

Getting married is one of the most crucial decisions in life. The importance and necessity of preparing well for marriage cannot be overstated—especially when the aisles of the average church are littered with both weak and broken marriages.

Over the past several years, John Henderson’s *Catching Foxes* has been one of our go-to resources in all our pre-marriage counseling. John helps engaged couples to truly understand their new covenant together and the impact of the gospel for daily living. His interactive study guide provides couples with many opportunities to discover each other, learn relevant biblical truth, and build a rich foundation for their new life together.

—**Kevin Carson**, Pastor, Sunrise Baptist Church, Ozark, Missouri

Our church has been using this book for years to help couples, young and old, work through a gospel-centered view of marriage. I’ve yet to find another book that is as biblical and as helpful at engaging the heart when it comes to this topic.

—**Matt Chandler**, Lead Teaching Pastor, The Village Church, Flower Mound, Texas

Finally a premarital book that cuts the fluff and delivers biblically sound preparation that paves the way toward a Christ-centered marriage. Brilliantly laid out, *Catching Foxes* provides couples the opportunity to engage with each other and mentors in honest conversation about vital topics. Faithful to Scripture, each page is packed with solid direction that will both challenge and excite couples to build their marriage according to God’s plan. I consider this book an outstanding road map to a God-honoring marriage.

—**Eliza Huie**, Counselor, Life Counseling Center

Self-centered views of compatibility, relational chemistry, and personal needs are too often the focus of preparation and counseling for marriage. *Catching Foxes* provides a Christ-focused, gospel-saturated alternative. Couples need to see that marriage has been given by God

to provide a beautiful picture of Christ and the church. He has given marriage to fulfill and illustrate His mission in the world. They need to see how the gospel connects to their everyday married life. This book can help them make the connection.

—**Lee Lewis**, Pastor of Biblical Soul Care, Radiant Church,
Austin, Texas

I am grateful to the Lord for John's work in helping couples who are entering into marriage. John, with his many years of pastoral and counseling experience, prepares couples for the covenant they are entering into by continually pointing them back to the reason for marriage: the glory of God. He provides practical questions, but more importantly he focuses on how each individual heart is corrupted by its own desires and how the gospel of Jesus Christ redeems couples and helps them to move from overly focusing on each other to savoring Christ. I am thankful for his work and how it has aided many of our couples in our premarital ministry at The Village Church.

—**Rachael Rosser**, Counselor, North Texas Christian Counseling

CATCHING FOXES



A GOSPEL-GUIDED
JOURNEY TO MARRIAGE

JOHN HENDERSON



P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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To Ruth,
my wife and faithful partner in
pursuing the delight of God in all things.

Thank you for your encouragement and steadfast prayer!

To Gabriel, Faith, Judah, Eliana, and Nathaniel,
our children and constant reminders of the goodness of God.
Thank you for your enthusiasm and endurance!

*Catch the foxes for us,
The little foxes that are ruining the vineyards,
While our vineyards are in blossom.
(Song 2:15)*

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A leader's guide is available to download
from the *Catching Foxes* page on
P&R's website, www.prpbooks.com.

Acknowledgments

I am thankful to the Lord for all the people He has used in order to bring this book to fruition. In no way could this work have been completed without the help of friends, family, and a host of other authors. I have used very few direct quotations from sources external to Scripture, but many people have still influenced this writing.

My wife, Ruth, and I have been in regular conversation about the contents of this book and the never-ending implications of the gospel for marriage. Ruth has often expressed, in one form or another, that any decent preparation for marriage must include a growing grasp of the grace of God. Ever since Ruth and I concluded that a book for premarital counseling was needed in our church and in surrounding churches, she has been in constant prayer about it.

My friend John Brown has been a source of ongoing wisdom and meaningful conversation that has helped me along the way. The title of this book was his idea.

Jerry Clark, who oversees the premarital counseling ministry at Denton Bible Church, as well as Dennis and Linda Sha, who train couples to provide the counseling, have offered encouragement and direction at various stages in my writing. Eric and Cassie Bryant and Lee Lewis have each provided valuable insight.

There have been several men who contributed indirectly. John Piper, whose preaching serves to remind my soul of the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ and the glory of God as the ultimate reason for everything, has been instrumental in shaping my understanding of marriage according to Scripture. His book *This Momentary Marriage*

offers a basic and profound framework for developing a biblical view of marriage.

Paul Tripp and his work have been invaluable. His voice refuses to let me forget the transforming power of the gospel and our constant need of it. His teaching series on marriage, “What Did You Expect?,” has been convicting and refining. David Powlison’s gracious manner and honest writing have made the living Word more living and the personal God even more personal to my soul. The way he understands, applies, and enjoys Christ and His Word has been deeply instructive and helpful.

From Tom Nelson I have learned the importance of relentless scriptural study. During the past fifteen years, he has helped me to see the endless riches and wisdom of God’s Word. While numerous people and their writings have helped me in beautiful ways, Tom has always reminded me to rest on the matchless truth and power of Scripture.

I wanted to acknowledge these individuals because they have influenced this writing in both small and large ways. While I do not quote them directly, their words and work, by the grace of God, have helped to shape my understanding of the Scripture, marriage, and human life.

Introduction

*Go forth, O daughters of Zion,
And gaze on King Solomon with the crown
With which his mother has crowned him
On the day of his wedding,
And on the day of his gladness of heart.
(Song 3:11)*

There should be no doubt in our minds that Solomon was prepared for his wedding day. The hour of his marriage did not sneak up on him. He was ready. His bride was ready. “How beautiful you are, my darling, how beautiful you are! Your eyes are like doves behind your veil; your hair is like a flock of goats that have descended from Mount Gilead” (Song 4:1).

The parade, the carriage, the columns of smoke, and the vast array of armed attendants signaled a day of triumph and celebration. This wedding had been planned for a while. Indeed, it was “the day of his gladness of heart” (3:11).

We cannot believe, however, that the only preparations for such a day were material or external. After all, the trumpet sounds and smells of perfume would soon fade, and a lifetime of sacrifice, service, and covenantal love would remain. The flowers would wither, and the clothing would wear out, but the marriage covenant was to flourish and strengthen until the end. External adornment was only part of the picture.

“Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that are ruining the vineyards, while our vineyards are in blossom” (Song 2:15). Foxes can destroy a vineyard. They love to dig holes and trample vines in search of their prey. They have no regard for the vulnerability of vines and grapes; they care only for their selfish appetites.

With these words in 2:15, Solomon pointed to a critical work that is needed before marriage: finding, capturing, and (if need be) destroying any serious threats to the marriage relationship.

The “vineyard” of any loving relationship and marriage union can be ruined by any number of “little foxes.” Pride can reduce the vines of marriage to stubble. Selfish appetites, if left alone, can destroy the sweetness of true fellowship. Extended family members and former lovers can invade the vineyard of marital love with toxins of contention and division. The idols of our hearts have no real concern for our marriage fruitfulness; they only nurture their own personal interests and serve themselves. We all need to know this.

Solomon, inspired by the Holy Spirit, knew that selfish appetites and false idols at work in his heart and the heart of his bride had to be identified and driven away in order for their marital love and affection to grow and blossom. Enemies to a God-honoring union had to be ushered out. If the grapes of their vineyard were to fully ripen into marital fruitfulness, then dangers had to be cornered and fenced off.

Surely Solomon was speaking to the condition of their souls and not to actual physical land. He pointed to potential dangers in their relationship, not to the quality of their wedding decor.

God called Solomon and his bride to address matters of the heart before Him and before each other. The critical labor for which He called was not external and physical but internal and spiritual.

This remains true for us today. The most vital preparation for marriage is internal. Our hearts must be awakened, matured, and strengthened in Jesus Christ. We must learn to appreciate the covenant of marriage as God appreciates it. Our hearts must be focused on Him. We must be filled with His grace and learn to follow His Word. After all, a marriage between a husband and wife is primarily, and above all else, about the glory of God and the exaltation of Jesus (see Eph. 5:22–33;

Col. 1:17–18). It is about learning to love another person with the strength that His Spirit provides.

Every generation of God's people lives in constant danger of missing the beauty and seriousness of marriage and, as a result, experiences a shallow and miserable version of the real thing. Whenever we miss its beauty and seriousness, we offer the world and future generations a warped and empty picture of marriage. We then offer them a warped and murky picture of Christ and the church. We all need ongoing, supernatural help in order to notice, enjoy, and project the glory of God in marriage.

The world surrounding every generation of God's people will supply its unique legion of foxes to bring destruction on the vineyard of biblical marriage.

The Word of God offers constant and sure defenses. It offers constant streams of strength and courage to help us along the way. The words of Christ provide a beautiful reminder of what life and marriage are really about, for our sake and the sake of His precious name.

And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." (Matt. 19:4–6)

What Jesus declared about marriage—"So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Mark 10:8–9)—was something very radical and profound to His hearers at that time. This message was not a new decree from God, because the Old Testament provides this picture of marriage multiple times and in multiple ways (see, for example, Deut. 24:1–4; Mal. 2:13–16); however, this truth was easily neglected. Jesus used strong words to explain an age-old reality. He explained that marriage has always belonged to God. And He was saying that marriage has always been a miracle. Jesus talked about marriage as a miraculous gift from

God—a precious possession that deserves our careful attention and protection. The people of Jesus' day either forgot or failed to notice the splendor and seriousness of the gift. We tend to forget and fail in the same way.

Despite all the wonderful resources and hard efforts that we pour into wedding ceremonies these days, we easily miss the amazing meaning behind the whole show. Behind the beautiful ceremonies, colorful decorations, and snappy outfits, a far more beautiful event—a miraculous event—exists. When an ordinary man and an ordinary woman come together before God and the world to become husband and wife, something extraordinary begins to happen. God joins them together. For this lifetime, at least, He makes them one.

So often we neglect and forget the significance of this union.

At the same time, every generation of God's people may face another (albeit less common) temptation to deify marriage itself, making *it* the primary object of our obsessions and desires. We can worship marriage falsely. As bizarre as it may sound, we can exalt marriage above the Lord Jesus Christ. And when we do, we quickly overlook the central point of marriage: to display God's glory, not our own, and to make much of Christ's eternal union with the church, not our temporary desires. Indeed, constant yammering about the latest strategies for marital romance, new ways to meet spousal needs, and better methods for balancing the household budget can actually, if we are not careful, drown out the majesty of Christ in marriage and thus short-circuit the splendid purposes that God intends marriage to serve.

When we deify marriage, we also miss how God displays His glory and builds His kingdom through a variety of other means and gifts in creation besides marriage. It may seem strange to you, but any one of us can become so preoccupied with celebrating marriage that we fail to behold and celebrate the purposes of God in singleness—to enjoy how those who are not married might contribute to the body of Christ as a whole. Married people may easily become separated from unmarried people, and those with children living at home from those without, who are then separated from the aging, who might as well be separated from people who have dogs or cats or goldfish. Using demographic data

as the primary reason for separation in the body of Christ tends to erect walls that the gospel has always sought to demolish.¹

Hopefully you can see a few reasons to prepare for your marriage prayerfully and thoughtfully. Such preparation can help you to grow your appreciation and respect for the covenant of marriage without making an idol of the institution. This book intends, by the grace of God, to help you understand the miracle and gift of marriage and, through such understanding, to prepare your hearts and lives for the journey you are about to begin. Our goal will be to raise our sights so high, bring our pride so low, and shape our view of marriage so strongly by the gospel that our hearts may be compelled by the Spirit of God to walk every step of the journey in His grace.

So if you are a couple preparing to marry, let me begin by saying, *congratulations!* You have reason to rejoice and be glad. You have chosen to partake in a wonderful miracle. Let me follow by saying this: *Be sober and get ready!* You have chosen to enjoy one of the finest gifts that our God has ever given for life on earth. Marriage comes from God. He designed it in His own mind. He formed it and blessed the union. He owns it. He has attached the glory of Christ and the church to the relationship between a husband and wife. This is what you are getting into—and much more.

Hopefully you have already found an older, wiser, Christ-loving couple to help you along the road. If so, they will be reading this book and learning along with you (and none of us will ever finish learning and growing in marriage on this side of the grave). Yet the real target audience of this study will be you—the man and woman preparing to be joined as one, called to partake of the marriage covenant together, called to worship and enjoy God together, called to reflect Christ and the church together.

1. Please read Ephesians 2:11–22—a beautiful passage that addresses this concern.

How to Use This Book

Basic Overview

Catching Foxes has been written to help engaged or betrothed couples prepare for marriage. Written in a semi-interactive workbook format, it guides couples toward a Christ-centered and Christ-exalting paradigm for marriage. It attempts to lay a biblical foundation for marriage and to help couples better understand what God desires for them and from them in marriage.

Although it is possible for engaged couples to complete the book on their own, *Catching Foxes* will be most effective if an older, godly, married couple provides ongoing counsel and direction through this material during the weeks leading up to the wedding ceremony. The material will also be most effective if the discipling or guiding couple can provide ongoing counsel during the months following the wedding.

Catching Foxes can also be used in a small group or large group format. Such an arrangement would allow for teaching and oversight by a pastor or counselor as well as rich small group discussion and interaction.

How the Book Works

Catching Foxes is a fifteen-chapter book containing interactive questions for personal response and discussion. Each chapter includes text to read and Scripture verses to study. Spaces are

provided throughout the workbook for readers to use in their responses to questions and exercises. The material from each chapter should stimulate meaningful conversation and prayer between the man and woman who are preparing to marry. This material should also form a framework to be used by the couple who is guiding them along the way.

The first twelve chapters are to be completed before the wedding ceremony. The final three chapters are to be completed in the weeks and months after the wedding ceremony.

Each man and woman preparing to marry should have a copy of the book. Couples are free to complete each chapter individually and then come together for discussion. Or couples can work on the chapters together while answering the chapter questions in their individual books.

No specific timeline is given, so couples will need to establish their own. A couple could complete two chapters a week and finish the premarriage chapters in six weeks. The chapters range in length between eleven and twenty-one pages, so two chapters a week could be quite intensive. A couple can complete one chapter a week, or one every two weeks, thus taking twelve to twenty-four weeks for the premarital counseling process. The author definitely recommends taking it slowly and carefully. Walking through a chapter every one or two weeks is probably ideal, but exceptions are certainly expected.

Finding a Couple to Guide You

From my point of view, finding an older, wise, and Christ-loving couple to guide you through the premarital process is essential. Such a couple does not need to look perfect in their own marriage, but they should be striving toward Christ and depending on Him in their daily life and relationship. Your church may provide this couple, or you may need to seek them out on your own. There may be extremely rare cases in which no one is available to help. I pray that the Lord provides an older couple for you. Please take this part seriously.

Once a discipling or guiding couple is assigned or found, you will

need to establish when to meet and how many chapters to cover during your meetings together. A *Catching Foxes Leader's Guide* is available on the publisher's website to help the discipling couple guide the premarital counseling process. The leader's guide offers a flexible structure for your meetings together.

Finding a Premarital Counseling Group

The church or ministry community of which you are a part may provide premarital counseling in a small or large group format. If this is the case, then you may not need to find a discipling or mentoring couple. The small or large group environment will offer you the context and structure for the *Catching Foxes* material.

If you cannot find a mentoring couple or premarriage group from your immediate church community, then please know there are various ministries with networks of trained counselors who are available to serve you. The websites of the following ministries provide the names and locations of trained biblical counselors who might be able to help you prepare for marriage well.

- The Association of Biblical Counselors: <http://www.christiancounseling.com>
- The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors: <http://www.biblicalcounseling.com>
- The Biblical Counseling Coalition: <http://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org>
- The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation: <http://www.ccef.org>

Post-Wedding Follow-Up

From my point of view, completing the post-wedding chapters of this book can be extraordinarily helpful. Following up with your discipling couple in order to talk through those chapters and your marriage in the weeks after the wedding will be equally helpful. While a

great many couples get through the early weeks of marriage smoothly, another great many couples do not. Ongoing prayer, counsel, and biblical community can help you address any difficulties or questions that may arise.

PART 1

Before the Wedding



1

Telling Your Story

*Your faithfulness continues throughout all generations;
You established the earth, and it stands. (Ps. 119:90)*

The image of Drew and Rachel sitting on a couch outside my study, waiting to begin our first premarital counseling meeting together, will probably never leave my memory. They looked like they were fourteen years old—as jittery as could be. I came to find out they were a little closer to twenty-two each, but goodness, did they look young.

They didn't have a clue what they were getting into. Neither seemed to care. All they knew was that something really exciting lay ahead and, whatever it was, they were facing it together. Their eyes were wide and bright with equal portions of wonder, excitement, and terror.

A few weeks earlier, someone had told them to get some counsel before jumping into marriage. So here they were.

They had met in a park about eighteen months beforehand. Rachel was jogging with her dog, and Drew was throwing a Frisbee with some buddies. The whole scene unfolded, from the perspective of Drew's friends, in a slow, uncomfortable, even nightmarish fashion. They remember seeing Drew running full speed from the right, looking back over his left shoulder at the Frisbee in flight. They remember seeing Rachel jogging from the left, looking down at the path in front of her. They recall Drew attempting a very impressive Frisbee maneuver in which he kicked his left foot high into the air, letting the flying disc pass under his body and between his legs so that he could catch it with his

right hand on the opposite side of his torso. It was a technique Drew had mastered and accomplished many times before. And if Rachel's face had not gotten in the way, according to Drew's friends, it would have been a spectacular grab.

Of course, her face did get in the way. Apparently the sole of Drew's left running shoe hit Rachel's forehead so cleanly and firmly that her entire body went parallel to the ground before she actually landed. Even her dog turned upside down from the abrupt force of the leather leash pulling backward. Drew felt totally horrified. If Rachel had been conscious, she would have heard him crying out apology after apology. By the grace of God, she was out for only a few seconds. She came to consciousness in his arms. The first thing she saw was Drew's face looking into hers with a sense of tragedy and death in his eyes. From her point of view, it was very romantic.

Drew felt compelled to make sure Rachel got home safely that day and received whatever medical attention she needed. He then felt compelled to take her to dinner in order to make reparations. Then he thought it was important and delightful to spend a lot of time with her in the months to follow.

And then he asked her to marry him. He drove her and her dog to the park where they met. They threw a Frisbee around before having a picnic. At sunset, he asked her to marry him; she, without any hesitation, said yes.

They had a great story.

Neither Drew nor Rachel grew up in Christian homes. Drew's parents divorced and remarried when he was young, as did Rachel's. They were drawn to Christ in similar ways. Friends witnessed to them at school and invited them to their respective churches, where they heard the gospel for the first time, repented from their sins, and placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. Their developmental years had been difficult, but the Spirit of God gave them strength to endure. The gospel opened their eyes to Christ and the many benefits of salvation in His name.

Though they weren't entirely sure where the Lord was taking them next, they were thankful for all He had done. They wanted to serve

Him together, but they didn't know what that meant. Almost everyone in their lives believed they were too young to marry, but they didn't really listen. They knew they were young. They didn't know what their future would hold. They knew that Jesus Christ would be with them and for them.

Hopefully you are entering into your preparation for marriage with a good story to tell. Perhaps you are not. Either way, this chapter intends to help you tell that story and to get you further down the road toward marriage.

Certainly the story of Drew and Rachel is not the standard for stories. You will have your own. There will likely be as many stories as there are couples. It is part of what makes premarital counseling so exciting and delightful. No two couples are the same. No two stories are the same. The ways in which the Lord works, moves, and gives grace can never be exhausted. There is always room for another story of God's love and faithfulness in the lives of His people.

Understanding Where We Came From

Personal histories are helpful. They give us a sense of trajectory in our lives. When we are able to see the course of our lives over years past, it can give us a glimpse forward to where we are going in the days ahead and to what needs to change.

If my personal history is full of rage, bitterness, and broken relationships without real heart change, then, if I am honest, I should know that the days ahead will include more of the same. If my personal history is riddled with immorality and drug abuse, but God has brought repentance in my heart and reconciliation in my relationships, then I may walk forward with a sense that God will continue to bring repentance and reconciliation in my life when I am honest about personal sin and cling to His grace.

If I have a track record of dealing with pain by running to Christ, crying out in desperate prayer, and submitting myself to His comfort and instruction, then I can expect that the Lord will remain faithful in these ways down the road. If I have a history of lying, cheating, and

avoiding in order to win the approval and praise of people, then I should probably be aware of this and pray for the Lord to alter my course.

Some of us grew up in loving, peaceful homes. Some of us grew up in harsh, abusive homes. Most of us grew up in a home that fell somewhere in the middle. Perhaps your parents left you to navigate life on your own. They were hands off. Or perhaps they examined and critiqued your every move. Your parents may have divorced when you were young, so that you rarely saw your father or your mother. Perhaps relationships with your siblings were a source of joy for you, or perhaps they were a source of pain. Either way, we need to realize that family experiences influence us today. They often matter in ways we do not see, provide a context for understanding our lives, and exert a degree of influence upon our marriages.

Our Personal Histories and the Promises of the Gospel

By the grace of God, our histories do not determine who we are or where we are going—the gospel promises this truth. The gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

Even though we all were enslaved to sin and hostile to God from birth, God rescued our souls and made us His children. He accomplished this through His Son, Jesus Christ. Because of our sin, we deserved His judgment forever. Yet God sent His Son to die in our place. Jesus Christ lived a perfectly righteous life. He was crucified as a payment for our sins in order to reconcile us back to God the Father. We are saved because He saved us. We don’t earn or deserve it. We receive it as a gift by trusting the Giver and His work on our behalf. We are reborn by the Holy Spirit. When He enters our hearts, we become God’s adopted and secure children forever. The trajectory of our lives has changed.

The gospel brings about real transformation. God uses His Word to wash, renew, and mature us over time. The Spirit of God and the Word of God work through and within our life experiences to conform us to the image of Christ, among other things.

Scripture does not minimize our personal histories. It does, however, help us to interpret those histories truthfully, respond to them triumphantly, and behold the glory of Jesus Christ shining through them along the way.

The gospel assures us that our hearts can be filled with (and therefore ruled by) the Holy Spirit. Past experiences, good or bad, assume whatever level of control in our lives the Lord allows them to. Under His loving hand, they assume whatever level of control we allow them to, as well. The sufferings and successes of our past can be seen and understood from God's point of view. Since He uses all our experiences to bring about our true good, then those experiences do not have control of our lives. God does.

The love of Christ should now control us. Second Corinthians 5:14–15 says,

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.

If we have been saved by His grace, then we belong to Him now. His Spirit controls our path into eternity. Our lives will follow His perfect design. Will we cooperate or resist Him? Will we stand in awe or stand in protest? Will we walk in the flesh or in the Spirit? Our answers to these questions will govern how much we enjoy the journey.

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Gal. 5:24–25)

If we have been redeemed through Jesus Christ, then He determines who we are. We are now “in Him” (see Eph. 1:4–14). In fact, God the Father “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him” (v. 4). In Christ, we are new creations: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new

creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17). The gospel has delivered deep, lasting, and transforming grace into our hearts. This changes everything!

Why am I saying all this? So that we will look at our personal histories with honesty and seriousness and will do so without feeling determined or trapped by these histories. I say it so that you will deal humbly with who you are and where you have been—and deal humbly with your fiancé and where he or she has been—in order to apply the gospel where it needs to be applied and to give no more power to the past than the Lord allows.

Here is what I would ask of you in beginning this chapter. Please start with humble prayer. Please thank the Lord for all that He has brought you through to this point and for the grace that He has poured on your soul. Then ask Him for wisdom as you respond to the questions and requests throughout this chapter.

The Story of Your Family

Each of us grew up in a family. Perhaps we had a father and a mother present in our home growing up. Perhaps we had siblings around. Perhaps we grew up in an orphanage or bounced from home to home without exactly feeling like we were part of any family at all. Some of us enjoyed our families as children. Some of us did not.

No matter what your experiences have been throughout your life, they are important. They do not *determine* you, nor do those experiences compose who you are, but they have *influenced* the way that you think, feel, and live. They have not *caused* your view of marriage, family, and life, but they have *impacted* your view. They are worth some consideration at this point of your preparation for marriage.

Now is the time to be honest. Hiding from people now will only make it more difficult to expose and face truth later. If you have a relevant sexual history, then please share enough of your history to bring into the light the sins and struggles that should be in the light. If you were physically abused as a child, please pray for the courage, if need be, to share about those experiences. If your extended family is marked

by chronic divorce, domestic violence, drunkenness, or anything else noteworthy, then please be open. How have you experienced anger, or hurt, or forgiveness? How have you expressed anger, hurt, and forgiveness?

In the same way, please be honest about the joys, delights, and blessings of your history. If you were reared in a home in which Christ was cherished, the gospel proclaimed, and marriage treated with reverence and wonder, then please don't hold back. If you are overwhelmed by the peace and harmony you have enjoyed in your relationships, feel free to rejoice. Now is the time to start placing any important stuff from your past onto the table.

1. Please share about your life growing up in your home. What were some defining events, whether good or bad?

5. What particular “foxes” might your family bring to your “vineyard”? What particular foxes have you brought from your family into your engagement?

The Story of Your Salvation

From my point of view, this aspect of your story is the most significant and powerful. The supernatural and gracious intervention of God in our lives through Jesus Christ has changed everything—and forever. We should never stop thinking about this and worshiping God for who He is and all He has accomplished for His people. “Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, and His praise in the congregation of the godly ones” (Ps. 149:1).

Life may well have been a long series of disasters before we were introduced to Christ, yet all has been made new in Him. Our sins have been forgiven in Jesus Christ. His righteousness has been imputed to us (conferred on us or reckoned to us). Life may be a continual battle with sin and suffering, but we now fight the battle as reconciled children of God rather than enemies of God.

Our lives as followers of Christ could be riddled with sinful escapades and explosions of pride, but He continues to wash us anew.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.
(1 John 2:1-2)

Now that we are beloved children of God, our life trajectories have changed forever. The rest of our time on earth can and should be a grateful preparation for eternity, a constant mission to call the whole world to faith in Jesus Christ, and a daily remembrance of His goodness and grace in our souls. We will all stumble along the way, but our course and destination have been charted for us by the sovereign will and love of God.

6. Is your faith in Jesus Christ for your salvation? Please explain your answer.

7. Briefly share how you were drawn to Jesus Christ.

11. What does life with Christ look like for you, hour by hour and day by day? Describe your relationship with Him.

The Story of Your Relationship

The way you met your fiancé and the reasons you have pursued each other toward marriage will impact the days to come. If you met your fiancée at a nightclub and want to marry her because you want sex, then you should rethink your motivations for marriage. If you are marrying the man next to you because all your friends are married and you believe this may be your last chance for a husband, then you may want to step back for a moment and consider your intentions. If your relationship has been full of disputes, anger, and fears, with few seasons of selfless, peaceful love, then you have something really important to address before you move further toward marriage.

It may be that you were drawn to each other because of a mutual love for Jesus Christ. It may be that your relationship has been full of peace and humble service. It may be that you share a deep affection for each other and can't really explain it. God may have brought your relationship about miraculously. The relationship may be a mixed bag of selflessness and selfishness, patience and impatience, fear and rest, depending on the condition of your soul in the moment. The spaces below give you an opportunity to present the relevant pieces of your relationship up to this point in time.

15. Share how you have handled pain and difficulties as a couple.

The Story of Your Engagement

You may have been asked a hundred times before to tell the story of your engagement. This will be another opportunity. Please share the story of how you came to be engaged.

The Story of Your Future

Two people can meet at a moment in time and get along very well while heading in two completely different life directions. A man with dreams of missionary work in Africa and a woman with dreams to be a surgeon in Florida can meet, enjoy each other, and fall in love while spending the summer in Spain. While they are in the same place for a single season of life, they are going in opposite directions. If they are going to spend their lives together as husband and wife, then either one or both of them have to drastically change their life direction.

I hope and pray this is not the case for you and your fiancé. I hope you are not simply crossing paths on your way to separate destinations. If you are, then you definitely need to be aware that you are walking different roads and planning different futures. Even more, someone in your relationship (and perhaps both of you) will need to change course in order for you to spend your lives together. Even if you are headed in the same direction, you still need to talk about your desires for the future and to hear the desires of your fiancé.

16. What are your dreams for your marriage? What do you expect your marriage to be like?

20. How has God gifted you for marriage? How has He gifted your fiancée?

There may be much more that can be said and discussed. The chapter was meant not to be exhaustive but to get you started in thoughtful discussion and prayer. I hope you are able to look back on your life and see the patience and grace of God at work. In the days ahead, I pray that you can more clearly see your experiences and personal story as small pieces of His eternal story.

Please take time in the hours and days ahead to thank God for all He has done. Thank Him for His patience and faithfulness. Ask Him to strengthen you,

with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:16–19)