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NAOMI RHODE, Former President, National Speakers Association

TIM SAVAGE (PhD, University of Cambridge) has been senior pastor of Camelback Bible Church in Paradise Valley, Arizona, since 1998. He is a council member for The Gospel Coalition. Tim is married to Lesli and they have two sons, Matthew and Jonathan.
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INTRODUCTION

A BINDING GLORY

What is more sweet than to live with her with whom you are united in body and soul, who talks with you in secret affection, to whom you have committed all your faith and your fortune? What in all nature is lovelier? Nothing is more safe, felicitous, tranquil, pleasant and lovable than marriage.

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS

For sheer joy, nothing compares to a wedding. The bride emerges at the top of the aisle accompanied by the strains of an exalted musical score, her face and form radiating an almost celestial beauty and her heart throbbing with a treasury of dreams coming true. Her counterpart, the groom, waits—waits for what seems an eternity!—for the processing angel to arrive at his side and for that cherished hand to be tucked under his arm by the guardian who has nurtured her so carefully and whose own storehouse of memories have, in the short space of thirty steps, come flooding back in a cataract of emotion. The congregation, sensing the ecstasy of the moment, rises spontaneously to its feet in a display of reverence befitting the arrival of a heavenly dignitary. The presiding official averts his eyes briefly from the sight of unrestrained love before him and seeks the composure to find words to frame a scene almost too sublime for human utterance. It is a moment of unparalleled joy.

There are too few such moments in life. In a world growing increasingly grim, we find little worth celebrating. A victory by a local sports team perhaps, a promotion to higher echelons of management, a diploma signifying the completion of a degree—these are the things we celebrate. And rightly so. But they are comparatively
minor glories, fading quickly with the passage of time and causing us to pine for something more enduring, something able to nurture our souls at the deepest level.

**FULFILLMENT IN MARRIAGE**

Many seek deeper fulfillment in marriage. What could be more encouraging than the union of two people whose lives intermingle in a symphony of mutual support, whose destinies run together in a rainbow of shared dreams, whose vows cement an indissoluble bond of tenderness and compassion? Marriage! It may be the most celebrated event of human experience.

No wonder we revel in the wedding. It serves as a base camp from which lovers make an ascent on a peak so grand it takes a lifetime to discover its many wonders. It marks the beginning of a relationship which, more than perhaps any other in life, holds out promise of enduring happiness. From the moment of dramatic fusion on the honeymoon to the settled unity of confidants on the golden anniversary, the marital partnership will produce life’s most satisfying moments.

But here we encounter a painful irony. The wedding, which is intended to inaugurate the first of many steps along the path of marital bliss, often represents the high point of the marriage relationship. Once the ceremony is over, rather than advance to higher slopes of marital contentment, couples frequently begin a slow and inexorable slide into disappointment and mediocrity.

We all know that one of the greatest social scourges of our day is the failure of marriages, and not just marriages that collapse in separation and divorce, but also those which, while remaining “intact,” become severely strained and emotionally scarred. One recent study reveals that nine out of ten marriages are “filled with dissatisfaction in every dimension of the relationship.” Nor is this just a modern malady. Marital unhappiness has been a blemish on every age. Martin Luther, the great sixteenth-century Christian Reformer whose own marriage became a model for generations of German partnerships, commented on the absence of good marriages in his day: “When I
see a husband and a wife who are at one, I am as glad as if I were in a garden of roses. It is rare.”

How can a union which begins so promisingly become mired in the quicksands of indifference and despair? It is enough to cause the cynical among us to ask whether marriage is just a cruel trick, luring us with the promise of golden peaks to be conquered but concealing the very real danger of breakup on the rocks below. It ought to give us pause. It ought to prompt us to evaluate soberly the very desirability of marriage. If matrimony is more likely to blight than to bless, ought not we to be extremely careful before embarking on such a union?

Remarkably, few show such restraint. Modern sociologists report that marriage—or the increasingly popular practice of cohabitation—is enjoying a resurgence in the popular mind. Even those who have good reason to mistrust marriage, those who have suffered the pangs of a failed first marriage or who have grown up in homes crippled by indifference or animosity between parents, still aspire “to tie the knot.” How can this be, especially when experience ought to discourage such a union?

There can be only one answer. We are romantics at heart. We cling to the notion that marriage can be satisfying. We refuse to believe that the relationship between a man and a woman is bound to fail. We nurture the ideal, rooted deeply in our subconsciouses, that great rewards await couples who are in love.

**THE PATH TO THE MARITAL SUMMIT**

But what happens when the initial spark of romance begins to fade, when the unbridled joy of the wedding is insufficient to propel a husband and a wife to the heights of lasting love, when the shared experiences of intimate companionship, sexual union, and raising children fail to elevate two lovers to the summit of marital fulfillment—what then do we say to the couple whose lofty hopes seem to have peaked at the altar?

We say with great emphasis and unstinting confidence: “Your hopes of an enduring union are not futile!” “Your vision of marital
fulfillment is not a deception!” “Your dreams of an increasingly intimate bond are not beyond the realm of possibility!” “Marriage can be rewarding!” But—and here is a crucial qualification—such lofty ideals are by no means automatically realized. Husbands and wives must exercise vigilance. They must be committed to work for this prize. In particular, they must cling tenaciously to the one piece of equipment that guarantees a safe ascent to the marital summit. They must fasten themselves to the rope that binds them together as one.

And what is that rope?

It is the glory of God!

When husbands and wives cling firmly to the lifeline of God’s glory and do so with a resolve appropriate to the importance of their joint expedition, the unbridled optimism of the wedding will be confirmed a hundred times over by an upward ascent that surpasses even their loftiest expectations. Their marriage can become a living miracle—a relationship grounded on earth but filled with the glory of heaven!

The purpose of this book is to examine the nature of the divine glory, which can sustain a marriage. We will marvel at its multifaceted radiance and rejoice at the very down-to-earth assistance it affords husbands and wives. We will see how partners in marriage, when they resolve to march in lockstep with the glory of God, are rescued from pitfalls and hoisted to awe-inspiring heights.

May our hearts—the hearts of men and women in love—yearn for nothing less than the binding power of God’s glory!
In a mutual relationship between two human beings, we know that it can be sustained only if both acknowledge something that has authority over them and if each trusts the other to acknowledge this.

Lesslie Newbigin

The British schoolteacher George Mallory was asked in 1923 what compelled him to be the first person to attempt an ascent of Mount Everest. He responded wryly: “Because it is there!” While such a quip may explain what motivated an adventurer to risk his life on a subfreezing precipice of ice and stone, it will hardly do for the more demanding ascent of marriage. A more weighty rationale, a more transcendent vision, is required to lift husbands and wives to the heights of marital fulfillment.

Yet when amorous partners are asked why they venture an expedition as harrowing as marriage, they frequently respond with breezy clichés. “We are attracted to each other.” “We share similar interests.” “He understands me better than anyone else.” “She makes me a stronger person.” In other words, they are drawn together by what is there—a winsome combination of mutual attraction, shared interests, and reciprocal love. While each of these comforts may prove useful in the assault on marital peaks, none of them—nor all of them together—is sufficient to sustain an enterprise as complex as marriage. Something weightier, something beyond what the couple itself brings to the relationship, must be there.
The Glory of God in Marriage

What is the necessary ingredient? It is the glory of God. Nothing catapults husbands and wives to the upper reaches of matrimony like God’s glory. Tethered to divine glory there is no limit to the heights married couples can climb.

With such an assurance, we would expect God’s glory to be the most treasured ingredient of marriage. Most often, it is not. We treasure others things far more—rings, sex, babies. But this is because we understand divine glory only in part. We imagine it to be exceedingly brilliant, even blinding, causing our spines to tingle and our breath to be stolen away. Emanating directly from God himself, we suppose it to be matchlessly beautiful, utterly awe-inspiring, and somewhat terrifying. Beyond that, we find it difficult to quantify. For most of us, the glory of God remains an abstraction cloaked in a mystery.

Yet divine glory is more accessible than we might think. According to King Solomon, the whole earth is filled with God’s glory (Ps. 72:19). That means everywhere we look, from the tiniest molecule to the largest ocean, we see evidence of God’s glory. Woven into the fabric of every bird of paradise, every polished agate, every towering sequoia, every emerald lake, every microscopic atom, and, especially, every human being—woven into every visible component of the physical world is a breathtaking display of the glory of the One who fashioned those components. And not just the visible world, but also the invisible universe—or multiuniverse as astral physicists now name interstellar space. In the words of King David, “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1).

No wonder, in the opening pages of the Holy Scriptures, the work of creation receives unqualified affirmation. “God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). “God saw . . . it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). To the eyes of the Maker, whose mark of glory has been left on every cell in a billion galaxies, creation is exceptionally good—good because it trumpets, in its every dimension, the radiance of his glory. Creation, it seems, could not be better.

Shockingly, however, the eyes of the Creator detect a deficiency. “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be
alone’” (Gen. 2:18). Anyone reading the first two chapters of Genesis is stunned by this negative assessment. After so many effusive affirmations, how could there possibly be a deficiency? The answer is that there remains one more step of creation, a step which will form the capstone of the Creator’s handiwork and provide an even greater outburst of divine glory.

What is that step? It is to fashion the first marriage. In the words of the Lord himself: “I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18). In the union of man and woman, in the very first marriage, we find an unprecedented crescendo of divine glory.

To prepare the solitary man for a fresh infusion of glory, the Lord invites him into an open field to review a long procession of living creatures. The purpose of this zoological exercise is to identify whether any of the quadrupeds might correspond to him (Gen. 2:19–20). The exercise proves embarrassingly futile. None of the animals fits the bill—neither the porcupine nor the grasshopper, neither the duck nor the elephant. None is a suitable partner.

Made to feel his deficiency, the man is guided to the next step in the drama of unfolding glory—an operating room! Under sedation of divine anesthesia, he submits to the heavenly scalpel, and one of his ribs is extracted and fashioned into a perfect human counterpart (Gen. 2:21–22). Aroused from his slumber, he is presented with the work of the Surgeon’s hand. It is a masterpiece so ravishingly suitable to him that he bursts into ecstatic praise: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen. 2:23).

The story of the first marriage never ceases to move us. Yet it is easy to miss its central point. The insight of these verses, an insight which ought to form the centerpiece of every marriage, is that there is more to matrimony than first meets the eye—in other words, more than what is there: more than mutual attraction, more than shared interests, and more than reciprocal love. There is infinitely more. There is the work of God, a work into which is woven more glory than all the glory of the prior works of creation—a glory brighter than
Glory Without Limits

that of the physical world below and the heavens above. In the first marriage, divine glory reaches a zenith.

Marrying for God’s Glory

The reason why there is so much glory in marriage is because there is so much of God in marriage. The biblical narrative is at pains to point out God’s dynamic role in every step of the first union. First of all, God identifies a deficiency (“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone,’” Gen. 2:18). Secondly, he proposes a solution (“I will make him a helper fit for him,” Gen. 2:18). Thirdly, he demonstrates a need (“The Lord God . . . brought [all the beasts] to the man to see what he would call them,” Gen. 2:19–20). Fourthly, he executes a plan (“So the Lord God . . . took one of [the man’s] ribs and . . . made . . . a woman,” Gen. 2:21–22). And finally, he presents his handiwork (“The Lord God . . . brought her to the man,” Gen. 2:22).

No other work of creation is reported in such detail. And its significance is not lost on the man: he breaks out into an impassioned song of thanksgiving, a robust lyric in honor not just of marriage but also of the One who, in fashioning it, has managed every detail to perfection.

We should do no less. We should, in our marriages, exult in the creative genius of the God who fashions our unions. But do we? Where are the voices ringing out the joyous refrain that marriage is, above everything else in creation, a work of incomparable glory? Such a tribute to God would strike a dissonant chord alongside the contemporary chorus that matrimony is essentially the work of two human beings, the simple achievement of consenting adults. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. If the Bible is to be believed—and we disbelieve it at our peril—marriage represents a high point of creation, a sparkling gem crafted by the Creator’s hand, a union of unprecedented glory.

To ignore the glory of God in marriage is tantamount to pushing up a steep rock face without “the rope,” which guarantees a safe ascent. It is to throw caution to the wind and to court inevitable
disaster. Marriages are on firmest ground when partners are most focused on the glory of the Lord.

This is a crucial insight, and one underscored implicitly near the end of the second chapter of Genesis. “[For this cause], a man shall leave his father and his mother and [be united] to his wife,” (v. 24). Naturally we want to ask, For what cause shall a man be united to his wife? The context supplies an answer: be-cause of everything God has done to form this union, be-cause of his involvement at every stage of its development, be-cause of the heavy allotment of glory he has invested in this partnership. We marry, not primarily for our own benefit and pleasure, nor principally for the comfort of mutual affection, nor ultimately for the joy of bearing and raising children—we marry be-cause in a work of unparalleled glory the Lord built this union. We marry be-cause of his glory.

So important is this one insight that we ought to put aside any prior notion of what produces a successful marriage and fasten exclusively onto this priceless truth. Here is the first principle of matrimony: we marry for the glory of God. When this becomes the guiding impulse of our unions, when the glory of God becomes our primary focus and greatest love, husbands and wives will track along a trajectory that is decidedly upward.

The amazing heights to which two people can ascend are hinted at in a tantalizing phrase at the end of Genesis 2: “They shall become one flesh” (v. 24). These five words announce one of the most dramatic realities of the Holy Scriptures, a reality as mysterious as it is breathtaking. Two individuals can be fused into one flesh. Extraordinary! The laws of physics seem to preclude it. But who would want it otherwise? What couple, buoyed by dreams of romantic love, would want anything less than to be bound together as one flesh?

We will explore the profound meaning and the thrilling implications of this term in a later chapter. Suffice it to observe now that the key to this mysterious oneness is God’s glory. When two people resolve together to make the glory of God the energizing principle of their marriage, they become united in an increasingly seamless
GLORY WITHOUT LIMITS

union. Nothing cements a marriage like focusing on the glory of the Lord. It is the tie that binds!

THE BINDING POWER OF GLORY

The binding properties of God’s glory are simple in theory. Living organisms often need an external stimulus in order to fuse into a dynamic union. In the case of large organisms like nations, external forces become unifying agents, such as in the early days of the American Republic. It was the presence of a foreign adversary that prompted the patriot Thomas Paine to plead for the unification of thirteen loosely affiliated colonies. With quill in hand, he dramatized the terrors of the British menace in a propagandist pamphlet called Common Sense and issued the famous call to stand united against the opposition. Five hundred thousand copies of the booklet sold in the first year—an astonishing feat in a land of only two-and-a-half million people—and within ninety days the Continental Congress was formed, the Declaration of Independence was drafted, and a national army was conscripted. The presence of an external foe galvanized thirteen disparate colonies into united states.

Marriages, too, need a galvanizing agent, something external to what the partners themselves bring to the relationship. Sometimes a common adversary will do—financial difficulty or persistent illness can rally husbands and wives to form a united front. So can positive stimuli like raising children or planning for retirement. But none of these challenges can supply more than temporary cohesion. When financial burdens ease or children leave home, what then unifies marriage? The marital bond requires something more enduring, something bigger, something stronger.

Only one thing qualifies: the glory of God. Here is something so powerful that it transcends the most difficult challenges of life. Here is a provision so dependable that it can lift marriages to awe-inspiring heights. Here is a beacon so intense that it can show the way out of the darkest crisis. Here is a vision so permanent that it can outlast every temporary obstacle. Here is something supernatural, something beyond what mere humans bring to a partnership. Here is the
cement of marriage. Here is the rope that binds. When husbands and wives unite for the glory of God, they unite indeed.

_Surmounting Circumstances_

The blessings of a union cemented by God’s glory are manifold. First of all, such a marriage will be invulnerable to the vacillating circumstances of life. For many couples, change threatens marital harmony. When time steals away the youthful features of a wife or produces hormonal swings and unpredictable emotions, husbands may be tempted to look elsewhere for more attractive and predictable companionship. When the stresses of work erode a husband’s self-respect and diminish his capacity for sensitivity, a wife may be tempted to look further afield for her encouragement.

But this will be the case only if partners focus on the oscillating drama of feminine beauty and masculine strength. If, instead, they cling to the glory of God as the rope that secures their union, the fluctuating circumstances of life will, far from destabilize their marriage, provide grounds for a deeper bond. This is because the glory of God is stronger in its capacity to bind than circumstances are in their capacity to divide.

_Overcoming Differences_

Secondly, when spouses fix their gazes on the glory of the Lord, they need never despair over apparent incompatibilities. While it is always important before marriage to assess the compatibility of a potential partner, the matter becomes moot after marriage. No alleged incompatibility will ever be able to break apart a husband and a wife who focus on the glory of God. Differences are inevitable in marriage: one partner may be quiet and deliberate and the other excitable and spontaneous; one may prefer directness and the other withdrawal. But such differences will never become “irreconcilable,” a line of thinking too convenient for husbands and wives today. Even the most disparate partners will be unified by the glory of the Lord, because divine glory is more able to bind than incompatibilities are to divide.
Thirdly, when two people are bound together by the glory of God, their marriage will become increasingly united over time. It is a sad feature of many contemporary partnerships that the opposite seems to occur: people grow apart. There is a presumption that, as the years pass, partners will inevitably grow weary of each other and be pushed in opposite directions by diverging interests. The perception, while often self-fulfilling, is unfortunate. When two people take aim at the glory of God, they are consumed by something so big that it creates synergy between them, causing them to climb enthusiastically to new and more exciting vistas. They will grow together spiritually, and when two people grow together spiritually they never weary of each other.

A very short thirty-two years ago a beautiful young bride and a somewhat overwhelmed groom stood before family and friends and recited their sacred wedding vows. They were perfectly matched and yet—at least in the mind of the overly pensive groom—they were very different from each other. They were deeply in love, but the husband-to-be wondered whether one day they would awaken to discover that their differences were driving them apart. What if they tired of each other? What then?

The young groom did not realize that his worries were completely allayed by the words he had secretly instructed the jeweler to inscribe inside the wedding band of his bride, the very words which, remarkably and unbeknownst to him, his bride had instructed her jeweler to etch inside the ring she presented to him. Later that evening, when at last alone, the newlyweds made the startling discovery. Written inside both rings was the identical prayer: “Together for God’s glory!”

For more than three decades they have sought, often imperfectly and always in need of grace from above, to uphold the sacred words encircling their fourth fingers. Today they can testify to the blessing of ever-increasing oneness, in which new challenges are welcomed as opportunities to grow closer together and in which the spiritual adventures of each partner have become a source of endless fascination to
the other. Now their bond is so deep that it cannot be captured in words but only cherished in the unspoken thoughts of their hearts. I know because those thoughts are my own, and the thoughts of that beautiful bride belong to Lesli, the woman I married!

Unity in marriage is simple conceptually. Only one thing is necessary: a mutual commitment to the Lord and his glory. Why, then, is it so difficult in practice? Why do contemporary marriages fail at an alarming rate? And why do so many of the marriages that remain intact become so dissatisfying?

**THE TRIALS OF CONTEMPORARY MARRIAGES**

The plight of matrimony in the West ought to provoke serious soul-searching. The pollster George Gallup Jr. has issued a sobering wake-up call: “[When] a disease . . . afflicts the majority of a populace, spreading pain and dysfunction throughout all age groups, we [naturally search] . . . for solutions. Yet [one] particular scourge has become so endemic that it is virtually ignored. The scourge is divorce, an oddly neglected topic in a nation that has the worst record of broken marriages in the entire world.”

Does our neglect of this epidemic suggest a resignation to defeat? Is marital discord an unavoidable feature of modern life? Perhaps it is—but perhaps not. There is certainly no abatement in the stream of literature designed to improve marriages. Consider the abundance of counsel flowing from national presses and Internet sites, advice for almost every conceivable eventuality in marriage, from how to land a partner through artful discourse to how to please a mate in bed. The sheer volume of blogs, seminars, magazines, CDs, DVDs, talk shows, radio programs, television interviews, and Internet banter committed specifically to enhancing marriage suggests that there remains an army of loyalists who believe matrimony is capable of being salvaged.

But—and here is the startling irony—despite all the optimism, marriages still languish. Is it possible that the stream of marital information is missing the mark? Are we packaging marital advice too lightly, ready for instant consumption, filled with creative techniques
and clever applications, but avoiding the more difficult task of nurturing unions at the deeper level of hearts?

A review of the literature does reveal an approach that relies heavily on personal anecdotes, practical tips, and heart-tugging stories. Husbands and wives are given practical instruction—often in the form of entertaining vignettes—on what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and where to do it. Hopefully, such advice will strengthen their marriages. But evidence suggests something different. While how-to approaches may mesh well with an age eager to find solutions in practical steps, it is difficult to see how a relationship as substantial as the union of a man and a woman can be strengthened by advice parceled out in bite-sized morsels. Such superficiality will only exacerbate the problem. It trivializes marriage.

**PERSPECTIVE BEFORE PRACTICE**

We must recover the kernel of wisdom enshrined in the old aphorism “perspective must precede practice.” We must begin with a right perspective. For marriage, the right perspective is set out in the Bible, where husbands and wives are called to focus on the glory of God. When they do, they will be ready to negotiate the practical challenges of marriage. But to begin with practical advice, with step-by-step remedies—where it seems many are eager to begin—is to anchor a union of enormous weight on a foundation of sand, to tackle the challenges of a rigorous ascent without the benefit of a sturdy rope. Sound practice, while certainly essential to healthy marriages, is only sound when it flows from right perspective.

It is helpful to examine exemplary marriages of the past. The nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon and his wife, Susannah, encountered many difficult obstacles in the course of their thirty-six years of marriage, including the trials of serious illness, debilitating depression, and scathing criticism in the national press. They met these disappointments with something more than anecdotal wisdom. In a poem of comfort written to his wife, Charles offered not tidbits of practical advice but solid perspective:
Though he who chose us all worlds before,
Must reign in our hearts alone,
We fondly believe that we shall adore,
Together before his throne.  

It is a perspective anchored in the sovereignty of God, in his loving reign over human lives, and it received a resounding echo in the thoughts of Susannah. After her husband’s death, she reflected: “I can see two pilgrims treading the highway of life together, hand in hand, heart linked to heart. True they had mountains to climb, but their Guide was ever watchful. Mostly they went on their way singing.”

The challenges of life can be mountainous. With enough suffering to dismantle ten marriages, Charles and Susannah persevered and enjoyed many triumphs. How did they do it? What was their secret? They were sustained in their climb not in the first instance by pithy advice but by a perspective that “reigned in [their] hearts.” It was the assurance that their “Guide” was able to convey them safely past the crags and crevices of life. And so they held on to him. They fixed their eyes on his glory.

When husbands and wives fasten their grips on the tether thrown down by the heavenly Guide, when they set their eyes on the awe-inspiring glory of God, they do more than pay lip service to a transcendent splendor with uncertain relevance to their lives. On the contrary, they cling to something that affects every dimension of their partnership, from their reactions in times of conflict to their celebrations in times of triumph. And they climb past the pitfalls of life with a song in their hearts. Of course they do! They climb with the assurance that one day their Guide will usher them all the way to the heavenly summit, where forever before the throne they will adore the Lord together.

It was mentioned at the outset of this book that the expectations of many marriages go unfulfilled. This is tragic and utterly unnecessary, especially if husbands and wives are prepared to adjust their perspectives and focus exclusively on the glory of the Lord.
GLORY WITHOUT LIMITS

But what does this mean? Where do we find divine glory?

We learned earlier that God’s glory was clearly evident within the first marriage itself. In other words, the inaugural couple did not have to look far to find God’s glory: it was radiating within their marriage. They needed only to cherish that glory, nurture it, and give it free reign in their lives. They needed to live for God’s glory.

We must do the same thing. With the shared resolve of both partners, we must live for the glory of God.

But how?
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