

Lifelong
LOVE
AFFAIR

How to Have a Passionate and
Deeply Rewarding Marriage

Jimmy Evans
with Frank Martin



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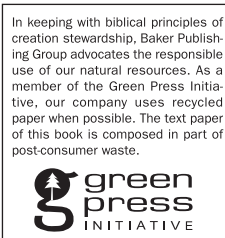
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To my precious grandson,
Reed Henry Evans.
You bring such joy to our hearts.
May your future be full of blessings and happiness.
And may you and your generation take the land for God.

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Foreword

A Hollywood screenwriter comes home to find his house burned to the ground. His wife, sobbing, says, “Oh, John, it was awful. I was cooking and the phone rang. It was your agent. We were talking, and I didn’t see the stove was on fire. The flames were unbelievable. It went up so quickly. We’re wiped out, honey—destroyed. There’s nothing left. But thank God, little Fluffy and I escaped by the skin of—”

“Whoa—wait just a minute. Back up,” John says. “Did you say my agent called?”

We must confess that we felt a bit like that writer when Jimmy Evans called. Not that our house was on fire, thankfully. But learning that Jimmy was about to publish a new marriage book grabbed our attention. Why? Because we knew that in spite of all the urgent demands that have a way of burning up our schedules, we needed to set them all aside and read *Lifelong Love Affair*.

So we did. And our marriage is stronger for it.

We first met Jimmy more than a decade ago when he invited us to conduct a marriage seminar at his amazing church in Amarillo, Texas. But even before that, we knew Jimmy by reputation. Everyone who knows Jimmy from his books, television broadcast, website, preaching, or live seminars knows just how passionate he is when it comes to helping couples build rock-solid marriages (not to mention his own marriage to Karen). In fact, you’ll be hard-pressed to find someone who is more dedicated to giving couples practical tools for

FOREWORD

lifelong love. And that's why we were so thrilled by the opportunity to get a sneak peek at this wonderful book.

Lifelong Love Affair takes God's timeless principles and shows everyday couples how to put them to work. It unpacks the eternal truths of Scripture and shows us how to live them out in one of the most challenging yet rewarding relationships God has given us: marriage. Not so that our relationships will simply survive but so they will stand strong and flourish in spite of the proverbial floods and fires trying to destroy them.

And know this: Jimmy is not in the business of giving out glib platitudes about lifelong love. Nope. He cuts to the heart of the matter and shows us how to make our married love affair nothing short of certifiably indestructible.

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott
www.LesandLeslie.com

Acknowledgments

First and foremost I want to thank my incredible wife, Karen, for everything she does for me and our ministry to marriages. This book is as much hers as it is mine. Everything I write and teach flows from the sharing of our lives. I could not have done this without the continual investment of her love, patience, wisdom, and sacrifice.

I am also deeply indebted to Frank Martin for his expertise in helping me write this book. Frank was great to work with and went beyond the call of duty. He was able to capture my voice with written words in an amazing manner. He also seasoned this work with his own words of wisdom and experience.

Joel Kneeder of Alive Communications has been a good friend and excellent liaison in representing me and introducing me to my publisher, Baker Books. I am so thankful for Joel and the great people at Alive Communications for the important work they do.

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Last but not least, I want to thank our team at MarriageToday for their hard work and excellence. My son, Brenton, who is president of MarriageToday, is a joy for me to work with and is amazing in his role as my dear friend and associate. Brenton is an important part of everything I do. My assistant, Shelly Millheim, and our marketing director, Jana Schiewe, are two of the hardest workers in the world and have been invaluable in helping me with this book.



1

Great Marriages Don't Just Happen

One of the ironies of contemporary family life is that many people who are good at intentional parenting are lousy at intentional marriage.

William J. Doherty

Marriage is the privilege and the honor of living as close to the heart as two people can get.

John Eldredge

Imagine that you're sitting in the front row of a grand concert hall as one of the world's greatest violinists takes the stage. The crowd rises in applause as he slowly makes his way to the center platform. He adjusts the music stand, waits for the applause to die down, then lifts his bow to begin his first piece.

You find yourself mesmerized as he moves from one movement to the next with breathtaking skill and artistry. The music fills the hall, rising and falling with ease as his fingers glide effortlessly across the strings.

For two hours he plays with flawless rhythm and tone, never once missing a beat or note. His last piece comes to a close, and the crowd explodes with one last standing ovation as he exits the stage to his right.

Now imagine that as you're making your way down the aisle to leave, a pleasant man in an usher's uniform intercepts you at the end of your row and asks if you'd like to meet the great violinist. "I was watching you from a distance," he explains, "and I saw how moved you were by the music. I happen to have an extra backstage pass, so I thought I would offer it to you."

You eagerly accept and follow him as he ushers you through the crowd toward the front stage door leading behind the great curtain. You walk down a long hall and through several more doors, and soon you're standing outside the great violinist's dressing room. The usher knocks, the door opens, and suddenly you find yourself standing face-to-face with one of the world's most talented musicians. He shakes your hand, asking if you enjoyed the concert.

"Yes, I enjoyed it immensely," you answer. "In fact, I think that was the most beautiful music I've ever heard."

He nods and thanks you for your kind words. Then you say, "You're so lucky to be able to play with such perfection. It must be great to have been born with such talent, and then to have found a violin that fits your hands so perfectly. I wish I could find an instrument like that."

His smile fades, and his head cocks to one side as you continue.

"You know, I've always wanted to play music, and I plan to take it up someday. I think I could do it because I'm pretty talented. I just haven't been able to find the right instrument. Someday I hope to find the perfect violin, or maybe a cello, or even a trumpet—something that suits me perfectly. Then I'll be able to play as well as you do. I can't wait. . . ."

Is that what you would say? Is that what any of us would say?

Of course not. You wouldn't say that because it would be a monumental insult. You and I both know that violinists don't become great by accident. Greatness is not simply the result of a person stumbling upon the "perfect instrument" or being born with the right talent. It's the result of hours and hours of hard work and diligence.

Becoming a world-class musician takes years of dedication, persistence, and sacrifice. It takes untold hours of patience and practice.

It takes an intentional decision of the will to do whatever is needed to become the best musician possible.

When we see a great violinist playing a flawless sonata at Carnegie Hall, we all know instinctively that he's earned the right to be there because he's done the hard work it takes to be called great. To say otherwise is an enormous insult to his success.

The “Soul Mate” Myth

So what about great marriages? Does that same dynamic hold true?

Instead of standing before an accomplished violinist, what if you were attending the fiftieth wedding anniversary of a happily married couple? Two people who had successfully navigated decades of life together, years of stress and strife and worry, a half century of bills and work and raising kids, yet after all that time seemed more in love than ever. You see the glint in their eyes as they smile in each other's direction. Just like two schoolkids in love. What would you say was the secret to their success?

Amazingly, many of us might think, *How lucky they are to have found each other. How wonderful it must be to find your soul mate at a young age and then spend your life growing old together. I wish I could find my perfect mate. Then maybe I could have the happiness they've found.*

When you see two people who are still deeply in love after fifty years of marriage, it's tempting to think they were just lucky, but that's as naïve as it is insulting. Great marriages don't just happen any more than accomplished musicians become that way by accident.

Like any great skill, loving takes time and patience and diligence to thrive and grow. Both partners must make an intentional effort to create a meaningful, lifelong love affair. A great marriage is not the result of two “soul mates” who happen to find each other. It is built through years of consistency and devotion—through a lifetime of dedication, effort, and sacrifice. Through a conscious decision to do whatever it takes to make the marriage the best it can possibly be.

This book is for those who desire to do just that—to make their marriage the best it can possibly be. It's for those who don't want to settle for second best. It's for those who have made a conscious

decision to develop a deep and meaningful love affair with their spouse and are willing to do the hard work it takes to get where they want to be.

The Confluence of Two Souls

In the mountains of Colorado, two mighty rivers run through a large portion of the state—the Roaring Fork and the Frying Pan. They are powerful and independent rivers, and they come together just outside of Basalt, Colorado, in the Roaring Fork Valley.

You can stand on the bank and see the fork at which these two massive bodies of water crash into each other and become one mighty river. Thrill-seeking rafters come from all over the state to ride these rapids.

As you stand at the confluence of these two rivers, you're struck by the sheer violence and power of these two waterways viciously colliding as they attempt to flow together and become one giant river. It's an awesome sight to behold.

And it's a perfect picture of the dynamics at work when two autonomous souls get married.

In marriage, you often have two independent and strong-willed people coming together at a confluence and attempting to become one flesh. They are two forceful spirits—each with their own dreams and identities, each with their own thoughts and ideas about the future, each with their own needs and weaknesses—and they stand at the altar declaring their desire to become one.

If that isn't a formula for conflict, I don't know what is.

That's why it takes work to grow a great marriage. That's why any marriage that lasts longer than a Tootsie Roll is bound to have struggles. People are inherently different, and when two different people come together into one life, there is going to be trouble.

The good news is, the longer these two "rivers" run together, the quieter the waters become. If they can just hang on and make it downstream, the rapids become easier to navigate. And the better they become at navigating those rapids.

The problem in most troubled marriages is that couples get stuck in the currents. They get caught up in the rapids and don't know

how to move forward. They get stuck on a large rock or boulder and can't seem to force their way free.

One has a dream or desire that they refuse to turn loose, and they cling tightly to it, afraid that if they let go they'll lose their identity. The other has dreams of their own, and they too hang on for dear life. The two refuse to work together and find safety downstream, and instead they find themselves in a constant battle to hang on to their independence, each desperately afraid of being swallowed up by the other.

This is where most divorces occur. It's to this point that almost every broken marriage can be traced. People get stuck in the middle of a violent rapid and refuse to let go.

What they don't understand is that the only hope they have is to turn loose and trust the other as they learn to work together, allowing God to mold and shape them into a strong and dynamic couple.

A Magnificent Journey

I have an optimistic view of marriage. I don't believe marriage was intended to be chronically frustrating and difficult. I don't think it's something we're supposed to "endure" in order to become better people. And it certainly wasn't intended to be dull and ordinary.

I believe marriage was created by God to be enormously fulfilling and exciting. It's intended to be filled with fun and adventure and gratification. When done right, marriage is the most rewarding experience a person can have this side of eternity.

When two rivers come together and successfully blend into one, they create a river that is far more powerful and magnificent than either of them could have been on their own. Because I believe that, I'm in the business of helping people create great marriages. My wife, Karen, and I have dedicated our lives and our ministry to bringing a message of hope and encouragement to those who are struggling in their relationships. Years ago God brought our marriage back from the brink of divorce, and in the process he imparted to us a vision and desire to help others do the same.

An Indestructible Marriage

After more than thirty years of counseling, I've found that the one truth I hold most dear is that no marriage is beyond help. Today I am convinced that any marriage can have a 100 percent chance of success. I believe that any couple, regardless of the baggage they bring to the table, can rebuild a strained and broken marriage into a love affair that is stronger and more passionate than the days of their honeymoon.

I'm absolutely certain that any couple can have a marriage that is divorce-proof, affair-proof, boredom-proof, disappointment-proof, even Satan-proof. A love affair that is completely and certifiably indestructible!

I believe these things because I've seen them happen time and again, not just in my own life but in the lives of countless couples who made the decision to put a few timeless principles to work. Principles that are readily found within the pages of Scripture. Eternal truths that were given to us by God to supernaturally bind our hearts together.

These principles, once unwrapped and put into practice, unfold for us the mystery of a lifelong love affair.



2

When Love Fails

Those who marry will face many troubles in this life.

1 Corinthians 7:28

Five out of ten marriages today are ending in divorce because love alone is not enough.

Emerson Eggerichs

It happened on an average Friday evening, right after dinner. The table had been cleared, the leftover food had been put away, and Lisa was busy loading the last few dishes into the dishwasher. One child was away at college, one was visiting a friend out of town, and the youngest two were sleeping over with friends. Lisa and her husband, Walter, were home alone for the evening.

Lisa turned to see Walter standing in the doorway of the kitchen. He looked somber and troubled, so she wiped her hands on a dish towel and turned to face him.

“We need to talk,” he said.

“Okay,” Lisa responded.

“You need to know that I’m in love with another woman,” he began. “I’ve been seeing her since last year, and I can’t keep it from you any longer. I’ve realized that I don’t love you anymore. In fact, I don’t think I ever did love you. Now I’m through pretending. I’m leaving you, Lisa. I don’t want to discuss it, because I’ve made up my mind. I’m leaving tonight, and I want a divorce.”

Lisa froze. For a solid five seconds—five seconds that felt like an eternity—neither said a word. She glanced at the ground, trying hard to keep her composure, then again fixed her gaze upward.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“You know I would never joke about this,” he answered. “I’ve never been happy in this marriage, and I want out. My bags are already in the car, and I plan to file for a divorce as soon as I can. I still love our kids, so I hope you won’t make this hard on everyone.”

Lisa couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She knew things had been a bit distant between them lately, but she had no idea he felt this way. And she never imagined he’d been having an affair.

“So you’re in love with another woman?” she asked, her voice quivering. “Is that why you want to leave?”

“Yes, I’m in love with someone else. But that’s not why I’m leaving. I’m leaving because I don’t love you. I don’t think I ever have.”

For the next twenty minutes, Lisa listened silently as Walter continued to wound her with his words. He explained how he had never been satisfied with their sex life, how he had felt trapped in a loveless marriage, how he had spent years pretending to be happy but just couldn’t pretend anymore, how he needed someone more affectionate, more vivacious, more exciting. How he was certain that God wanted him to be happy.

That night Walter left, and he hasn’t been back since. The two are now negotiating details of their divorce through lawyers. Lisa is alone, living in a small apartment with her two youngest kids and going to night school to learn a trade to support herself. Walter is looking for contentment in the arms of a woman fifteen years his junior, a woman who hasn’t yet discovered his many flaws, a woman who is still ten years away from having to cover the gray streaks in her hair. A woman he’s certain can bring him the happiness he deserves.

Broken Promises

Walter and Lisa's story is sad but not uncommon. In fact, it's a story that's growing more familiar by the day. Each month we receive many letters at our MarriageToday ministry headquarters from people just like Walter and Lisa. Couples on the brink of divorce. Couples who are struggling in their relationship, trying desperately to undo the damage that's been done. People who have been wounded by infidelity, pornography, abuse, or one of the many other marriage killers in today's society.

A lot of recent studies seem to suggest that the divorce rate in America has started to decline over the last few years, but that's only because fewer people are getting married. Many young people are choosing to cohabitate instead of getting married, and a large percentage of people simply choose to stay single. Today's married couples are under more stress and face more temptation than at any time in recent history, and largely because of this, people are simply afraid of making the commitment.

But perhaps the most disturbing statistic on marriage is the large number of empty nesters who are choosing to divorce. A recent study conducted by the National Center for Family and Demographic Research at Bowling Green University showed that the divorce rate for those over fifty has doubled in the last two decades. Today, 25 percent of all divorces are between couples over the age of fifty.¹

In the past, marriages that lasted that long almost always went the distance, but that's not the case anymore. Empty nesters are divorcing at their highest rate ever.

I recently counseled a couple who filed for divorce just a few months after sending their youngest child off to college. As their pastor, I had asked to speak with them in hopes of saving their marriage. When I talked to them about it, they seemed completely ambivalent about the breakup. They calmly explained to me that they knew this day would come, that they had long since fallen out of love, and that they had stayed together only for the sake

1. Susan L. Bowen, "Divorce in Middle and Later Life: New Estimates from the 2009 American Community Survey," Center for Family and Demographic Research (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University).

of the kids. Now that their child-rearing days were over, they saw no more reason to remain married. Nothing I said could convince them otherwise.

Like Walter and Lisa, almost all couples go into marriage pledging to stay together through thick and thin. Yet fewer and fewer couples seem willing to honor that promise.

Where Did We Go Wrong?

So what happened with Walter and Lisa? That's a question that begs an answer.

What would cause a man to so easily turn his back on his family? Why would a man who had so much going for him, a man who had invested twenty-five years of his life in a relationship, simply decide one day to leave and start over? What would cause a once strong and thriving love affair to fade and die so easily?

The truth is that what happened with Walter and Lisa is not only common, it's predictable. In fact, it's the natural result of a love relationship left unchecked and unguarded. It's what can—and will—happen to any love affair over time without regular and decisive care and maintenance.

I often compare love to a garden. When tended properly, a garden gets richer and fuller with each passing year. With each season it bears more fruit, fuller branches, deeper roots, thicker vines, and more beautiful plants and flowers. There is nothing more spectacular than a lush, green, flourishing garden that has been tended well and carefully tilled by a skilled gardener.

But what happens when the gardener stops working? When the garden goes untended? Even the lushest and most thriving garden will quickly begin to atrophy and wilt. Eventually it will die altogether.

Love doesn't have to be that way. It was never intended to last only for a season or to grow stale with age. Love was designed to grow deeper and stronger with time. To become even more intimate and rewarding. To meet many of our deepest needs and desires. To not only last but to grow healthier and fuller with age.

The question is, how exactly do we do that?

Irreconcilable Differences

When I was nineteen years old, I worked in a hardware store. One day I was going through the order sheets and saw an order for something called a “male fitting.” I didn’t know what that was, so I asked my boss about it. He grinned and took me into the back room. He pulled out a male fitting and showed it to me. Then he pulled out another type of fitting and said, “This is a female fitting.” He put the two together to show me why they were called that.

I was completely stunned. And I’m pretty sure I turned beet-red.

From that day on I was absolutely convinced that all plumbers were perverts. And every time someone came in asking for a male or female fitting, I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing.

Even hardware store guys understand that men and women are inherently different. Not only do they look different, but they have distinct purposes. And they are created to fit together. They are intended to work as a team.

When couples understand this truth and learn to embrace their differences, they’re able to create something dynamic and beautiful together—something that neither of them could have made on their own. They find a renewed synergy and purpose within the relationship.

A man can accomplish great things on his own, but when he binds himself to a godly wife, the possibilities become even greater. A woman can have a perfectly happy and productive life on her own, but if she can build a meaningful life with a husband, a brand-new world of opportunities is opened up to her.

When we embrace our differences, we become stronger as a team. It’s when we reject and criticize those differences that trouble comes.

When couples file for divorce, the most common reason they state on the divorce petition is “irreconcilable differences.” When forced to disclose what happened to tear them apart, they have to admit that they were simply unable to reconcile the differences between them. So they’ve given up and decided to go their separate ways.

Most of these couples married because they found their differences exciting. They were drawn to each other because of their different natures, the unique ways they looked and thought and acted, and

their distinct spirits, characters, and personalities. It was their differences that made them want to build a life together.

But they soon realized how difficult it is to blend two unique individuals into one union. It's not easy to take two raging rivers and flow them into one independent body of water. So they gave up trying.

Marriage is about learning to reconcile the differences that make us so special and unique. It's about learning not only to accept those differences but to welcome them, grow through them, and embrace the new and exciting possibilities our differing personalities can bring.

Finding Hope in the Chaos

Let me venture a guess. You didn't pick up this book because you have nothing else to do. I doubt that you have so much free time on your hands that you're just looking for extra ways to fill it.

If you're reading this book, you probably have a good reason for it. Maybe you picked it up at one of my marriage seminars or ordered it from our *MarriageToday* television program. Perhaps your pastor or marriage counselor suggested it. Or maybe you simply stumbled across it in your local bookstore and found the title intriguing. However you came across it, I seriously doubt that you're reading it for pleasure.

If you've found yourself on this page, I'm going to assume that at least some of you are struggling through some difficult issues in your marriage. Maybe you've found yourself frustrated or indifferent or worse. You could be in the middle of a relationship so fractured and damaged that you doubt any amount of work can save it. Perhaps you're in the throes of divorce.

Whatever it is that brought you here, let me give you a word of encouragement from someone who understands exactly what you're going through. No matter how bad things seem at the moment, there is hope. No matter how frustrated you feel, no matter how much pain and heartache you've experienced, no matter how strained your relationship has become, you can make it through. More than that, you can rebuild your broken love affair and come out on the other end stronger and happier than you ever imagined possible.

I know what it's like to feel utterly hopeless and broken, to be so disenchanted with your relationship that you think divorce is the only option. I understand the frustration of feeling completely out of sync with your spouse and the sting of hurtful and biting words being slung back and forth across the room—words you wish you could take back the second they leave your lips. Trust me, I understand your pain.

Karen and I have been married for over thirty-nine years, and I can honestly say without hesitation that we are happier and closer today than we ever imagined possible. But it hasn't always been that way. Early in our marriage we made mistakes that bordered on irreparable. Mistakes that very nearly shattered the foundation of our marriage.

By the grace of God, we made it through those stormy times and found the strength to move forward. And in the process, we learned some profound, life-altering truths about ourselves and God's purpose for our marriage. Truths that are surprisingly simple yet revolutionary enough to radically alter the direction of any marriage.

Stay with me while we explore these concepts together. I promise it will be worth your while, no matter where you are in your relationship.

