

MARRIAGE

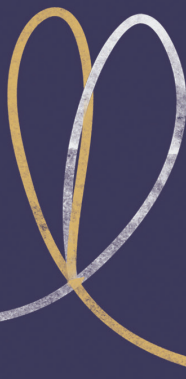
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WORKS

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GOD'S WAY OF BECOMING
SPIRITUAL SOUL MATES, BEST FRIENDS,
AND PASSIONATE LOVERS

CHIPINGRAM

Introduction

One Thursday night, I got an overpowering whiff of Brut cologne as Dave, my mentor, came down the stairs. Dave had been trained by the Navigators and had launched two successful campus ministries in West Virginia. But he was a blue-collar guy who laid bricks for a living.

Dave wore a big smile and a tie and sport coat - clothes I didn't even know he owned.

"What's going on?" I asked him. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going on a date." He grinned.

"With who?"

"Polly, of course. Who do you think?"

I was shocked. Dave and Polly had four kids - two in high school, one in middle school, and one in elementary school. I had never seen my or anyone else's parents go on a date unless they had to

chaperone a dance. My folks loved each other, of course, but they did not look at each other the way Dave and Polly did even after twenty years of marriage.

I had been around Dave and Polly for about five years, moving with them to a new city after college graduation to help them launch a campus discipleship ministry. While Dave worked, I taught high school, coached basketball, and lived in the garage apartment behind Dave's house.

I have eaten more meals at their table than I can remember. I had seen their struggles. And I knew they really loved each other. But the picture of Dave coming down the stairs anticipating a date with his wife had an impact on me. It redefined what a marriage could be.

The Marriage God Wants for You

This book is about having that kind of marriage. Whether you and your mate are newlyweds or have been married for decades, God has designed this unique relationship to, over time, produce best friends, passionate lovers, and spiritual soul mates.

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Best friends, passionate lovers, spiritual soul mates. That is the kind of marriage God wants for you and your mate. This is not hyperbole. It isn't idealism. It's a real possibility, regardless of where you and your spouse find yourselves.

Don't get me wrong. This isn't easy. It will require some *knowledge* that most people don't have, some *skills* everyone can learn, and a lot of *grace*, which God promises to provide.

It will also require setting aside some assumptions you've made about marriage, as well as mustering up the courage to honestly examine where your marriage is - and where you want it to be.

Paying a High Price

If you're thinking I'm one of those pastors from a long line of wonderful ministers who have had wonderful marriages and wonderful children - someone who has never had any problems, can't understand your marriage or your issues, and just wants to tell you how to do things the right way - you need to know that's not the case.

The kind of marriage I have with my wife is far better than I ever dreamed, but the price has been higher than I ever imagined. I don't mean to sound harsh about that; I'm just being honest.

Like many couples, Theresa and I carried a lot of baggage into our marriage. I came from a semifunctional alcoholic family, a background that is fairly common to those whose fathers served in World War II. Theresa's experience was even more severe, and it was complicated by an early marriage as an unbeliever to another unbeliever who found it more profitable to sell drugs than work - and more appealing to run off with another woman than to provide for his infant twin boys.

Theresa and I both came to know Christ in early adulthood. We met a couple of years after her husband left, were involved in a campus ministry in addition to having full-time jobs, were friends for about a year, dated for about a year, then married and left for seminary with two four-year-old boys. We had no premarital counseling and no money. I went to school full-time *and* worked full-time so she could care for the children. By God's grace, I adopted the boys a year later. Also by God's grace, one of my professors was Dr. Paul Meier, founder of the Meier Clinics, when less than a year into our marriage the wheels were falling off.

Theresa's and my journey has involved counseling, marriage exercises, reading books together, going to conferences, forgiving each other (again and again), learning to communicate, resolving anger, and figuring out how to get on the same page with money, values, in-laws, sex, parenting, and most of the big decisions of life, many of which we've disagreed on. Other than that, it has been pretty smooth!

Learning God's Design

How did we make it? I could tell you it was all by the grace of God, but as true as that is, it's too generic and not very helpful.

I could also tell you we got some very good insight from counselors and friends who helped us understand the issues from our past and our families of origin, and who gave us some tools we needed to work on our marriage. That's true too, and I don't want to discount any of it.

But the fundamental reason we are still together and have the kind of marriage I always dreamed of - still with normal struggles like every couple has - is that we *learned God's design for the marriage relationship and committed to follow it.*

The Larger, Overarching Plan

This book is not a personal story, and I'm not a psychologist. I'm a pastor who has worked hard to have this kind of marriage and has spent thirty-five years counseling and observing Christians and non-Christians struggle, settle, and - far too often - quit.

The world doesn't need another marriage book that will give you psychological inventories, idealistic stories, and conventional advice. Plenty of those resources exist, and many of them are excellent. I have read, studied, and benefited from quite a few of them, both in my own marriage and in my ministry.

What we do need in this day of sexual confusion, pop psychology, and addiction to narcissistic personal fulfillment is some very clear biblical truth from the Author of marriage - the One who created and designed it. And we need practical application of that truth.

God has communicated what marriage is, how it works, the roles and responsibilities for husbands and wives, and why His instructions are so important. He did this not only for the sake of marriage but also for His larger, overarching plan to reveal Christ's

love to the world and His commitment to the church. That's why this book exists.

In the pages that follow, you will discover the power of making a covenant with your spouse. You will read some things that in today's culture may be considered politically incorrect. But they are foundational for a husband loving his wife well and taking responsibility for his God-given assignment. You'll read some challenging thoughts about how a wife must trust God and overcome fears of her husband's inadequacies.

Most of all, you will experience the beginnings of a spiritual, psychological, emotional, and physical oneness that you and your mate were both designed to enjoy.

With that in view, let's begin this journey together to discover God's design for the marriage you long to have.

God's Design for Marriage

Submit to One Another Out of Reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

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. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church - for we are members of His body.

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

- Ephesians 5:21-33

The early years of my marriage to Theresa were rocky, and there were times when I wanted to bail. But we stuck together and got professional help, and it was the best money we ever spent. Everyone has troubles; that's just part of marriage. What you do with them makes the difference.

Now, more than three decades later, we connect early in the day. We're early risers, and whoever gets up first makes the coffee. Maybe a half hour later, depending on the day, we talk about what's going on in each other's life, what the day looks like for each of us, what's coming up, where we're feeling pressure. It doesn't happen every day; sometimes one of us needs some alone time first. But then I'll grab her hand, and we'll talk to God together.

It took us some time, but we realized long ago that there is a design for this relationship. It works when we align ourselves with the design, prioritize each other's needs and fulfillment, and honor each other's uniqueness and relationship with God.

It's a lot like owning a high-performance car. You know it took years of planning, creating, and refining by the finest engineers and that it functions at its best only when you tune it to certain settings, use the highest-quality gas and oil, and are meticulous about maintenance. Marriage is like that.

The Master Designer of marriage has given us a manual for optimal performance. Marriage isn't easy to maintain, but neither is anything else that is valuable or worthwhile. His blueprint tells us how things work, and if we don't follow it, we will experience the consequences - as many in society are finding out nowadays. But unlike the instructions for high-performance machinery, these come from the loving heart of a Creator who wants His people to have deep, meaningful relationships with Him and others. His Word tells us how.

One of the clearest pictures of marriage in Scripture is in Ephesians 5:21-33, and it works for every married person, even for those who are coming out of a dysfunctional past. It tells us about the role of a husband and a wife, how they should relate to each other, and what the higher meaning of their union actually signifies.

In this passage, Paul is writing to the Ephesians. He has just explained how they can be filled with the Holy Spirit and allow God to control their lives. He talks about the transformation in attitude that occurs when we are living by the Spirit's power. It's a beautiful and inspiring passage, but it begs a question or two: What does this spiritual life look like in real-life situations? How does it affect our relationship? Verse 21 begins with an explanation. Here's what a Spirit-filled marriage looks like, and it starts with a very unexpected statement: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Words like "submission" are not received well in a culture that demands political correctness. They upset a lot of people. I can understand that, especially in light of the ways some of those

concepts have been abused in the past. Whatever reservations you have about them, however, I want you to put them on hold for a bit.

We are going to explore what submission really means and the context in which it is to be lived out. I think you will find that the demands on each of us as marriage partners are equally challenging, stretching, and even impossible to accomplish in our own strength. God's instructions will not appear fair at first glance - until we realize the example He set for us and how the roles of husband and wife are both reflections of His extravagant love.

It Starts with Mutual Submission

There are three important initial observations about the Ephesians 5 passage, and being subject to one another is the first and foremost. Mutual submission is the only way a marriage can work.

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First and foremost, each partner needs to understand that God is in charge of a marriage and that it should reflect His nature - His love, His concern, His radical sacrifice. It requires a selfless relationship because God is selfless. Marriage is not about fulfilling your own wants and needs; it's about fulfilling someone else's. If you enter into it thinking it's about you and getting your needs met, you're rejecting the design. Marriage is about honoring God and receiving from Him whatever your spouse needs to get from Him through you. That isn't easy. I understand

that. But above all, it requires mutual submission to God and to each other.

Second, marriage won't work unless you learn how to love your mate not as you define love but as *God* defines it - and as your mate is designed to receive it.

As a husband, that means I am given an absolutely impossible job of loving my wife as sacrificially as Jesus loved the church - that I would actually give up my life for her, that I would nourish and cherish her, and be sensitive to her needs. We husbands need to create an environment in which our wives will flourish. We can't do that on our own. We need divine help.

And wives are given the seemingly unreasonable commandment to do for their husbands what the church is to do for Christ: devote herself in service; partner with him in a degree of intimacy that stretches her level of trust; and respect him in ways that build him up, strengthen him to be the man he was created to be, and encourage him to do what he has been called to do. She can't do that without divine help either.

Third, this passage assures us that marriage has an even bigger purpose than our own happiness. Our joy, pleasure, and fulfillment are important to God, but they are only lasting within a larger context. According to this passage, marriage is a picture of an eternal relationship between Christ and the church. That is the blueprint behind the blueprint of marriage and family. God designed family to be a stable environment for offspring and a fundamental unit of society, yes. But it flows out of the eternal relationship designed for Christ and His bride, the church.

Demonstrating God Through Your Relationship

One of the greatest opportunities you have to demonstrate the reality of God in your life is in your relationships, especially in how you get along with your marriage partner. In my experience the number one reason given for divorce is irreconcilable differences. In other words, "We just can't get along." People who do get along - who communicate well enough and compassionately enough to build each other up, even when they have differences - stand out.

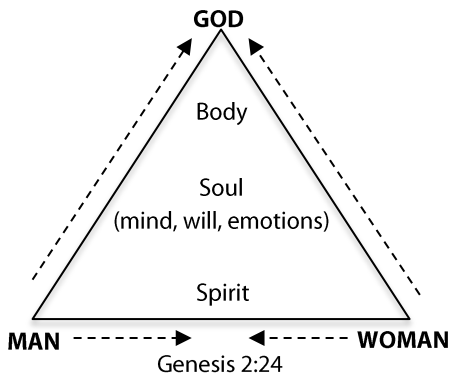
Theresa and I once had a neighbor who got to see the good, the bad, and the ugly in our relationship because a next-door view provides that window into your life. Our kids and hers played together, we would occasionally talk in the yard, and sometimes we would invite her to church or to dinner. She was never very interested in spiritual conversations, but when she was getting ready to move, she said something I'll never forget.

"I've always been turned off by religion, and I'm not sure I believe in God, but over the years I've watched you and your wife. If I were ever going to be a Christian, I'd be one like you."

She was not saying that because she had seen a perfect marriage - not by a long shot. We made a lot of mistakes. But I think what she was trying to say was that she saw a man and a woman who loved each other through all of life's ups and downs. She saw commitment in a world that doesn't have many examples of it. And that made an impression about the kind of God we serve. In some way, our marriage was a reflection of the heart of the Master Designer.

God's Blueprint for Marriage

In the world of design and engineering, seeing a blueprint is necessary before you can implement a design. We can see the blueprint of marriage in the lives of those who are doing it as Scripture defines it. But an even simpler picture might help us envision how it works.



This equilateral triangle represents the basic premise of biblical marriage. God is at the top, of course. He created men and women in His image and designed us for the kind of relationship that embodies His nature and Christ's relationship with His people.

Marriage is His idea. That's really important to remember. Marriage is not just a social construct, one idea out of many others that developed in ages past as a good option for our society. No, it is written into the DNA of this world as God's normative pattern for the growth and development of humanity.

At the bottom of the triangle is a verse that points to the nature of marriage, established from the very beginning. Genesis 2:24 identifies the goal of marriage as oneness, or intimacy. When God created marriage, He said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). He designed it to address the problem of loneliness or isolation. A God of love by nature shares who He is; those made in His image are created to share themselves with someone else. The goal of marriage is for two beings - male and female - to be united as one, with hearts and minds and bodies that connect at every level.

From all I've observed about human nature over the years, that oneness is a basic human desire. Nearly three out of four Americans believe in the idea of a soul mate, according to a 2011 study. The largest group of true believers are under 30 (80 percent) or 30-44 (78 percent). The percentages drop for older folks, but still, 72 percent of those 45-59 and 65 percent of those 60 and older think soul mates exists.¹ Whether there's one Mr. Right or Mrs. Right for each person on earth is debatable. But there's no debating that we've been created to experience - and long for - an intimate, lifelong relationship.

Your Spiritual Connection Is the Foundation

Back to the triangle. Inside it, you will see three levels of connection - oneness in spirit, soul (mind, will, and emotions), and body. A biblical "soul mate" is fundamentally spiritual. It includes your relationship with God as well as your spouse's relationship with God. It is a triangle of unity, three spirits knit together in deep intimacy. The soul (mind, will, and emotions) and the body are certainly part of that. But the spiritual aspect is

the biggest and most foundational part of what it means to be a soul mate.

There is a closeness in that process of growing in spiritual intimacy that ranks as high as sexual union. When spirits come together before God, He does something to draw a married couple together. It can be very awkward at the beginning, but later

it's as natural as eating and breathing. Spiritual oneness with God and each other is meant to be the foundation of marriage.

Spiritual oneness with God and each other is meant to be the foundation of a marriage.

Sharing Your Soul: Your Mind, Will, and Emotions

In addition to spiritual oneness, God also wants us to have soul oneness. He wants you and your mate to be best friends.

Many married couples started out that way but are now just living as roommates; the mind, will, and emotional connections are not what they used to be. The goal was never for both of you to get absorbed in your jobs or for the husband to hang out with the guys all the time while the wife hangs out with her girlfriends. Too many couples spend their "together" time in the same room but with faces glued to a screen or book. There's nothing wrong with reading or watching TV. But separate lives absorbed with separate activities undermine the connection, and it eventually goes away. That was never God's plan.

God wants soul mates to talk together, walk together, pursue hobbies together, and have some fun. Life will not always be just like it was when you were dating - that would be completely unrealistic. Many couples are disillusioned when the joy of dating fades away underneath the responsibilities of adulthood. But when you continue to date your spouse, it stirs those special feelings and excitement about being together - like my mentors you met in the introduction, Dave and Polly.

Soul oneness requires communicating and injecting some fun into the routines of your lives. Best friends support each other with the bonds of friendship - empathy, comfort, and affection. That kind of connection is at the heart of God's design for marriage.

The Bonding Power of Physical Union

As the icing on the cake, God designed physical oneness not only to fulfill the "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28 NASB) command but also for our enjoyment. He wants married couples to be passionate lovers.

God designed men and women to bond in the sexual experience, not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. The brain secretes the hormone oxytocin during and after sex, causing couples (especially men) to want to open up and share what's going on inside. The physical chemistry enhances the connection at every other level. God has wired that bonding into His creation and His design for marriage.

Historically, some Christian leaders have had trouble with the idea of passionate sex as a gift to married couples and have taught against it. Unfortunately, a consequence of that faulty teaching was to provide unhappy and unfulfilled people an “excuse” to seek physical fulfillment outside marriage. Hebrews 13:4 tells us that God wants the marriage bed to be undefiled - sex is holy.

One of the biggest problems with society's perceptions of marriage is the separation of sex from the rest of the relationship so that people are led to believe that the best sex is outside of marriage. Ironically, secular studies have found that the best and most fulfilling sex in America is happening not in the singles scene or in extramarital affairs but in monogamous couples who are deeply committed to one another with high moral values.² I'm convinced from the way we are made that the physical relationship is meant to be the culmination of a foundational spiritual relationship and a mind-will-emotions relationship that flows out of the spiritual. Sex is the physical expression of a deeper union that serves its purpose only in the context of love and commitment.

Our culture has separated sex from love, which leaves people unfulfilled on both counts. Pornography, romantic fantasies, and illicit relationships are all examples of false intimacy that grow out of a society that does not understand the multiple connections of real intimacy. I recently read a statistic suggesting that more than two-thirds of people who get involved in extramarital affairs begin the relationship on social media.³ If you're having struggles in your marriage and you connect online with an old flame from

high school or college, it's easy to see where things might go from there.

I'm not suggesting that married couples delete their Facebook accounts or ignore old friends, but I am suggesting that we tend to treat our marriage too casually. And it isn't working out for us, is it? False intimacy in any area of life undermines unity in our homes, harms our children, can have devastating effects on our finances, and leaves us unfulfilled. It contradicts God's plan for our lives. He wants oneness for us at every level.

Closer to God, Closer to Each Other

I want you to try a little exercise with the triangle graphic shown earlier in this chapter. Put a finger on each of the corners that say "man" or "woman," and then slowly move your fingers up the sides to the point that says "God." Where are your fingers in relation to each other? They are closer, right? The point is simple, but it's also profound. The closer you grow to God, the closer you and your spouse grow to each other.

God designed marriage in such a way that it does not work as it should apart from Him. It's true that many people who don't know him would say they are happily married, and I wouldn't argue with them. But are they as connected physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually as they could be? I don't think so.

And neither are many Christian couples. Just being a Christian doesn't change the dynamics very much. But I promise you that

growing in intimacy with God changes everything despite our baggage and struggles. It was this passionate pursuit of Christ, which both Theresa and I were committed to, that saved our marriage. The greatest thing you can ever do for your marriage is to live as a committed, passionate follower of Jesus. You become like whomever you spend time with. When you spend time with God, He revolutionizes your heart and mind, and a new person shows up in your marriage. Only He can give you the power, freedom, and grace to give you mate what you could never give on your own.

I married a selfish person. So did my wife. If you're married, there's a very good chance you married one too. All of us are innately self-centered until we mature. That's because of the sinful nature we inherited, and it can be remedied only by God's work in our lives.

The "satisfy me" urge in marriage never ends unless we make a radical decision to lay our own lives down, just as Jesus told His disciples to do. A husband lays down his life for his wife, and a wife comes under her husband to serve - not with the expectation that the other will respond but with the commitment to live sacrificially even if the other doesn't.

The greatest thing you can ever do for your marriage is to live as a committed, passionate follower of Jesus.

If that doesn't seem fair, it's because it isn't. But we aren't trying to work out what's fair, are we? We are trying to have a great marriage. And that's the only way to do it. That ends the cycle of selfishness and draws us close to God and to each other.

Spiritual Oneness, Deep Friendship, Physical Intimacy

After more than three decades of marriage, a lot of hard work, and plenty of struggles along the way, Theresa and I have found ourselves in a relationship in which we get what we need from each other because we are more focused on giving the other person what he or she needs than on seeking our own fulfillment.

I don't get up in the morning and read the Bible to cross an item off a list of spiritual requirements. I do it because I'm a desperate man in need of power and grace to give my wife what I would not otherwise be able to give her. She does the same for me. The result is a deep spiritual oneness, and ever-growing friendship flowing out of that, and then an intimate physical union that has produced a relationship beyond what words could ever express. That's God's design.

The blueprint for marriage as it is spelled out in Ephesians 5 tells us what marriage ought to look like. But underneath that blueprint is an even deeper truth about what marriage actually is. It is one thing to know what the blueprint is and another to know how to make it a reality in our lives. Ephesians 5 points us to the answer to the question of "how," and its truths may seem a little surprising, especially in today's world. But they are timeless truths that really work.

When we get a handle on these truths, we approach marriage in an entirely different way than our culture does, and we begin to discover and experience the crucial components of success.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why do you think most people identify a fulfilling marriage and family as something they want to experience in life? If this is such a strong desire, why do you think so few people are actually experiencing it?
2. Did you have realistic expectations when you first got married? Why or why not?
3. According to Ephesians 5, what does marriage illustrate? What bigger purpose does it serve?
4. Why doesn't being a Christian couple automatically imply having a better marriage? What must happen in any marriage - Christian or not - for a couple to grow closer to each other?
5. If you are married, which level of the relationship - spirit, soul, or body - has been the most fulfilling for you? List three things that originally attracted you to your spouse. Share those three things with your mate in a card or over coffee this week.
6. What one thing could you do this week to improve your marriage?

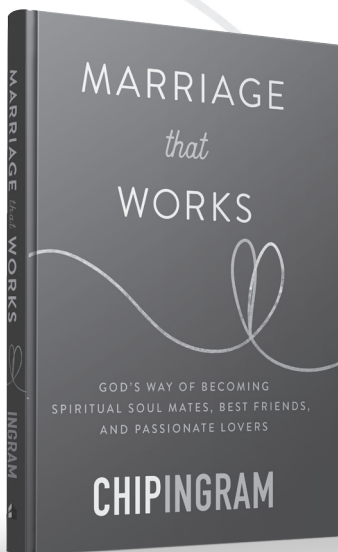
Notes

Chapter 1: God's Design for Marriage

1. Marist Poll, "It's Destiny!": Most Americans Believe in Soul Mates," Marist Poll, February 10, 2011, <http://maristpoll.marist.edu/210-its-destiny-most-americans-believe-in-soul-mates>, accessed March 22, 2018.

2. Robert T. Michael et al., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994).

3. Zack Carter, "Internet Infidelity: Today's Blind-Spot Threat to Marriage," PsychologyToday.com, posted June 1, 2017, accessed July 23, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/clear-communication/201706/internet-infidelity-todays-blind-spot-threat-marriage>. See also Samantha Yule, "Facebook Now Crops Up in a Third of Divorce Cases over Cheating and Old Flames," Mirror.com, posted January 20, 2015, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/technology-science/technology/facebook-now-crops-up-third-5011205>, accessed July 23, 2018.



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God's Prescription for a Great Marriage

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- what marriage really is
- the biblical model
- a man's unique role in marriage
- a woman's unique role in marriage
- the bigger picture of why God created marriage

A marriage that works, says Ingram, is more wonderful than you thought possible and harder than you imagined--but worth the work. Couples will learn the power of making a covenant with their spouse and fulfilling their design in an atmosphere of respect, resulting in the spiritual, psychological, emotional, and physical oneness they long to have with each other.



CHIP INGRAM is the teaching pastor and CEO of Living on the Edge, an international teaching and discipleship ministry. A pastor for over thirty years, Chip is the author of many books, including *Culture Shock*, *The Real Heaven*, *The Real God*, *The Invisible War*, and *Love, Sex, and Lasting Relationships*. Chip and his wife, Theresa, have four grown children and twelve grandchildren and live in California