can attempt to offend you all day long, but if you refuse to see it or receive it, it cannot grow into real offense. Your bride—yes, even your lovely bride—will do things that could cause disrespect to take root in you. Don’t let this

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happen. Stand firm against offense and disrespect.

Likewise, don’t flirt with number 2. That is, steer wide paths around the kinds of acts of treachery that could give birth to disrespect for you in your bride. Live a life that honors her, and she will honor you.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Is there long-lasting disrespect in your marriage relationship? Do you see potential for disrespect in your marriage? How can you set about killing off these seeds today?

[ROUTINE]

How old is your marriage? How tired?

Notice the relationship between these two common words: *family* and *familiarity*. They are much alike in appearance and root, just as they co-exist within the four walls of the place we call home. The more time we spend with others, the more familiar their words and actions become, right down to the subtlest nuances. And in the train of life, right behind the car of familiarity rides the car of predictability, and right behind the car of predictability rides the car of boredom. Ouch!

No one ever sets out with this goal in marriage: let’s grow bored with one another. Or this one: let’s fall into a pattern of lifeless routines.

We live in the entertainment generation to beat them all, with virtually every form of visual entertainment available to us right in our living rooms. We used to have to go to the ballpark to see a game. Now the 22 different cameras providing every good angle and every definitive slow-motion replay almost discourage us from going. We used to have to go to the theater to see a movie. Now we don’t even have to go to the video store; Netflix and pay-per-view bring what we want to watch right to our couch.

So even entertainment offers no inoculation against boredom.

There is one sure cure for boredom in a marriage, however, and it feeds the adventure that John Eldredge tells us men have to live.

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That cure is variety. You see, the very word *adventure* strikes hesitation (if not fear) in the hearts of many. We know the stories and have seen the pictures and we are no Crocodile Hunter or X-Games shredder or Everest sherpa. These guys are off the charts, and if what it takes to break the boredom in our marriage or our life is to match their exploits, we'd just as soon hit the auto-light on the barbecue one more time and call it *primitive*. Variety is not so demanding, but it can do wonders in contending against the boredom that threatens a marriage and sends a bride looking for other possibilities.

Mark Driscoll, who may be the hippest preacher in America, has some pretty down-to-earth advice in this arena: become a student of your bride. Find out what she really likes and make it happen—especially something you've never done before. You'll doubly bless her by hitting her sweet spot and by stepping out of your routine. Driscoll tells the story of when he and his own bride, Grace, were young in marriage and house-dreaming. One day he made a U-turn in the driveway of a house in a Seattle neighborhood, and she off-handedly said, "Someday I'd like to live in a house just like that." Quietly, Driscoll wrote down the address and began to set his plans. Several years later, he bought that house. You know what's funny? His bride did not even remember the house! But when he reminded her, you'd better believe she was blown away.

Maybe it's our turn to blow away the boredom in our marriages, to add variety to the inevitable routine. You don't have to throw everything off kilter. You just need to breathe the fresh winds of change over your bride.

THINK ABOUT IT

- What are three things you can think of right now that would provide new "adventures" for you and your bride?
- People add variety into our lives. What fresh experiences can we engage in to include interaction with people in ways that benefit us and them? How closely do these ideas touch on the Bible's teachings about encouraging and supporting those who have real needs?

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[CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS]

"Men are dumb." Actually, it would take a lot of nerve for me to say something like that after counting on your thoughtful consideration of all that has come before this page. In fact, what I am counting on is that we are not dumb at all—in spite of what our culture suggests about us.

In the course of your life and mine, heavy doses of authentic consideration have been given to the likes of Archie Bunker, Al Bundy, and Homer Simpson. They've been good for a lot of laughs, maybe, but along the way they have added to a catalog of notions about the way men "really are." Chiefly, men are noted to be consumed with thoughts of size, including their size, their wife's size, other men's size, other women's size, the size of the engine under the hood of their truck and the size of the bed they will haul things in, and the size of the burger they are about to stuff into their widening mouth and the size of the drink that they will use to chase the burger down into their expanding stomach. It's a pretty basic existence. And to the extent that it is true, it is a pretty sad one.

Of course, the extent to which it is true puts our personal honesty to the test, doesn't it? We have to grade ourselves on a pretty tough scale if we are going to rise above this cultural class. Or do we? Maybe we do not have to be uncommonly responsible so much as simply be responsible, which now gets extra notice because it is increasingly uncommon. Maybe we need to—as we have already discussed—provide for our brides and our families, and relish the opportunity to do so. Maybe we need to—as we have already discussed—complete the honey-done list before our brides hand us a honey-do list. Maybe we need to—as we have already discussed—make our bride our One-and-Only among the many other women who might cause blips on our radar screen.

Maybe, if the culture has changed to discount men as hormonally charged, appetite-driven knuckleheads, we need to become counter-cultural. It may be as easy as putting down the donuts and cleaning up the dishes.

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THINK ABOUT IT

- Have you noticed the way men are often depicted in advertising and television programs? To what extent do these depictions bother you? What might you do to live counter-culturally as a man in today's world?

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HOW ARE YOU DOING? No doubt, bruises formed when you were reading through the last section. You became aware of places where the enemy of Christ has risen up in contention against your marriage and your bride. Some of those places made you painfully aware. Now you have two options:

- Run. You are overwhelmed by what it will take to fight.
- Take up the battle. You are ready to contend for your bride.

It is my great hope that you will choose the battle. You have a beauty to win, or win back, or keep on winning. And there are some very certain ways to go about this.

In every battle, those in charge seek to set a strategy for victory. Then they commission their fighting troops to employ a variety of tactics in order to accomplish that strategy and seize that victory. Our strategy in contending for our brides is to rely on the God of the universe. In the Old Testament book of Samuel we find one of the greatest “contender accounts” of all time. It is the account of David and Goliath. In the moments before David unleashed the rock from his sling that would end the Philistine champion's life, the two men exchanged words. Goliath insulted the choice of the Israelites, this small young man who had no apparent battle training. David was wearing no armor and carrying neither sword nor shield. But David responded that the weapons of men would not

give honor where it should be given: to God. David's final words before letting go of that stone were these: "All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (1 Samuel 17:47).

We want God to get the honor for the things that we do in contending for our brides. So we engage in His work, going forward with tactics that demonstrate love for our bride and honor to our Lord. The rest of this section will consider those tactics.

[PRAYER]

We must pray for our brides. But before that, we must pray for ourselves.

When I first introduced this entire idea of contending for our brides to a small group of men on retreat, I began with this tactic of prayer and proceeded through the rest of the list. Prayer, in most contexts, is a self-evident necessity of relationship with God. But that does not mean that we faithfully employ it, or even that all of us understand it. So the leader of the group asked me to back up and explain what it means to contend in prayer for our brides. I would say first that it means the same as contending in prayer for anyone, beginning with our own selves. When we pray, we:

- Turn to God.
- Turn things over to God.

Turning to God. Prayer must begin with humility. It must begin with the understanding that God can do things that we cannot. He is far above us in knowledge, wisdom, strength, and wonder. He has insight where we are muddled. He has ability where we are derelict. He has ingenuity where we are simplistic. And through the core of all this, he is merciful, forgiving, full of grace and full of love. This is why Jesus taught his disciples to begin the so-called Lord's Prayer with these words: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." The prayer begins with honor to God, stating that we hold his name as more revered than any other.

Some time ago I realized that I needed God. I say that very pointedly. I think that for years, even decades, I lived by thinking that I needed God for *this* and I needed God for *that*. What was new was that I was realizing that what I needed most was *just God*. I needed him, above and beyond all that he could or would do for me. So I began to pray first thing each morning, "Lord, I need you." That's all. That's all because it took me quite some minutes before I could think clear through to that alone without attaching my various specific needs—of which I seemed always mindful. I had one goal: need *just God*.

So I am convinced that this is where we must begin in prayer: by turning to God. We must grab hold of the reality that we have relationship with and access to the most capable, most personal power in all existence.

Turning things over to God. In 1947, a pastor named Robert Munger preached a message that would become one of the best-known pocket-sized books ever. It was called, "My Heart, Christ's Home." In this little book, Munger took the life of a man and set it against the analogy of a house with its many rooms, each one representative of a certain "department" of a man's life: business, pleasure, family, etc. Jesus visited the man in his home one day and began touring from room to room. Some of the rooms were well-known to Jesus, as the man had freely opened these to him. But eventually, Jesus came to a room that was sealed against him. When the man suggested that he was not about to allow Jesus into that room, the Lord told the man that he would then have to leave the house altogether. In Munger's narration, at this point the owner of the house thought this: *When one comes to know and love Christ, the worst thing that can happen is to sense him withdrawing his fellowship. I had to give in.*

If you did not come to this book with a sense like this homeowner, a sense of having to give in, I hope that you have it now. To fully contend for your bride and your marriage in prayer, you must fully surrender the many elements of your life to God. You must allow him to master you and your circumstances. You must employ

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the tactic of conversational prayer with the one great God who can see clearly what is happening in your life, in your bride, and in your marriage. You may even find that you misstate the preciseness of your needs and that God answers you in a way that you did not expect but a way that is so obviously right.

What can you not talk to God about? Nothing. That's right, there is nothing that you cannot talk to God about—or plainly, you can speak to him of everything, and especially the things we reviewed in the last section:

- You can display your anger and ask him to defuse it.
- You can give him your personal IDs and ask him to help you trade those that are weak for those that would be strong.
- You can discuss with him your work and your goals and seek his confirmation of your decisions and your priorities.
- You can ask him to “join you” in your hobbies, helping you keep them in balance with the rest of your life.
- You can give him your sex life, imploring him to replace everything impure with rekindled passion for your bride.
- You can engage his power to crush the seeds of disrespect and to erase any offense or grudge-bearing that would provide excuses to look elsewhere.
- You can request from him the creativity that would enable you to replace the routine in your marriage with adventure—remember, he is the Creator!
- You can look to him rather than to the culture for examples of true manliness and seek from him the courage to take his route.

Finally, it is important here that I include an exhortation to pray *with* your wife. Sadly, we have been conditioned as men in a sexually-charged time to think of intimacy in terms of sex only. We are scared to death of most emotional feelings, so we rely almost wholly on physical sensations. But if you desire the fullness of abundant life that Jesus offered, you will want to draw closer to

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your wife in all kinds of intimacy. Prayer *with* her—for your marriage, your family, your ministry together in the world—can bring a depth of relationship like you have never had before.

THINK ABOUT IT

- To what extent have you ever before considered the difference between needing God and needing God for certain things? How does this idea open a whole new aspect of thinking for you? How does it change your approach to prayer?
- What kind of push do you need to become one who prays specifically for his marriage and his bride? How about to pray *with* your bride?

[PRIORITIZING]

Some men are easy to recognize as men. Take Albert Pujols. Not only is the two-time National League Most Valuable Player rock solid in his build, he uses that build in perfect connection with his powerful swing, allowing him to send balls screaming up against and well over fences 400 hundred feet away. In 2008, Major League managers voted Pujols the “most feared hitter in baseball.”

But Pujols has some other manly qualities you need to know about. They have to do with humility, responsibility, and priorities. In 2000, this man who had every reason to guard his “cool” status married a woman with a daughter who had Down syndrome, a condition that demands a lot of extra attention from parents. Pujols, on the verge of stardom, didn't need to make this encumbering choice, but he did. Since then, Pujols and his wife, Deidre, have had two other children, and together the family works to support causes on behalf of those who have Down syndrome.

How does it all work for Pujols? You may well want to spend some time of your own on his web site (www.pujolsfamilyfoundation.org), but if you don't have the time, know that you will find there this stated priority: “Our faith in Jesus Christ is the central point of our individual lives, our marriage, family and Foundation.

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Take Jesus Christ and faith in Him out of the equation and all those other things would not exist... My life is not *mostly* dedicated to the Lord, it is 100 percent committed to Jesus Christ and His will.”

Your bride needs you to set priorities like that for your family. She needs to know through your words and your actions that you honor God above all things, that you cherish her next, and that all other relationships and pursuits fall in line after that. Even your career must exist to serve the kingdom of God and support your bride and your family. In a typical week, you will spend far more waking time on the job than you will one-on-one with God or your bride. But while you are there, you must keep in mind that God has given you your skill and experience; the job you have was his to give you. And you must keep in mind that he has given you this job not to feed your own exclusive needs and pleasures; he has given you this job to bless others, starting with your bride.

If you do not set priorities like this—and yes, you may need to write them down and post them in order for you to keep them in mind—you will go through your day guessing at which decisions are best. And your bride will be guessing as to your motive in every little thing you do. If you want to build trust in your marriage, sit down with your bride, lay out your priorities, and begin to allow these priorities to govern the way you live.

THINK ABOUT IT

- When you step back and look at the schedule of your typical week, what would it say to God and to others about your true priorities? In what ways can you sharpen the focus of your life so that you honor God and cherish your bride in ways that are purposeful and focused?

[LEADERSHIP]

Establishing priorities for your marriage and your family is actually a part of the larger role of leadership that God puts in the hands of men. Guys like to know what something will look like when it

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is built. Blueprints are helpful, but the elevations are what instill vision and move us through a project to its completion.

I am convinced that this is why many men stay away from faith or religion. They cannot see the “end result.” *What am I going to look like when I get done?* It’s a fear-filled question, and a fair one.

Actually, the Bible is not secretive here. A man who begins with faith in Christ, turning over his life to the work of God in him and through him, will mature toward what the Bible calls an elder. And these are the marks of an elder:

- Integrity in his dealings with others
- Complete faithfulness to his bride
- Clear thinking
- Control of his anger and other emotions
- Respected for his behavior
- Welcoming and friendly to others
- Committed to learning and passing on that learning
- Temperate, not drinking excessively
- Cool-tempered and not argumentative
- Not in love with money
- A good manager of his household, including his children
- Humbly guarding against temptation
- Experienced and yet still growing

(You will find these characteristics in chapter 3 of Paul’s first letter to Timothy.)

A checklist like this offers work for every one of us. Some will need a major overhaul in one area and fine-tuning in other places. Others will find a different area that needs concentrated work. The key may lie in that last item: *experienced and yet still growing*. Too many people are willing to come to God at first, because they see an aspect of their life that is grossly out of whack. But once that’s taken care of, they fall back into managing things as they see fit. They are not really willing to allow Christ to change them and keep changing them. They are like a car with just enough right under

the hood to keep the car puffing down the road. Meanwhile, duct tape holds a plastic bag in place over one busted window, the body has a dings and dents from several fender benders, the air doesn't blow cold, and a spring is popping up through the driver's seat. Like the guy at the shop, Jesus is saying, "Don't drive away now—I can do so much more!" But we flip on the radio to the one station that works, turn up the volume, and look at him recede into the distance of the cracked rearview mirror as we drive away.

We may think this kind of existence is OK for us. We might even take pride in our humility! But we have our brides to think about. They are desperate for their men to take the God-centered lead in their marriages and their homes.

"However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband" (Ephesians 5:33)

THINK ABOUT IT

- Do you see a strong connection between the traits of an elder and the respect that a woman may give to her husband?
- What traits of leadership do you recognize as most important for you to develop at this time in your marriage?

[ENCOURAGEMENT]

We are making pretty good progress in considering—and hopefully acting on—ways that we can contend for our brides. One problem. So far, in praying, prioritizing, and leading, we have been able to make some changes without necessarily *talking* to our brides. And that's the rub for a lot of guys. Day-to-day, nuts-and-bolts, meetings-and-appointments sort of conversation—they're OK with all that. It's not much different than talking sports with your buddies over lunch.

But if you really want to make forward progress in your direct relationship with your bride, you are going to need to speak up in ways that you may have avoided for a long time, perhaps since the

two of you were dating. You may need to *encourage* her again.

When we were dating our future bride, or still young in marriage and romantically nuts, we would say things that made her feel special. We would actually tell her what we liked about her—even when she didn't ask! And we would encourage her to do (and wear) things that made her more attractive to us. We might even pay for some of these treats that were also our pleasures.

What goes wrong? Why do we stop saying and doing these nice things that build her up? No one knows for sure, and it's not the same in every marriage, but you might look at that list of contenders against your bride from section 5 again to get an idea. Maybe we just think we are above and beyond that. If that's the case we may be helped by something that feeds our ego a bit here: a lesson in Greek. After all, guys who can speak a foreign language are intellectual and suave, are they not? And since we are freshly committed to continual growth, we can certainly justify some time spent in learning a new and valuable skill.

So here's what you need to know: in Greek, the words *oikodomē* and *paraklēsis* correspond with our words "upbuilding" (or edification) and "encouragement."

When we act in love, it will always build up (edify) those to whom we show the love. When we speak in love, it will do the same. In other words, if in marriage contenders are *builders* and *defenders*, you are right in line with your key role as husband to your bride when you bring edification into her life in the things you say and do!

One of the specific ways we can edify our bride is to provide her with *paraklēsis*, or encouragement. This is a word with multiple meanings. It can mean "comfort," as when we speak softly against any sorrow that she may be experiencing. It can mean "encouragement," as when we restore courage to her in a time of defeat or discouragement. And it can mean "exhortation or appeal," as when we push someone to do something they may feel unqualified or unwilling to do, but we have the sense that they can do it and would benefit from it (this is not a command, but a well-meaning challenge).

CONTEND FOR YOUR BRIDE

To speak personally, I have found this to be one of my most important roles in marriage through the years. My bride is uniquely and exceptionally skilled and gifted in many ways. In fact, she possesses many strengths that I do not have—and I love to watch her “at work” in employing these strengths! But she sometimes does not recognize her own capabilities, or she is overwhelmed by an onslaught of lesser matters. This is when I have to step up and encourage her. I tell her that I think she would be good at this or that. I tell her why. And I give her some suggestions as to how she might take on the thing she is not sure she can do. I don’t have a 100 percent track record in getting her to do something challenging (she might have excellent reasons that counter my own thoughts), but I will never forsake contending for my bride in this way!

THINK ABOUT IT

- Do you notice a difference in the way you may have encouraged your bride in the past and the way you encourage her now? Have you gone backwards or forwards in this important activity?
- Does the thought of speaking openly with your bride in a positive way cause you to hesitate in getting it done? Take a few moments to ask for God’s strength and guidance in employing his brand of encouragement with your bride.

[BLESSING]

One of the most revered pictures in the whole Bible is that of Jesus blessing the children. Figuring Jesus’ time was more effectively spent on adults, the disciples began to discourage those who had brought their children to receive prayer from Jesus and spend a few minutes with him. But Jesus turned the disciples’ thinking upside-down. He told them to let the children come to him, in order that he might bless them.

What is such a blessing? Simply, it is a word or action that addresses a need in our life. When a hungry man needs a meal and you feed him, you have met him with a blessing. When an athlete

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breaks a bone in competition and a doctor tends to that injury by preparing it to heal, the doctor has met that athlete with a blessing. And when your wife has a need that you meet, you have met her with a blessing. Here’s what that may look like in your home:

- You listen to your bride tell the stories of her troubling day
- You sense your bride’s weariness and step in to tackle some extra chores
- You bring your bride a favorite small gift or take her out to a favorite restaurant
- You offer to run an errand for your bride, releasing her to do something more enjoyable
- You offer your bride some words of wisdom or encouragement from your own time in study of the Bible that day

While we may bless others with our words and actions, the best blessings still come from Jesus. This is because through the Holy Spirit, Jesus knows the deepest needs and longings of our spirit. Your bride might be especially open with you in your conversations together, yet Jesus knows her better still. Look at Paul’s incredible words to the Romans: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26). So you may also bless your bride by praying over her, asking God to bless her in ways that you cannot recognize as needs or tend to in your own knowledge or skill. You can even do this as she sleeps, resting your hand on her and praying God’s fortifying strength into her!

THINK ABOUT IT

- What does your bride need most in her life right now? Are you equipped to bless her in this way? If so, what will it take for you to do this? If not, are you prepared to turn to God and seek his blessing for your bride?

[SPEAKING ‘HER LANGUAGE’]

Several years ago, a man came into my office confounded with his marriage. In the midst of the discussion that ensued, I hopped up from my seat and began to write a list on the small white board on my wall. Here is the list:

- Physical affection
- Acts of service
- Encouraging words
- Time together
- Gifts

You might recognize this list as indicative of Dr. Gary Chapman’s famous Five Love Languages. Dr. Chapman says that we all are best communicated to through one or two of these “languages.” The man who had come to visit me had never seen the list.

I asked him, “Which of these would most speak to you, and which would most speak to your bride?”

Immediately, the proverbial light bulb went off in his head. He realized in that moment that not only did he and his bride speak “different languages,” but that he had not been properly communicating with his bride in her language at all.

We have already alluded to all of these languages in this book, at least briefly. Not one of these is difficult to understand. All of them are endeavors worth a man’s time. And yet, if you know your bride, you know that one or two of these languages speak best to her. (If you don’t know which ones, you’d better start studying your bride!)

A lot of guys will tell you that roses win the day every time. And surely, no wife would turn them down if they aren’t being given to “buy her off.” But roses may fall somewhere near the bottom of your own bride’s list. She may be aching for your time, to just sit with you for an hour and talk about “nothing” over a cup of coffee away from the kids. Or she may need to hear from you words of praise for the wonderful (and usually unnoticed) ways she is contributing to your home. Know your bride better and you’ll contend for her best.

THINK ABOUT IT

- What is your bride’s preferred love language? Have you ever considered “speaking” to her in this way before? How might you increase your efforts in this way?

- For more on the love languages, including a quiz that will allow you each to discover your true love language, you will want to investigate *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*, by Dr. Gary Chapman (Northfield Publishing, 1995).

[CONVERSATION]

If we can contend best for our bride by knowing her better, we are going to have to go where few men dare to go. We are going to have to talk to her. Actually, that phrasing leaves open the possibility that we do all the talking. So better yet, we are going to have to *converse* with her.

Consider this very scary possibility. After weeks of crazy involvement with work or church or kids—or all of these—you and your bride decide that you need to get away, at least for the evening. So you clear the schedule, get a sitter for the kids if you need one, and make your way to a favorite restaurant, maybe a place the two of you really enjoyed long before all the rest of this stuff entered your life. The host seats you, the server takes your order, and finally, in the minutes before the food comes, you have a chance to talk. *And you find you have nothing to say!* You don’t want to hash over all of the stuff you are trying to leave behind by going out in the first place. You don’t want to bring up any of those hot topics that you know need to be discussed—not right now. So you sit there in silence, maybe enjoying the moments of quiet reflection, but knowing that this is not why you have come.

No wonder we guys think so little of conversation!

But here’s the truth for most of us. While we were certainly physically attracted to our bride before we married her, we pretty well knew that sex—even good sex—would not sustain a marriage.

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So we were careful to choose a bride who not only enticed us but interested us. We enjoyed similar activities and shared similar perspectives, and we spent much time talking about these. So where have they gone?


What you need is a basis for conversation. You need to be reading. You need to be watching thoughtful presentations and listening to provocative discussions—in person and on television and on the radio. You need to be an observer in your neighborhood and in your children’s school. You need to have dreams and ideas and goals, preferably those given to you by God himself through his word in the Bible and his word revealed to your heart. You need all of this—both of you. And then you need to bring it to the table of conversation. You need to say smart and surprising things. You need to ask sensitive and surprising questions. And as the husband, you need to learn to take the lead here—whether or not you are “the talkative one” between you.

Good conversation leads to excellent understanding. So if you are going to contend for your marriage and your bride, you need to initiate good conversation, and you need to inspire the same from your bride by listening intently to what she has to say.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Do you find conversation with your bride difficult or limited in scope? How has your conversational relationship progressed through the years? What can you do to make it better even now?

7 WHAT TO CONTEND FOR ON BEHALF OF YOUR BRIDE

 **W**E HAVE ALL HEARD THE ADAGE: “Choose your battles.” Some things are not worth fighting for. You may earn some bragging rights when your fantasy football team or church scramble foursome comes away with top honors, but these are far from key wins in the arena of life. They’re not even key battles.

As we have been considering in this book, contending for your bride sits high on the list of worthy pursuits. In fact, after contending for Christ and his kingdom, it is likely the highest calling you will ever receive—and when you’re married in Christ, it is actually an integral part of your kingdom life.

But when it comes to battles of any kind, it is far more enjoyable to be on the offensive than always playing defense. When you are on the offensive, you get to make the game plan instead of just responding on the fly to someone else’s. When you are the offensive, you get to contend *for* excellent things, rather than contending *against* the trash that would try to take you down.

This section has one goal, then, which is to get you thinking about being on the offensive, about setting the game plan. Though we could brainstorm and consider a small mountain of possibilities, I want to focus on four areas where you might engage in contending for your bride. That is, in these areas, you might:

CONTEND FOR YOUR BRIDE

- Pray for her
- Lead her
- Encourage her
- Bless her
- Talk to her and with her

Let's begin with the most important.

[SALVATION]

Want to set the world on edge? Get yourself a placard that says "Jesus Saves!" and march down the busiest street in town. Nearly everyone comes down on one side or the other with regard to sidewalk prophets. Plenty give them a thumbs-up approval, but those who don't—well, their words are often rude and unprintable.

So it's hard to go down the path where we talk salvation. But most people are honest enough to say that, yes, they need saving. They need someone far more powerful to come alongside in their hours of tragedy and offer a way out. They need someone who understands how they could have been lured into devastating choices and who offers them a U-turn. They need someone who sees that they are setting themselves up in this life for judgment in eternity and who provides the very salvation that will carry them instead to heaven.

That someone is Jesus Christ, the one who came from God and as God to offer the salvation we need through the shedding of his blood on the cross and the resurrection of his body as he overcame death on behalf of all who would place their trust in him. There is no more valuable truth than that, and yet until it is made plain to you by the Holy Spirit of Jesus, you will be blind to it. Often, it will be the farthest thing from your mind. But your soul, as walled off as it may be from the rest of you by your arguments and your actions, always yearns for God. This is true for the holiest "saint" and the vilest "sinner."

Writing to the fellowship in Corinth, Paul spoke frankly about the fact that some spouses would be separated in their belief. One would be in Christ, while the other would be far from him.

WHAT TO CONTEND FOR ON BEHALF OF YOUR BRIDE

You may have come to this book as one who did not believe in salvation through Jesus Christ, and you may still not believe it. In this regard, your bride may be the one contending for you. She may be doing this on her own, in prayer only. But she may also have spoken to you about your need for Jesus, encouraging you in this critical direction. It may be time for you to give serious attention to this matter. Men who want to be regarded as serious contenders in life do not forsake their spiritual due diligence. And if neither you nor your bride has a saving connection with Jesus, you should be taking the lead in investigating and addressing salvation as it is described in the Bible.

But you may be the one who does believe. Your bride may be saying—and I have never heard a man say this about his bride without a quiver in his voice—that she wants nothing to do with Jesus. In such a case, your role as contender is absolutely clear: You must seek the Holy Spirit's influence on your bride's mind, heart and soul. You must lead as one whose whole life is under Christ's authority, so that she may see the changes in you and turn to the love of Christ through you. You must gently but urgently encourage her to meet with Jesus. And may that encounter be as radical as the one experienced by the woman at the well (see John 4)!

THINK ABOUT IT

- Have you ever been as mindful of each person's serious need for salvation as you are now? What circumstances or thoughts have aroused this knowledge in you? Do you and your bride share the same thoughts about this, or are you in different places before Jesus?
- Have you ever engaged in "spiritual due diligence," exploring the claims of the Bible? We could all stand more of this! For a strong series of Bible studies in this vein, check out the Spiritual Due Diligence series under Bible studies at www.linksplayers.com.

[JOY]

Many pages ago, we reviewed the account of Nehemiah, the cup-bearer of King Artaxerxes who returned to Jerusalem to lead the effort to rebuild the walls of the city. It was Nehemiah, you will recall, who allowed us to understand the joint role of contenders as *builders* and *defenders*. Let's return now to Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem.

After the wall was completed and the temple ordinances were reestablished, the Law of God, written on ancient scrolls, was rediscovered by Ezra and the priests. Ezra stood before the people and read the Law, and their hearts were broken. Suddenly it was being revealed to them how far they had strayed from God's beautiful intent for them. They began to weep.

But this was not what this day was meant to be about. This was not a day intended for mourning but for celebration. God's land and his Law had been restored, and his love was being renewed in the hearts of the people. So Nehemiah stood up and implored the people: "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our LORD. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:9-12).

Joy—the real kind of joy that comes from a renewing of our spirits by God's Spirit—is something always worth fighting for. The enemy will do all he can to rob your authentic joy, even the joy that comes from the simplest of pleasures. Why? Because he, like Nehemiah, knows that this is where your strength comes from.

So, we must be contenders for joy in our bride's life. We must pray that God gives her joy unmistakable and irrevocable. We must protect her joy by lifting worries from her through our proactive leadership. We must increase her joy by affirming the excellent work and gifting of God that we see in her (encouragement and blessing). And we must seek out more ways to bring her joy by asking her about the things that enthuse her most.

THINK ABOUT IT

- How do these words help you see joy as a very desirable at-

tribute in life? What can you do to increase levels of godly joy in your marriage and for your bride?

[UNITY]

I don't know if I can buy into John Gray's now-famous suggestion that "men are from Mars, women are from Venus." Maybe I'm too much of a realist. But I do know this: you and your bride are different.

Long ago I learned this truth when my mother explained to me—without ill will—that the traits that had most attracted her to my father were some of the very things that could bug her the most after years of marriage. And she was just the first to tell me this. Many others, both men and women, have confirmed this to be true in their own marriages through the years. If you were attracted to your bride because she always seemed to be peppy, you have now wondered whether that really is such a good quality at 7 o'clock every morning. And if she admired you for your steady emotional structure, she has certainly tried since to shake you into excitement when she wants a little response from you!

All of this is... *good*. When a man and his bride bring different personalities and interests to a marriage, there is the wonderful opportunity for complementing one another (here meaning *fit together*, rather than *saying nice things*). If you are the quiet type, it is nice to have a talkative wife who can carry the conversation in tough social settings. If she is not at all mechanical, you can be of great value to her by applying your fix-it skills to household projects. You do the bill paying, but she adds up the check register. You fill in the forms, but she looks them over for edits. You cook the meal, but she makes the table look great. When a marriage works this way, you don't have to be especially bright to recognize how powerful unity can be.

Unity is the characteristic of pieces fitting together to achieve the same end. It is not the same as *unison*, where everyone does exactly the same thing (an insightful observer once said, "When two people agree on everything, one of them is redundant"). Paul

CONTEND FOR YOUR BRIDE

championed unity when he wrote to the Corinthians, telling them that Christ's church is like a body, where all the parts are designed to work together though they are not all the same. "Let each one do his (or her) job," Paul essentially told them.

But unity does not always come easily. Pride can get in the way ("I'm good at this—why can't you be?"), or impatience ("I could have finished that an hour ago—what could be taking her so long?"). If you let them, your differences can become contenders *against* your marriage. So here's an obvious resolution: don't let them! Seek unity by God's hand in your marriage. Pray that he would continually give you eyes to see how your bride's complementary qualities are a blessing to you. And encourage your bride in these qualities—as you hear yourself speak these uplifting words to her, you will be consciously reminded yourself of how valuable she is to you!

THINK ABOUT IT

- What traits does your bride possess that you do not? How about you—what personality features and what abilities do you have that she doesn't? How do you complement each other through these differences? What do you want to ask God to show you through these differences?

[FREEDOM]

Long ago, when I was studying at a university in Southern California and filling some time playing intramural softball, I pitched in a championship game against one of the professors, a man named Neil Anderson. We lost; Dr. Anderson's team won. So you can imagine my dismay several years later when my bride began to identify with a new favorite author: Neil Anderson! Yep, same guy.

But I have found great worth in Dr. Anderson's books as well, beginning with his classics, *The Bondage Breaker* and *Victory Over the Darkness*. The chief thrust of Anderson's writing is this: The enemy is using lies to deceive you into thinking that you are worthless, particularly before God. You need to grab hold of the truth of the Bible, that you are loved and redeemed through Jesus Christ

WHAT TO CONTEND FOR ON BEHALF OF YOUR BRIDE

and that anything Satan says or does to discount that truth is locking you up (binding you) from doing all that you can in Jesus.

This is true for both men and women. We are equally prone to the enemy's deception. But I have found through my conversations with my own bride and with women in the church that I have pastored, as well as through further study, that women take particular hits when it comes to their view of themselves in terms both of their looks and their personality. In fact, the main method the enemy uses to tell women that they are not what they could be is the visual images presented in magazines and on television that feature shapely, charming women. The expectations that culture places on your bride, through the media and the spoken and unspoken assessments of other women, are not only immense, they fall outside of the realm of true beauty that Bible lays out for women: "Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful" (1 Peter 3:4,5).

Remember, to contend for your bride is to contend against the enemy of God. Because the picture of marriage is the picture of Christ and his own bride, the church (which we will explore in the End of this book), Satan will do all he can to damage that picture in the eyes of the world. One way he will do that is to cause depression in your bride through false expectations that offer no lasting beauty. Pray against this. Speak the truth of God's word in the Bible to your bride, encouraging in her traits that are both desirable and lasting. And do all you can to "speak her language," letting her know that you like her as God as made her to be, not as others apart from you and the Lord expect her to be.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Have you seen in your bride the evidence of bondage that comes from false expectations? How can you speak differently to your bride to counter the demands of these expectations?
- Do you see more clearly now how contending for your marriage

CONTEND FOR YOUR BRIDE

and your bride is a real battle? How much more important does knowing the truth of the Bible become in a battle like this?

[A VALUABLE EXTRA BIT]

We have explored four possible areas where you can take up the fight on behalf of your bride: salvation, joy, unity, and freedom. Since you are contending for these in your marriage, you will be asking for God's hand on your bride. But don't forget to include requests for your own strength in these areas when you consult with the Lord in prayer.

That said, you should also know about an outstanding resource right in the Bible itself for praying for, blessing, and encouraging your bride. Proverbs 31, beginning at verse 10 and carrying through to the end of the chapter, paints a picture of a godly woman, one who is out to complement her husband in the things she does both inside and away from their home. Take the time to read through these verses and add to your list the things you can contend for on behalf of your bride.

One last note here: You will need to allow God time to do his work in your bride. You may see some characteristics change in her the hour after you start contending as God would have you contend. That is the way his miraculous hand can work. But in other matters, you may have to contend faithfully for years before you see a change. This will require patience both with your bride and with God. In other words, your own faith will be tested—is it an enduring faith, one that fights to end? If it is, you are a godly contender.

8 DON'T CONTEND ALONE

MOST OF US KNOW THE FAMOUS BIBLICAL ACCOUNT OF DANIEL, the praying man who went to the lion's den for his prayers. When the ruler of the land was duped into creating a law that required prayers only be made to him, Daniel did not alter his routine. He went back to God in prayer, as he always did. And the men who had framed him carted him off to the king and had him thrown into the den, where the famished lions were sure to tear him to pieces. If you know even a little of the account, you know that the beasts left Daniel unharmed, and his conspirators were eventually sent to the judgment they had dreamed up for Daniel.

From that account, we often gain the perspective (not all wrong) that Daniel was a man committed to God and to prayer, even when he was the only one. He was resolved enough and courageous enough to go it alone. But there is an earlier story from Daniel's life that shows this was not necessarily his preferred method.

When Daniel was a young man in training with his friends to serve the king's court, the king had a dream that disturbed him greatly. The king was desperate for an interpretation of the dream, but he could not even remember the dream after he awoke. So he became even more desperate in his dealings with his wise men and diviners; he demanded that they tell him the dream and provide its interpretation, or they would be executed. When word of this rash pronouncement reached Daniel, he humbly presented himself to

CONTEND FOR YOUR BRIDE

the king and asked for a night to seek the Lord about this matter. Then, we are told, Daniel went to his companions and told them to “plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery.” You see, when Daniel had the opportunity to engage his friends rather than contend alone, he sought their direct help. Up against the greatest of challenges, he knew they would do better to contend together.

This is a lesson for us. Many times we will need to contend for our marriage and our bride alone. There are things between us that we must hold on to in secret, if only to protect her dignity. But many matters may be brought to others as you ask them to help you contend for your marriage (and for matters in the rest of your life). Whenever possible—preferably on a regularly scheduled basis—gather with other men who are seeking to follow Jesus Christ and contend for God’s power in their own relationships. Pray for one another. Look out for one another. Challenge one another. Maybe like this:

- I can still vividly remember a speaker I heard in my teen years, whose heart had been broken by a friend’s decision to leave his bride for another woman. That friend walked right out of an excellent marriage. And I can remember this speaker saying, “I now have told my best friend, if ever I start to do the same thing, chase me down, bring me back—don’t let me do it.”
- I do much of my writing for groups of men who gather for the purpose of studying the Bible together and daring each other to live it. Not long ago, a man in a group like this received one of *those* emails from an acquaintance. With a mix of bravery and fear, the man wrote back, beginning with these words: “I might have appreciated this kind of stuff several years back, but don’t anymore. Looking at pornography doesn’t honor my wife in the manner in which she deserves.” He had no way of knowing what kind of response he would receive, but when the reply came back it

DON’T CONTEND ALONE

was apologetic and repentant. These men were moving one another to godly change.

- In the late 1990s I moved my family to the small South American nation of Ecuador for two years, where my wife and I taught in a mission school on the edge of the jungle. Ecuador is one of the world’s most prolific producers of roses, supplying florists all through the United States. The advantage to the men of Ecuador is that they can acquire beautiful bouquets of roses for about \$4 per dozen. The second year we were there, we were privileged to be joined by two dear friends, and I must say that this man, older than many of us, took the lead when it came to romantic gestures. In fact, when special occasions like Valentine’s Day or Mother’s Day came around, he ordered down from Quito not just one dozen roses for his own bride, but many dozen roses so that the rest of us too would be awakened to put up that “exorbitant” four bucks and do the right thing for our brides as well!

Working together as men who would contend can be both serious business and fun. We can provoke each other spiritually and practically. In fact, Marlon Brando’s plea to his “brother” in *On the Waterfront* implied this: “I could have been a contender, Charley. *And you could have helped me.*”

God’s people are not meant to do his business alone. To the greatest extent you can, build a team of support around you. Begin with a single mentor if you must. If a man as godly as Daniel relied on his friends, what does that say for you and me?

THINK ABOUT IT


- What value is evident in contending alongside others in life and for your marriage as you look to live as God has called you to? Do you have friends that you can rely on to contend with you? If so, take some time this week to specifically thank these men for the key role they play in your walk of faith with Jesus. If not, begin im-

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mediately to explore the options that a mentor or pastor can give you for connecting with a group like this. Men who take the step of participating in a group like this often find supportive friends for the first time in their lives.

END

THE MARRIAGE THAT MATTERS MOST



THERE IS A MARRIAGE THAT MATTERS MORE THAN ANY OTHER, and it is not your own.

After reading all this way, that statement may surprise you. How could there be a marriage more important than mine, a bride more important than mine? It's simple. Look:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (Ephesians 5:25-28)

Actually, you have seen this passage already in this book. But look at it again. The marriage between you and your bride is only a shadow of the most important marriage in the universe: the marriage between Jesus Christ and his beloved church (those who believe wholly in him). When we live the way that God would have us live in our marriage—as loving contenders for our brides—we are only mirroring what Jesus did when he came into the world in order to die for us.

Here is an essential piece of understanding: Jesus did not come

CONTEND FOR YOUR BRIDE

as an *example*. He came as the only possible perfect sacrifice, having to die if the relationship between God and humanity was ever going to be restored, and if it was going to be restored once and for all. Jesus did not come to provide a good pattern for us to follow. He came to pay the price for our salvation. However, in the midst of living such a life unto death, he did provide an example. It was an example of just how love is supposed to be done.

- We are to give ourselves up for our bride, making whatever sacrifices are necessary to make her a better (even holy!) woman before God.
- We are to cleanse her with the word—that is, encourage her through the truth of the Bible, as we ourselves are being challenged to live that truth.
- And in doing these things, we discover this wonder: she becomes radiant to us, more beautiful than any product or project could ever make her to be.

If you are ever to understand the full meaning of this kind of love and contending, you must be “in Christ.” That is the Bible’s phrasing for someone who has given the whole of their life to Jesus, that he might save them from death and prepare them for eternal life.

You may ask, how is this done? How do I enter into such a covenant with God? Our now familiar mentor, the apostle Paul, put it into these words for the Romans:

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (Romans 10:9-10)

Start with your heart. Do you long deep within for a life-giving relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ? Are you ready

THE MARRIAGE THAT MATTERS MOST

to turn the desires of your heart from pursuits common to this world and move instead to the desires of Jesus Christ for you?

Now are you ready to speak of this belief? You will begin by saying a simple prayer to God, like this: “Great God of the universe, I know that like all sinful men, I have been separated from you by seeking my own desires, satisfying my pride and my flesh. I don’t want to live like that any more. But I can’t change on my own. I need Jesus to save me. I believe that he can, and I am ready for whatever changes he will bring. Begin today with the work of renewing my heart and mind for you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Finally, you should know well by now that life in Christ is not meant to be lived alone. If your bride is not with you in this step of faith, begin to pray that she too will give her life to Jesus. Next, seek out a mentor who knows and honors the Bible and can help you learn more about life in Christ. This will often be the pastor or another leader in a local church. Finally, do all you can to team up with a group of men who are also committed to growth in Christ. You’ll be amazed at how men united for a noble purpose and empowered by the Holy Spirit can make a God-honoring impact on each other and in the world.

RESOURCES

The following resources are referenced in this book and recommended as place for further consideration of the topics discussed.

The Bible. Read a translation written in understandable language that fits your listening ear. Popular translations of this variety include the New International Version, the New Living Translation, and the translation used in this book, the English Standard Version. Nearly all Bible translations are also available in audio versions for listening in your car or workshop.

The Five Love Languages, a book outlining the ways men and women communicate love to one another. (Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*. Northfield Publishing, 1995.)

GetReligion, a blog devoted to analysis of how the media cover religion. (Online at www.getreligion.org.)

This Momentary Marriage, a personal reflection and biblical study of marriage. (John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*. Crossway Books, 2009.)

My Heart, Christ's Home, a small booklet revealing the vision of its author about Christ cleaning up a person's life. (Robert Boyd Munger, *My Heart, Christ's Home*. Intervarsity Press, 1986.)

Pujols Family Foundation, a web site describing the life and work of Major League Baseball star Albert Pujols. (Online at www.pujolsfamilyfoundation.org.)

Wild at Heart, a quintessential men's book, leading us to go after the essence of God's creative hand in us. (John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*. Thomas Nelson, 2001.)