

Bestselling Author of *Sacred Marriage*

Gary Thomas

MAKING
YOUR
MARRIAGE
A FORTRESS

Strengthening Your
MARRIAGE to Withstand
LIFE'S STORMS

Praise for

MAKING YOUR MARRIAGE A FORTRESS

Marital storms are a reality in human experience. They come with different levels of intensity, and in different seasons of life, but none of us are exempt. If you are looking for practical help in surviving the storms, *Making Your Marriage a Fortress* is a must-read.

GARY CHAPMAN, PhD, author of *The 5 Love Languages*

There are so many challenges today that can impact our marriages. When real issues arise, we need more than pep talks and Band-Aids; we need wise guidance and practical tools! Well, Gary Thomas is a wise guide who provides great tools. He is also one of the most caring men I know. This book is an opportunity to learn from an insightful pastor who has a lot of experience and who cares about you and your marriage. It will help you come out stronger on the other side.

SHAUNTI FELDHANN, social researcher and bestselling author of *For Women Only*, *For Men Only*, and *Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages*

Gary Thomas's *Sacred Marriage* provides the transcendent foundation of biblical marriage, while *Making Your Marriage a Fortress* gives us a look inside at the practical application of when God's Word intersects with the problems of living we all experience in a fallen world.

STEPHEN D. WILKE, PhD, founder, LEADon University

With real-life stories, Gary Thomas's always-authentic style and shared knowledge from some of the best marriage advocates today make this a masterpiece of wisdom. From dating and engagement times to the most seasoned marriage, this book offers guidance through every season and storm. The takeaways at the end of each chapter are gold.

BOB RAUSCHER, pastor and marriage coach

(www.themarriagepastor.com)

Now, more than ever, our marriages are under siege. Now, more than ever, we need them to be fortresses. Gary Thomas's sage wisdom—pulling in stories from all across the body of Christ and weaving them with God's Word—is fortress building. At twenty-plus years into marriage, I have found this book to be a gift to read.

SARA HAGERTY, bestselling author of *Unseen* and *ADORE*

Every good marriage bumps into bad things. It's inevitable. But if you guard your relationship with intention, if you cultivate emotional safety, you can make it through nearly any difficulty to say, "I love you more than I did before." The key, of course, is to prepare for tough times—to make your marriage a fortress. That's why Gary Thomas's outstanding book is invaluable for every couple who is serious about enjoying life-long love to the fullest.

DRS. LES AND LESLIE PARROTT, authors of *Saving Your*

Marriage Before It Starts and *I Love You More*

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Bestselling Author of *Sacred Marriage*

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Making Your Marriage a Fortress

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*To Mary Kay Smith and her husband, Brad.
Post Sacred Pathways, Mary Kay has read and reviewed
every one of my books prior to its publication.*

*She and Brad have become friends
and true coworkers in the advance of God's kingdom.
I'm grateful for her friendship, competence, advice,
perspective, and partnership in this ministry.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Big One

Lisa and I were enjoying a weekend in Fredericksburg, Texas, a quaint, tourist-oriented town nestled in the Lone Star State's Hill Country.

That's when the phone call came.

"Gary, this is going to be a big one."

Ben isn't one to panic. He's a low-drama kind of guy. But he urged Lisa and me to get back to Houston right away. The fact that he made the phone call was sobering enough. His words, given the source, sounded even more ominous. Essentially, he was telling me, "I know you've laughed at the way we've panicked about storms in the past, but this isn't panic. This is real."

Ben was referring to the fact that, coming from the Pacific Northwest, I had occasionally remarked about the way Texans could cancel school for a week if it looked like we might get a quarter inch of snow. We'd heard rumor after rumor of big storms in Texas and seen the flashing digital road signs appear every June: "It's Hurricane Season! Prepare for an Emergency!" For the first few years we read the signs and took them seriously. Now, in year

seven of our Texas residency, we thought those warnings were about as relevant as the permanent “This Bridge Will Be Icy in Freezing Weather” signs that came into play in Houston approximately once every five years.

To be honest, most of the storm warnings *had* turned out to be puddles in comparison to storms we had seen in the Northwest. But when Ben, of all people, told me something was different about Harvey, Lisa and I figured we should cut short our time away and get back to our house in Houston.

Hours after we arrived, Harvey hit the coast hard but then immediately weakened.

That’s not so bad, I thought. Devastating for Rockport, yes, but everything was still standing in downtown Houston.

That’s when Harvey decided to camp out for a while and proceeded to dump more than fifty inches of rain over the next three days.

LANDFALL

At the time, we lived in an area of Houston called “the Heights.” Lisa and I laughed when we learned that the name “Heights” arose from the fact that our neighborhood is a couple dozen feet higher than downtown Houston. Apparently, a couple dozen feet of altitude in flat Houston demanded a geographical moniker, and since we moved here after spending most of our lives in sight of the Cascade Range, we felt right at home.

In the aftermath of Harvey, we stopped laughing about that couple dozen feet. Two dozen feet isn’t much, but when you’re dealing with rising water, you’ll take every inch the land gives you.

Once the rains started, they didn't stop. They were forceful, pelting, thunderous at times, and unrelenting. The drainage ditches filled first, then our sidewalks were covered, then the water rose about halfway up our vehicles' wheels. We started searching on the internet for how to waterproof our house, but it was much too late for that, as we didn't have any of the necessary tools or supplies. My pathetic stash of painter's tape and cardboard was no match for rising water.

By the time Harvey rolled back out into the Gulf of Mexico, more than one hundred people were dead and more than a hundred billion dollars of damage had been done.

Though our house stayed dry, thousands of people in our community lost their homes. Some had to move upstairs when their downstairs became an indoor pool. In one heartbreaking story, some friends of ours had stayed dry through the worst of the rains, but near the end of the storm, authorities opened up a dam they feared might be breached, and the ensuing water surge sent six inches of water into their house for six hours.

Six inches isn't much and six hours isn't long, but when you're talking about water in a house, it was enough to do catastrophic damage.

One of the guys in my running group lived in a neighborhood that became a lake. We were told of a wealthy medical professional who paid more than six thousand dollars to essentially shrink-wrap his house in anticipation of the storm, but it didn't work. His house still became a sponge.

Finally, Lisa and I got it. Yes, there had been years of near misses and what ended up being pointless panic. But Harvey was so bad for so long that we would never again look down on anyone taking storm warnings seriously.

Hurricanes are an inevitable part of living so close to the Gulf. If you stay in Houston for years rather than just months, you'll eventually have your own storm story to share. There are many benefits of living in this part of the Lone Star State, but with the good come the hurricanes. It's just a matter of time.

The same principle is true for your marriage. Your storm is just around the corner. I can't tell you where it will hit, when it will hit, or how it will hit. I just know that you live in a world where spiritual, physical, relational, financial, emotional, and health-related storms are inevitable. Eventually, one will find its way to your house. Your house may be standing tall and proud in pleasant weather, but can it survive a storm?

YOUR HURRICANE IS COMING

I'm embarrassingly sentimental when I perform the marriage ceremony for a couple. Lisa and I spend so long counseling each couple that we grow to love them dearly, and I'm seriously awed by the weighty commitment these young people (and occasionally middle-aged people) are making. I try so hard to prepare them, but I can't fully prepare them because the reality is, none of us know when we get married just how difficult the journey may be—not just because of the fact of our sin (which is the focus of *Sacred Marriage*), not just because relationships tend to drift (which is the focus of *A Lifelong Love*), and not just because familiarity tends to breed contempt (which is the focus of *Cherish*), but because we live in a broken and sometimes even hostile world that assaults all relationships. Life will occasionally be brutal, often prove unyielding, and sometimes seem relentlessly unfair.

In this book, we'll look at a couple whose lives have been upended by multiple sclerosis. Another couple who lost their only child. A couple who, because of the husband's vocation, have spent years apart. A wife who had an affair, a couple who earned and lost millions of dollars, and a couple whose home was overturned by an international pandemic no one saw coming. And yet—this is the key point—each couple is now stronger than they were before the crisis hit. They are closer, more mature, more loving, and more committed to their marriage. Somehow the assault ended up pushing them together, even though at the onset it may have felt like their relationship was doomed.

Why weren't their marriages doomed? What caused their relationship to take the hit, stagger, catch its breath, and then come back stronger than ever?

That's what this book is all about.

You may never face their specific challenges (and I earnestly hope you don't), but you'll surely face your own. Financial calamity, health crises, children rebelling or dying or needing lifelong care, personal addictions, busy schedules, forced time apart—the relational hurricanes that married couples face today are legion. Money can't solve these problems. I'll never forget talking with a man whose net worth totaled several billion dollars. Two of his children face a challenge that the best doctors in the world can't solve. He would gladly pay hundreds of millions to make the problem go away, but dollars are powerless and irrelevant against the challenges his children face.

Neither does faith always remove the challenges. Like money, faith can help us deal with the pain and difficulties such challenges present, but also like money, faith doesn't always make them go away.

Romantic love doesn't solve problems either. Romantic love is about as effective in overcoming life's disappointments as trying to hold water in a paper bag. There's not much romance to be enjoyed when a relentless cancer saps a loved one's strength or when you're humiliated because you're being forced to sell your house and your adult children look at you with contempt as they offer you financial advice.

This book is about how to keep your marriage together when the world is determined to rip the two of you apart and, as of right now, how to start making your marriage a fortress in *anticipation* of that unknown assault. When I thought about preparing our home to face Harvey after the storm had hit, it was much too late. If our home had been built with bricks going up twenty feet, we wouldn't have given one of the century's largest storms a moment's thought.

When hurricanes hit, one of two things will be true for you relationally—(1) the state of your marriage will become part of the problem, adding to your woes, or (2) the strength of your marriage will become a refuge against the storm. The couples you're about to meet will admit that they made many mistakes along the way, and they will freely share what they got wrong and where they had to backtrack and find healing. But they'll also share the things they've learned to prepare themselves for the next storm. I was profoundly inspired talking to them; this project has been one of the highlights of my life as I gleaned wisdom and inspiration from wise, godly, and faith-filled sisters and brothers in the Lord.

Here's what I've found: *Getting through one storm is no guarantee that you're set for life* and get to go into retirement. On the contrary, storms often come in threes—a parenting crisis coupled with a health crisis lead to a financial crisis. Or it may be a sin crisis

exacerbated by a betrayal crisis made even worse by a vocational crisis. This world is creative in its fallenness and gifted in its ability to undermine even the best of our intentions.

If your house has been “flooded,” these stories, and the principles that follow, will assure you that someone else has been where you are and has become immeasurably stronger individually and more intimate as a couple. If you’re like Lisa and me, the first six years we lived in Texas, downplaying the warnings because we thought they would never amount to much, I hope you’ll take these stories as preparatory planning. Just because you can’t see the storm doesn’t mean it isn’t forming somewhere far off in the ocean, amassing its fury to mock your sense of security.

Most chapters will focus primarily on one couple’s story, but the principles gleaned from their struggle will be universal. It’s not really about the problems; it’s about the principles. If you are strong physically, you can lift up a fallen comrade in battle, open up a jar for your spouse, or help your friend move some heavy furniture. Strength that comes from one source still has many applications; the same is true for spiritual strength: “Godliness has value for all things” (1 Timothy 4:8).

If there’s one thing Lisa and I learned from being caught in a hurricane with nothing but painter’s tape and cardboard to save our house from an unrelenting flood, it’s this: If we wait until the storm hits to gather what we need (i.e., learn these lessons), we’ve waited too long. Preparation is key to make sure our marriage becomes part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

Though I’ve never met you, I love you in the Lord, and I want to serve your marriage. I want your relationship to thrive, to be a refuge in the midst of life’s storms and inspire many others as you become “more than conquerors” through him who loves you

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(Romans 8:37). Please read this book as a labor of love inspired by a God who knows the future you don't know, who has given you witnesses to his steadfast love when you can't see it for yourself, and who can prepare you to draw ever closer to Christ and ever closer to each other.

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CHAPTER 1

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FIGHTING FEAR WITH FAITH

Mentally Managing Loss

What if your biggest fear about your marriage came true? What if you woke up one day and realized that the primary reason you got married is something that now will never happen and has forever been taken away from you?

Can your marriage survive that?

Yes, it can, with faith.

For Stacy and Darell, a sobering diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (MS) reset all their expectations about what their marriage would be like. For you, the diagnosis may be something entirely different—childlessness, a mental illness, the lack of sexual function, or financial impoverishment. Learning to live without what you once thought was a primary purpose of marriage is necessary to find happiness in marriage, for the simple reason that none of us will ever get all we want out of marriage, or at least not for our entire lives.

To succeed in marriage, then, we must succeed in mentally

managing loss. If we don't learn to turn disappointment into determination, helplessness into hope, and frustration into faith, our marriage won't go far in a hostile world.

We all have different fears, but MS hit both Darell and Stacy in core places of their identity, and yet not only has their marriage survived; it has also thrived precisely because of what they learned from having to face down their greatest fears.

TRUE STRENGTH

Stacy fell in love with a weight lifter who could bench-press four hundred pounds. If you're not familiar with weight lifting, that's a lot (and likely a couple hundred pounds more than your spouse could bench press). Stacy's family of origin was neither safe nor healthy. Looking back, she thinks Darell's strength made her feel protected and secure.

It wasn't primarily Darell's physical strength that attracted Stacy, however. "The fact is, before Darell I was drawn more to the small and lean type, the long-distance runners. But when I saw Darell's heart for people—especially youth—experienced the way he truly listened to me, and saw his deep faith, I was hooked. And it didn't hurt that he was wicked funny."

For his part, being physically strong was a core element of Darell's identity. He was never into shaping his physique like body-builders do; he just wanted to be a guy who could take care of and protect his wife and family. And he could tell that Stacy wasn't exactly turned off by his arms and pecs. "I was arrogant enough to think that I kind of had a little bit of that 'wow factor.'"

They were married in 1986. Stacy had her strong, protective man who could lift anything, carry in all the groceries, and even pick her up if needed.

Less than three years later, Darell experienced his first early sign of MS—optic neuritis, an inflammation of the optic nerve. It came and went rather quickly, so neither of them paid much attention to it until it returned in 1991, which led doctors to make an official MS diagnosis.

Stacy was pregnant with their second child when they found out.

Even after the diagnosis, Darell's MS lay fairly dormant for a number of years, to the point that Stacy thought perhaps God had healed her husband.

Darell didn't share his wife's belief. "I didn't feel healed. I thought the MS was just hiding under a rock. I didn't share all this with Stacy, but I knew something was up because I kept getting so tired and I could tell my legs weren't working like they used to after a long day of work."

One year in particular brought numerous stressful challenges that overloaded Darell's system. An accident at the camp where he worked, myriad vocational stresses, and some personal challenges all combined to send his body into a tailspin. Darell noticed a major shift in his body's movement as he tried to run to the scene of the accident.

"I couldn't pick up my foot and thought, *Okay, that's not a good thing.*"

Stress can exacerbate the symptoms of MS, and Darell believes that year sent him over the edge. "I've never been the same physically."

INITIAL IMPACT

When you realize life has changed, and that what you hoped to get out of marriage will not come true, it can take a while to accept it.

How do you and your spouse face your fears? Typically, one spouse will deny them while the other obsesses over them—the typical “glass half full, glass half empty” dichotomy. Sometimes couples fight about everything *but* what they’re afraid of. Fear unaddressed can become anger, defensiveness, resentment, shame, and any number of secondary emotions. That’s why it can help so much to pull up the roots and face your fears by naming them as *fears*.

“I can’t bear the thought we’ll never have biological children.”

“So you’re blaming me because I’m infertile?”

That sounds so cruel, so the “fertile” spouse may just shut up and never say what they are truly afraid of. They aren’t blaming the other, but they are devastated by the new reality. Facing these issues takes a high degree of differentiation. You must be willing to understand and bear your spouse’s frustrations and disappointments without making it about you—even though, of course, it feels like it has everything to do with you. But you didn’t choose to be infertile, any more than Darell chose to have MS.

The reason I say we need to deal with fears openly is that fear unaddressed becomes a relational cancer.

Stacy recalls vacationing at an Oregon beach cabin with friends as the recent MS diagnosis hung in the ether between them.

“It was really hard,” Stacy remembers.

We yelled a lot at each other. I yelled a lot at God. Looking back, I think it was all about facing this terrifying reality of the completely unknown. All of a sudden, there’s this spike in your

foot, and no doctor can take it out. Your foot is never going to be the same again. It's sort of like how it must have been for Adam and Eve in the Garden after they sinned. Everything was so good, but then this event happened. Imagine comparing a sinless marriage, without death and disease, to one with sin, death, and disease! There must have been an ominous feeling that things were never going to be the same. That's what I had to come to grips with.

Face your fears by naming your fears, even if it's initially painful to do so. Naming your fear doesn't make it worse, just as denying it doesn't make it go away. And talking about your fears shouldn't be seen as *blaming* your spouse; it's *helping* your spouse understand you so the two of you can face your disappointments together.

ONE MEDICINE DOESN'T CURE ALL

Darell didn't share Stacy's anger. "For better or for worse, I tend to be the optimist. I always figure things will work out somehow."

Darell doesn't see his way of thinking as better, however. MS forced each of them to draw on spiritual resources they never had before. "I needed a reality check, and Stacy needed some encouragement."

This is such a key principle for facing the moment in marriage when your dreams die. *Each spouse needs a different spiritual prescription. And the one spiritual medicine that heals you may not help your spouse.* Darell needed to face reality; Stacy needed to embrace hope and faith.

A common experience we'll see with most of the couples in this book is that when a spiritual disease assaults a marriage, it hits each spouse in a different way and therefore requires different care. *The symptoms and therefore the cure may look different for each of you.* Respect that. Learn from each other. Understand each other.

Stacy kept saying, "It's going to be horrible" while Darell, true to his nature, kept saying, "It'll all work out." Neither of them had a clue about how wrong and right they both were.

In fact, Darell's optimism initially made things worse. As an athlete, he prided himself in pushing through the pain and working out hard, but for an MS patient that can be counterproductive.

I tried to stay in shape to prove to myself that I was going to beat MS, until the doctors explained that the more active I was, the more irreparable damage MS was doing to my body.

I finally had to come to the realization that, even as an optimist, it was essential to admit that there was an elephant in the room called MS. I couldn't defeat it. I could manage it, but denying it not only wouldn't get me very far. It would actually take me back quite a bit.

It tore Darell up inside to finally admit that while his body was the host of MS, MS was impacting Stacy's life—indeed their entire family—in a way he couldn't protect them from. His identity had been "I'm the strong man," but he couldn't protect his family from *this*.

So after you name your fear, accept the reality of the new situation. You don't like what it's calling you to do, but there's no use denying it. You need to live and relate to each other accordingly. "This is our new normal. How do we make it work?"

If you're facing down a fear this very moment, pause here and talk about it together. What is your new normal? What do you hate about it? What do you fear about it? In the midst of your own struggle, try to understand how this trial is affecting your spouse, perhaps in a different way than it is affecting you. Use the fear to increase understanding and empathy rather than letting it foster alienation and resentment.

EARNEST ENLIGHTENMENT

Christian transformation looks like this: "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). To face your own disappointments, you need enlightenment. The Christian classics stress how self-understanding is almost as important as an understanding of God.

John Owen wrote, "He . . . who is not exactly skilled in the knowledge of himself, will never be disentangled from one temptation or another all his days."¹ And Teresa of Ávila wrote, "Knowing ourselves is something so important that I wouldn't want any relaxation ever in this regard."² I could cite many other classics, but frankly, common sense alone should carry the argument. Growth depends on seeing things as they are; otherwise, we don't really know what's wrong and therefore aren't aware of what we need to change. Most of us live with a faulty view of ourselves and of God, so we stumble along like a person with a fever who thinks they need medicine for an upset stomach, or a person with a brain tumor who thinks they just need to do Pilates to improve their balance. We need the courage of David to pray, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

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See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23–24).

David models to us the need to *seek* the truth, not just believe the truth, and he assumes he needs God to show him what lies hidden. He learned this the hard way. Remember, David actually thought he was okay, before Nathan courageously challenged him—saying, “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7)—and the full depth of his sin with Uriah and Bathsheba was exposed in all its ugly horror. When was the last time you asked God to search your heart? When was the last time you listened for the Holy Spirit to quicken your conscience?

Now is a good time to begin. Life’s disappointments, if faced with the proper attitude, can force us into reevaluating who we are, who our spouse is, what God offers, and what we actually need. And they can awaken us to greater self-awareness. Stacy looks back and says:

Who knows who they are when they are newly married? Both Darell and I came from really challenging home lives and households, though early on, we didn’t realize how much our backgrounds had affected us. The subconscious reality for me was that I married Darell because I wanted someone like that to take care of me. It’s ironic, because now I’m taking care of him.

Why did *you* get married? What hopes did you think your spouse would fulfill? Have those hopes been dashed? Can you still find meaning and purpose in your marriage in the face of your disappointments?

One thing many of the classic Christian writers such as Madame Guyon, Teresa of Ávila, Julian of Norwich, and Henry

Drummond (and in contemporary times, Kay Warren) stress is the Christian practice of *surrender*. Many of us don't realize how frequently and earnestly we fight with God. We will not give up! Our expectations will be met! Our hopes will not be dashed! We will make life work the way we want it to!

Until we can't.

Surrender is the humble acknowledgment that life is about conceding to and accepting God's agenda and will over our own, seeking to learn what he wants us to learn instead of trying to convince God that what we initially wanted is best.

Both Stacy and Darell had to embrace surrender in order to move forward. Darell explains: "As a young man, I just wanted to be strong physically. God wanted me to see that inside, there was way more to me than just my physical strength."

Stacy had to accept that the help she was seeking might come from a different source than her husband. "For so many years, I thought my husband would take care of me and be strong and protect me and provide for me, and now the very thing I wanted most, and one of the reasons I sought to get married, God was saying about it, 'No, that's not going to happen. *I'm* going to care for you.'"

She doesn't sentimentalize how excruciating the process of surrender is. "Working out the death of our expectations and receiving God's counteroffer is rarely pretty. Accepting the new reality can be really hard."

Darell had to go through the same process:

I told Stacy in my wedding vows that I would take care of her and protect her because she grew up not being protected and cared for. That was my heart. Now I'm in a situation where she

takes care of me and protects me, and I'm haunted that I haven't been able to live up to that vow, but those vows were said as a young adult.

When I was first diagnosed, I was riddled with fear. All of my prayers had to do with being healed. I recited every healing passage in the Bible and proclaimed them loudly to God (as if he had forgotten them). It was all, 'Heal me, heal me, heal me.' Finally—we're talking years here—God got through to me with, 'Darell, I get that you want to be healed of MS, but I have something even better for you. Just hang with me. There are bigger problems in your life than MS, and I can use MS to address those things.'

When I interview people of faith like Stacy and Darell, I'm often blown away by such massive declarations of faith. No human being on their own comes up with, "There are bigger issues in my life than MS." That's God. He spoke clearly and with comfort in a way Darell could receive it.

"I said, 'Okay, God, let's go, but would you do one thing? Could you take the fear away?' and I believe God said, 'I can do that,' and that moment, *I was healed*. Not of MS! I was healed of my fear, which was a bigger issue than MS."

He knew the healing was complete one night when he realized, "Darell, here you are, in a wheelchair, just what you wanted to never happen, and yet you're not afraid. You're still laughing. Your wife is still with you. You have a good life."

Stacy knew her reset had taken place one evening as she paused during a dinner party to look around. "We had a table full of people laughing and enjoying the evening, and it dawned on me: Darell is in a wheelchair, my greatest fear, *and we're doing it*."

We're managing it. I thought, *What damage those ten years of fear did, and yet here we are.* In the end, those fears did more damage to us than the MS."

Darell adds, "A lot of times we can pray for the wrong thing. A lot of great things have come out of living more than half my life with MS. I'm closer to what God wants me to be."

I would be remiss to pass over the power of Darell's casual "A lot of great things have come out of living over half my life with MS." That's an astonishing statement, but it can be true of any marital challenge. It's a hard-won affirmation of Romans 8:28–29:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

I recommend great caution before you take out this verse when trying to encourage a hurting friend. Wrongly applied, it can feel like salt poured into a fresh wound. But when people apply it to *themselves* after God smashes their expectations, this declaration helps them crawl through their fears and prepares their hearts to receive the truth of God's affirmation. It just may be one of the most powerful statements in Scripture.

A MARITAL RESET

After you reset your own expectations, you need to reset the expectations you have for your marriage. Stacy remembers:

MAKING YOUR MARRIAGE A FORTRESS

Before MS, we were like a hand-in-glove couple. I used to *love* riding in Darell's wake. I didn't need to do anything myself because I could follow in his wake. When I realized it wouldn't be that way anymore [Darell is now retired, and Stacy is still working], I responded by trying to control everything, still trying to produce the outcome that desperately hung on in my head: Darell would be the strong, charismatic, up-front guy everyone looked up to, and I'd be his support. I couldn't get that out of my head.

Sadly, in my attempt to make that happen, I became a very controlling and enabling wife and mother. I started doing everything and putting it all on me. If God wasn't going to fix this, I'd do my best to fix as much of it as I could. I tried to create an environment so that in every aspect Darell wouldn't have to do anything. It was a desperate attempt to preserve his strength and health. I kind of stopped becoming me and became the environment controller. That enabled everyone in my family to think, *Oh, Mom will just do it.*

Are you making things worse by your response? In some ways, Stacy believes her attitude hurt her family more than MS did. Maybe your *reaction* to financial scarcity or childlessness is becoming a bigger problem in your marriage than the initial assault.

How do you avoid this? You have to learn how to live without your expectations, and that may be as shaky an experience as a first-time driver attempting to parallel park. There may be some awkward moments and a slightly dented bumper or two. But that's the beauty of lifelong marriage—we usually have time to make our first attempt, get it wrong, re-evaluate, and try again.

It took *decades* for Darell and Stacy to get to where they are today. Maturity is a *process*. It's not about getting everything right the first time. It's often about taking a wrong turn, ending up at a dead end, turning around, and finally asking God for the right directions.

One of the best tools for growth is learning how to grieve in a healthy way. Stacy, the “glass half empty” part of the couple, wants to emphasize that “it’s important to be okay to grieve and to be sad. Don’t just be *mad*; give yourself space to truly *grieve*. And when you have children, talk with them about grieving. When our daughter got into middle school and her dad showed up at events with a walker, we thought she was embarrassed, which of course was hurtful. Later, we realized she wasn’t embarrassed; she was grieving, which is healthy and needful. We kind of put her in that situation because, back then, both Darell and I always put up a front—‘We’re going to do this; our lives are not going to be any different’—but that’s a lie. Our lives were going to be very different, and it’s okay to grieve about that.”

Grieving isn’t sinful. It’s healthy to admit to God where you hurt, how you hurt, and what makes you hurt. Mixed with an attitude of surrender, grieving is a necessary step toward spiritual health, maturity, and a life of faith.

D. A. Carson writes, “There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God’s people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but a faith so robust it wrestles with God.”³

As Esther Fleece points out in her excellent book *No More Faking Fine*, God the Father grieves (Genesis 6:5–6), Jesus grieves (John 11:35), and the Holy Spirit grieves (Isaiah 63:10), so grieving cannot in itself be an act of sin.⁴ Instead, it’s often a courageous

and honest step toward a life of faith. Far from pushing God away, lament brings him near: “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

CELEBRATE

Darell, the “glass half full” part of the couple, is quick to add, “Yes, grieving is very important, but at some point you need to stop grieving and start celebrating what you have.”

His perspective here humbles me. “Let’s say I have 20 percent of my physical ability left. I want to use 100 percent of that 20 percent to be productive. Make the most of what you have left. I don’t think God is expecting you to be as productive as you were before, but if you just have 20 percent, do 100 percent of that 20 percent.”

Let’s say you and your spouse are unable to have a biological child. Perhaps you can adopt. Or perhaps you can be the best aunt and uncle in the world. Everyone’s situation is different. You may never have what you wanted at first, but don’t let your previous expectations take away joy from the opportunities in front of you.

In my research for one of my previous books, I talked to a couple whose husband’s cancer treatment meant he and his wife aren’t able to enjoy penetrative intercourse. But they are learning to embrace what they can enjoy. Anger and bitterness can lead us to say, “If I can’t have everything, I’m not going to do anything.” That mindset punishes us more than it heals us. Let’s do what we can.

In Darell’s case, “I try to get in bed by myself, but Stacy has to pull my legs over once I do. But I don’t just sit there in the chair and expect her to do everything. I do as much as I can while I can.

And I'm grateful I can at least get in bed myself. I don't take that for granted anymore."

This is where grace becomes sweet. "I'm learning more and more to let my appreciation be greater than my frustration. Every little thing seems to be so hard all the time. The more I take time to appreciate Stacy and everything she does for me, if I can make that greater than my frustration, I find that I appreciate Stacy more and am frustrated less." Do you see how this terrible disease makes Darell love Stacy more rather than less? MS is a terrible thing to endure, yet facing it is making their marriage a fortress far more than it is assaulting their fortress.

"I'd rather be a happy person than a cranky old bitter dude. If I can spend my time appreciating what Stacy does—and she does a lot—instead of fixating on what MS takes away, I should be appreciative all the time. Having MS makes me a more thankful husband than I might have been otherwise."

Having MS makes me a more thankful husband than I might have been otherwise. Astonishing! In the world's eyes, it would be just the opposite, but this is a supernatural truth. Darell focuses on what his wife gives to him, not what MS takes away, and that leads to joy and gratitude instead of resentment.

To get to this place of surrender, we need divine intervention: grace.

LIVING BY GRACE, NOT HEALING

When the apostle Paul asked for his "thorn in the flesh" to be taken away, God responded, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," which led Paul to conclude,

“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Darell admits that in his early prayers, “I didn’t want grace, I wanted healing.” As you face the challenges in your own marriage, are you praying for grace or healing? It’s not wrong to pray for healing, but seek grace as you pursue healing. Physical or emotional healing isn’t a given, but grace is.

Darell explains, “Paul had to come to grips with the fact that healing wasn’t in his story but grace was in his story. And guess what? As he started experiencing grace, he said, ‘Grace is better than healing!’ Power is made perfect in weakness. And since power was such a big deal to me back then, I had to learn that spiritual grace is better than physical power.”

Grace can even cause what might kill a marriage to bring a thrill to marriage. If someone saw Darell and Stacy getting ready for bed or waking up in the morning, they might feel sorry for them—but in doing so, they’d be sadly mistaken. Darell and Stacy are one of the most grateful couples I’ve ever met.

Stacy explains why: “Thankfulness comes from practice. Darell gets a lot of opportunity to practice because I have to do a lot for him.”

Darell adds, “Thankfulness is a choice. I can be frustrated, or I can be thankful.”

Stacy has to work at thanksgiving as well:

I have to take on more household duties and caregiving. Doing those chores one time doesn’t mean they won’t have to be done again tomorrow or the day after that. They will. That’s why thankfulness and love are founded on *daily* choices. I’m

committed to do whatever I can to make Darell's life easier and more enjoyable on any given day. When I'm frustrated because I want to go out to a place in the evening but I know Darell does better if he's in bed by eight o'clock, I embrace the opportunity to help him instead of fixating on what it's costing me. I have a chance to serve my husband. I have a chance to make his life better. Those little choices make me a more thankful person, even though I'm the one doing the serving.

Darell helps by cultivating an attitude of appreciation. He doesn't slip into a "woe is me" mode. Les and Leslie Parrott warn that "self-pity is the luxury no marriage can afford. It's guaranteed to drain all the energy from you and your relationship. Any amount of self-pity is more than enough."⁵

Darell also doesn't take it for granted that Stacy, as his wife, is "supposed" to make sacrifices like this. "Stacy's care for me is always going to be a duty, but my response can turn it into a delight."

Stacy wants to serve Darell because she delights in his well-being. Darell appreciates Stacy's service and works hard to make sure her service is delightful to her. They can't change the situation, but they have learned how to use a terrible situation to delight in each other. Thus, the terrible situation is making their marriage stronger, not weaker.

That's real faith applied!

The LORD is good,

a refuge in times of trouble.

He cares for those who trust in him. (Nahum 1:7)

Building Your Fortress Takeaways

1. To succeed in marriage, we must succeed in learning how to mentally manage loss. If we don't learn to turn disappointment into determination, helplessness into hope, and frustration into faith, our marriage won't go far in a hostile world.
2. Spouses frequently respond to fears and the death of expectations in different ways. Intimacy is strengthened when we learn from each other instead of automatically assuming that our response is the healthiest response.
3. Unaddressed fears often come out as hurtful secondary emotions, so it's important to courageously address your fears as fear so you can talk about it.
4. Responding in a healthy way to your spouse's fears requires "differentiation"—understanding and bearing your spouse's frustrations and disappointments without making it about you.
5. Talking about your fears shouldn't be seen as *blaming* your spouse; it's *helping* your spouse understand you so that the two of you can face your disappointment together.
6. When dreams die in marriage, each spouse needs a different spiritual prescription. The "spiritual medicine" that heals you may not help your spouse.

7. After you name your fear, accept the reality of the new situation. Denial only makes things worse. You need to live and relate to each other accordingly.
8. Christian transformation begins with the mind. To face your own disappointments, you need enlightenment, which includes a greater understanding of yourself. What is this trial teaching you about you?
9. In classical Christian teaching, surrender is the humble acknowledgment that life works better when we adopt God's agenda over our own and learn what he wants us to learn instead of trying to convince God that what we initially wanted is best.
10. Sometimes our fears of a potential problem do as much damage if not more damage than the problem itself.
11. One of the best tools for growth is learning how to grieve in a healthy way.
12. While grieving is important, we will thrive when we also learn to celebrate consistently and persistently what we still have instead of fixating on what we've lost.
13. The Bible urges us to pray for healing, but we should also pray for grace.