

*“Thriving Despite a Difficult Marriage* is a book about a well-lived life in spite of an unfulfilling marriage. It is about moving beyond suffering and mere surviving to finding joy and supernatural thriving. In the hands of master soul physicians such as Misja and Misja, the hidden chambers of the heart come alive with wisdom for living. Their practical theology of desire, their explanation of the battlefield of the soul, and their relational process for moving from hoping in your marriage to hoping in God are worth the proverbial price of the book. *Thriving Despite a Difficult Marriage* is for any spouse who wants to love well, hope endlessly, and rejoice deeply—despite external circumstances and relational disappointments.”

—ROBERT W. KELLEMAN, PhD, chairman of the master of arts in Christian counseling and discipleship department, Capital Bible Seminary; founder, RPM Ministries

“A profound yet simple message of hope that will enable Christians in difficult marriages to be committed to their spouses but free to live their own lives. It is rare to see such good material that addresses the complex relationship and scriptural dynamics of difficult marriages. Chuck and Mike Misja obviously have a wealth of experience and insight to offer those who feel trapped in their difficult marriages.”

—KARLA DOWNING, MA, licensed marriage and family therapist; author of *10 Lifesaving Principles for Women in Difficult Marriages* and *When Love Hurts*

“On your wedding day, you hoped and dreamed of happily ever after. You never imagined that marriage could bring the heartache and regrets you have experienced, and you are now at a place where hope is lost. You’ve given up trying to fix your spouse or even yourself. If this describes you, you have found the right book. Authors Mike and Chuck Misja will challenge you to see your situation and your spouse through the eternal perspective of how a loving Father desires to refine you even as you experience disappointment and hardship.”

—DR. JULI SLATTERY, family psychologist, Focus on the Family

“This book does not pretend marriage is easy. But Michael and Chuck Misja have cleared a new path through the thorny issues of marital disappointment, challenging spouses to follow God into the pain and learn to live with radical honesty, transcendent purpose, heroic effort, and unquenchable hope. Their words offer deep and lasting joy to those who will embrace and persevere in a difficult marriage by God’s grace.”

—NANCY GROOM, author of *From Bondage to Bonding*

THRIVING DESPITE A  
**Difficult**  
MARRIAGE

MICHAEL MISJA, PHD  
& CHUCK MISJA, PHD

NAVPRESS 



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

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*This book is dedicated to our parents, Charley and Verna Misja,  
whose marriage of fifty-two years modeled not only how to  
thrive in a difficult marriage but also how to have  
love and joy “until death do you part.”*

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# Foreword

On your wedding day, you hoped and dreamed of happily ever after. You never imagined that marriage could bring the heartache and regrets you have experienced. Along your journey, you have dared to believe in various panaceas and formulas that promised to breathe life into your loveless marriage. Yet each conference and book and counselor seemed only to deepen your desperation. You are now at a place where hope is lost. You've given up trying to fix your spouse or even yourself. You are through with seeking advice and tired of being the only one working at your marriage.

If this describes you, you have found the right book. Dr. Mike Misja and Dr. Chuck Misja do not promise to fix your marriage or even give you hope of renewed love. They also do not pander to the relativistic message of many psychologists that you have tried your best and should throw in the towel. Instead, they will encourage you with a broader message of the purpose of life, marriage, and disappointment.

Over the course of twenty years, Mike and Chuck have met with hundreds of men and women flailing in the wake of disappointment and devastation in marriage. Some of them are married to abusive spouses, some to spouses with mental or physical illnesses, and still others to spouses who simply don't care. While holding to the permanence of marriage, Mike and Chuck also recognize that it is not enough

simply to tell someone to endure the constant rejection and agony of an unhealthy marriage. They also recognize that not every marriage can be restored to a fulfilling and loving union.

Through this book, they will explore with you what it looks like to thrive as a person in spite of the great difficulty of an unfulfilling and even hurtful marriage. This book will challenge you to see your situation and your spouse through an eternal perspective of how a loving Father desires to refine you, even as you experience disappointment and hardship.

— DR. JULI SLATTERY, PSYD, Family Psychologist,  
Focus on the Family

# Acknowledgments

This book is a result of talking with hundreds of couples who have struggled in difficult marriages. We are privileged to be part of their journeys toward healing and wholeness or toward thriving despite ongoing difficulties. They have challenged us with their painful struggles and taught us with wisdom that can come only from a sincere pursuit of God.

Many wise counselors, pastors, and friends have stimulated our thoughts and brought godly perspectives to this work. We are most grateful to our original think tank of colleagues from North Coast Family Foundation who got up far too early in the morning to meet and wrestle with how to thrive in a difficult marriage. Joe Koch, Caroline Stanczak, Liz Shella, and JoAnn Shade were willing to engage in challenging, loving, and sometimes contentious exchanges on differing perspectives concerning why marriages are difficult and what God wants from someone living with a spouse who is destructive and not likely to change. We are thankful to them for the courage to go through the dark forest of gender perspectives, finding a way to include male and female differences without alienating many we were trying to help.

We want to express our deep appreciation to Dr. JoAnn Shade, who spent many hours helping us refine and articulate the concepts of this book. Her willingness to read through chapters and provide feedback, especially in the final push to meet the deadline, was invaluable. She has

been a wonderful colleague and wise contributor to this book. Her belief that it should be written and that God wanted us to write it provided us inspiration and hope that God will use this book to help his people.

The counselors at North Coast Family Foundation have been helpful in listening to ideas and offering their experience and wisdom. In addition to our think tank, we are grateful to Mark Yoder, Sara Fellows, Susan Weber, Nancy Berger, and Mary Alexander.

I, Mike, am especially appreciative to the men in my pastors' support group with whom I have regularly met for the past ten years. Tom Petersburg (and his wife, JoAnn), Rick Duncan, George Mercado, Joe Abraham, Juri Ammari, Bob Kuntz, Randy Chestnut, Jeff Thompson, Bob Mackey, and Doug Davidson have all been challenging and encouraging, asking the tough questions every man should be asked. Other pastors, especially Ryan Edlund, Jonathon Schaeffer, Mickey Aquilino, and Russel DeBord have graciously offered their biblical and pastoral wisdom on how to help those struggling with difficult marriages.

We are thankful to NavPress and our editor, Tracey Lawrence, for guiding us through the long process of getting a book from the infant stage to publication. We appreciate their willingness to publish a book that is not in the mainstream of Christian thought for marriage counseling, yet will bring hope to many in struggling marriages.

We could not have done this without the gracious understanding and encouragement of our families. Our children, Olivia, Emily, Carmen, and ChesseMei (Mike), and Chuck, Matt, and Jeanette (Chuck) have believed in this work and been wonderfully supportive.

Our deepest gratitude is to our wives, Lin and Jackie, who have spent a combined total approaching seventy years married to and loving Misja men, one of the most complex and difficult breed of husbands to grace this earth (we love you, Dad, as you "chortle"-laugh with joy from heaven).

We are most profoundly grateful to God, whose deep, deep love for struggling saints provides the hope that is found in this book.

— MIKE and CHUCK

## To Our Readers

As you read this book, you will be going on a journey that may lead you out of the darkness of despair and into the light of hope. *Thriving Despite a Difficult Marriage* has been written in a way that parallels the counseling process. Each chapter, like every counseling session, builds upon the last. While you may read and understand the last chapters without having read the previous ones, you will not benefit from them unless you have built the foundation found in earlier chapters. If your counseling is to last ten sessions, the healing and hope from the last two meetings will emerge from the hard work done in the previous eight. So enjoy the journey. We pray that God will bless you and teach you to thrive even if your marriage remains difficult.

— MIKE and CHUCK

P A R T I

# Difficult Marriages

WHEN DIVORCE IS NOT AN OPTION

C H A P T E R I

# Three Paths for Difficult Marriages

*Nevertheless such shall have trouble.*

— 1 Corinthians 7:28, KJV

Divorce is not an option, so misery seems inevitable. It's just not working out. Nothing is changing. No matter what you do, no matter what you say, he doesn't get it. In spite of your doing everything she has asked of you, she is still angry and distant. Hope has taken the last train out of town, and you are faced with some tough days ahead.

## IS IT EVER OKAY TO GIVE UP ON YOUR MARRIAGE?

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You're where you thought you'd never be. You thought if you did it the right way—you know, followed the rules and all that—your marriage was going to work, and you'd be happy. Happily ever after. Yeah, right. No one told you you'd be as miserable as you are. The marriage journey is tough, isn't it? You started well, but now you're living with a broken heart, feeling trapped in a difficult marriage without hope, and you don't even want to begin to think about the future. *What future?* Every morning you wake up in disbelief and every night you go to bed

in despair. *Is this my marriage? Has it really come to this?*

It's not like you haven't tried, is it? You've gone to the seminars that teach helpful principles and techniques on how to build a strong marriage. The ideas you learned made a lot of sense to you, and it seemed like your marriage was headed in the right direction. You even had a few warm moments with your spouse that made it seem like things were going to be different. But you were merely teased with hope because nothing really changed. Two months, weeks, or even days after the marriage conference you're back to the same old patterns. The bickering and coldness have returned, and you feel more discouraged than ever. You're not able to run away from the reality that your marriage is empty.

If you're strong enough to look beyond your pain, way down inside yourself, what disturbs you more is what's happening to your heart. Every once in a while, when you take that honest look, you are appalled at the dark, wild thoughts you have. You never thought you could have such ugly thoughts about your "beloved." Your heart is being polluted with bitterness or is hardening with smug disdain for your spouse. You might even be so lonely and empty that you are allowing yourself to be drawn to someone else. So not only is your marriage in bad shape, but your heart is a mess too.

*Q: "Everybody tells me I'm supposed to hang in there and believe that if I trust and do what I should, my marriage is going to turn around. I want to scream, 'You don't understand! Nothing helps. Why should I keep trying?'"*

Is it ever okay to give up on your marriage? A lot of people think so. The fighting, game playing, or loneliness has destroyed the relationship, and sooner or later a spouse decides to get out while he or she still has some self-respect. So the couple divorces. Some couples do it legally, but many more divorce emotionally, staying married while living separate, distant lives. Either way, the marriage is over. Others who are in a destructive, messy marriage stay together and slug it out with each

other like two fighters trapped in a marathon cage fight, scratching and clawing until neither is left standing. They don't divorce, but they'd bleed a lot less if they did.

*Q: "Doesn't it make sense to admit my relationship can't be fixed and it's better to cut my losses and run?"*

We have talked with hundreds of couples who have struggled in difficult marriages. This is a tough, sincere question many people ask us on a regular basis. As Christian psychologists, we believe in a tough, though often unpopular, answer: Unless there is a pattern of abuse or unchanging immorality, the answer is "No, it's *not* better to give up on your marriage." Instead, never quit, never give up, don't stop praying and searching for a way to turn your marriage around. Miracles happen, people change, and, besides, you don't know what God has planned for your marriage. In addition, you can't give up on your marriage without betraying your heart. In the best part of your heart, you will always hope that love will come back to life and your marriage will get better.

*Q: "But what if it doesn't? I can't imagine wasting even more years trying to fix this debacle only to end up even more miserable than I am now. If giving up on my marriage isn't an option, then am I supposed to try even harder?"*

Trying harder seems to make sense. After all, you have been taught to believe that anything can be fixed through prayer, hard work, and determination. So why not dig in, do what you're supposed to do, and work even harder to get your marriage on track? Another workshop, CD, prayer session—there must be something you can find that will turn your marriage around. "But," you tell yourself, "I've done this all before and have gotten the same dismal result: Nothing really changes." You are tired, frustrated, becoming cynical, and leery about getting all

excited over a new book or teaching on marriage, fearful of ending up even more disillusioned.

*Q: “Are you saying that I may have to start thinking that my spouse will never change and start accepting that my marriage may always be difficult?”*

Absolutely! The reality is that some spouses never change, and some marriages don’t get better. While you can’t ever give up hope, you don’t want to keep banging your head into a brick wall trying to fix something that won’t be fixed. There is a time when you should accept that the wall is there and that you don’t have a way to tear it down. You may be in a tough marriage that is not likely to improve, and, if you aren’t wise, it could destroy you.

*Q: “Okay, if I can’t give up on my marriage and trying harder to fix it does not change anything, what options do I have?”*

We’re glad you asked. There is another way besides giving up or trying harder: Learn how to *thrive* and live well even if your marriage remains difficult and your spouse never changes. The ache and confusion you are experiencing can be faced and worked through so you can have a life of meaning and contentment even if your relationship with your husband or wife remains painful. You can live in an imperfect or difficult marriage and flourish. This is a book of hope for those who have difficult marriages and have worked hard to make them better, but are coming to the realization that their marriages are not going to change.

Sometimes people need permission to acknowledge what is true about their marriage—that it may never have a happy ending or a resolution that is satisfying. Disappointment, shame, and inferiority dominate the spirit of the individual who can’t resolve the difficulties of an imperfect marriage. They often live lives of defeat, emptiness, and spiritual despair. But it doesn’t have to be that way. It’s possible to

become equipped to thrive despite the lack of hope in your marriage. Most marriage teachings state that if certain steps or techniques are practiced, a happy, fulfilling marriage will result. Learning relational skills and applying spiritual principles are offered as solutions that will fix any marriage. Yet realistically, many individuals have worked hard at their marriage with little change. People need another way to view their situation in order to find a different sort of hope.

### CHRISTIANS AND “GREAT MARRIAGES”

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*Q: “But aren’t Christians supposed to have great marriages?”*

In some ways we believe the current evangelical Christian culture does a disservice to married couples without knowing it. You see, we are caught up in a culture that truly believes any obstacle can be overcome. We can be successful at whatever we do if we just pray, put our minds to it, and push on toward our goals. We acknowledge struggle and talk about it as being part of the Christian life. We may read the book of Jeremiah and acknowledge that things didn’t get better for the suffering prophet, or we may weep with compassion when we hear stories of persecution on the mission field. Yet when we encounter a struggler in our churches, we’re often impatient and smugly condescending. We think, *Come on, get over it. You have all the stuff you need to get it together, so stop moaning and get happy.* This is especially true with our understanding of marriage. Those facing trials in their marriages are seen as having something wrong with them, while those who have marriages that seem to work are thought to have more spiritual maturity. Many couples learn to be dishonest about what is really going on in their marriages because no one else seems to wrestle and struggle as much as they do. If they speak up about their problems, they’re afraid they’ll be offered another book on the godly husband or the servant wife. These couples often feel that if they continue to struggle, it will be

obvious to all that they simply aren't applying God's principles to their marriage. So they learn to put on a good show and hide the truth that they are just getting by, trying to survive in a painful marriage.

Some mature marriages result from two people developing the skills and selflessness needed to address the hard issues in their relationship. These marriages are a result of honest work and sacrificial love and are filled with transparency, humility, and honesty. They, indeed, have a depth of maturity that serves as a positive model. Other marriages that are held up as models of maturity may involve people who are just easy to get along with, who *fit* well with each other. As one pastor told us, "I understand difficult marriages and feel compassion for couples in pain. But I can't relate because my wife is so open with me. I don't have to work hard at it—love just overflows from my heart."

People in relationships without conflict are often happy to just go with the flow. These individuals may be easy to love or considered to be low-maintenance people. They may see the glass as half full and with their positive personality never get drawn into unpleasant conflicts. Their good relationships may not be the result of painstaking work on the difficult issues of marriage but the product of an easygoing personality style. These individuals often have smooth-running, good-looking marriages. But we run into confusion when we hold up marriages with low-maintenance, uncomplicated people as the models for godly, mature relationships.

Marriages between two thirsty, passionate souls who are selfish by nature tend to have conflicts and troubles. People are complex. Many people who are understood to be high-maintenance may be hard to love. High-maintenance people are often difficult in their personality styles and a challenge to relate to. They are too sensitive and notice every slight, or they're stubborn, insensitive, and unaware of their painful effects on others. They may be demanding, needy, moody, insecure, always discontent, bored, or adrenaline junkies.

Some high-maintenance spouses can also be a challenge because they don't settle for the ordinary; they desire lots of interaction and

exhaust their mates with their passion for living. However, in reality, others are unkind, unloving people. They may be seen as destructive spouses. If you are such a person, or are married to such a person, and you want a stress-free marriage, you may be continually frustrated.

Scripture teaches us that marriage is inherently difficult. If we think of the relationship between God and the Hebrew people as a marriage, then we see God coping with a difficult, contentious spouse in a difficult marriage filled with tragedy and heartache. Christ, the bridegroom, was a man who was filled with sorrow and grief (see Isaiah 53) and suffered brutal rejection at the hands of his “beloved.” The difficulties between Christ and his bride (the church) were so severe that his death was required in order for their relationship to be possible. Christ knew the difficulty of marriage.

For example, in Matthew 19 Christ gives his understanding:

Jesus’ disciples objected [to his words], “If those are the terms of marriage, we’re stuck. Why get married?”

But Jesus said, “Not everyone is mature enough to live a married life. It requires a certain aptitude and grace. Marriage isn’t for everyone. Some, from birth seemingly, never give marriage a thought. Others never get asked—or accepted. And some decide not to get married for kingdom reasons. But if you’re capable of growing into the largeness of marriage, do it.” (Matthew 19:10-12, MSG)

Jesus made it clear that marriage would be costly and require much. The disciples were thinking the way we do: It doesn’t make sense to be married if you aren’t happy. Jesus challenged their thinking and told them marriage is not for the fragile. *Unhappiness is not the basis for ending a marriage.* He shattered their thinking that marriage wasn’t worth the time and effort if it didn’t result in happiness.

Difficult marriages are more the norm than the exception. This is what Paul said when he wrote that we would face many troubles in

marriage (see 1 Corinthians 7:28). The word *trouble* is rendered as tribulation in other places. A literal understanding is that those who are married will undergo severe tribulation. The idea that all trouble and struggle can be eliminated from marriage is *not* biblical. Married couples are desperate for someone to acknowledge that it's okay for them to have ongoing struggles.

*Q: "You mean I can have a life even if I don't resolve all the stuff between me and my spouse? My difficult marriage doesn't make me the failure of the century? I'm not the Wicked Witch of the West because I sometimes wish I had not gotten married?"*

Many people we counsel believe they are failures and displeasing to God because their marriage is troubled. Most are already in enough pain and don't need to go through unnecessary shame and guilt. It's sometimes hard to accept that you can be whole even if your marriage isn't. Part of the reason for this is that most people don't have an understanding of how to live in a difficult marriage.

## HOPE

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Visiting Dom in the cancer ward was more difficult than I (Mike) imagined it would be. As I got off the elevator, I recognized the contrasting messages the hall conveyed. Bright, cheerful pictures were posted next to a closed door with the somber message, "Radiation in use. No visitors." The hospital made attempts to communicate that life was good while the scent of death and decay was unavoidable.

When I saw Dom shuffling down the hall, his frail body and lifeless eyes took me back sixteen years to another cancer ward. The eyes that haunted me then were those of our kid brother.

Mark was twenty-eight years old when cancer stole life from his body. My family's hearts were crushed during his battle. We prayed,

hoped, and begged God to restore his life as we saw death invade more intensely with each passing day. We tried to hold on to hope as we saw him fight for life with a depth of integrity and passion I long to know. Yet we knew we were losing a son, a brother, an uncle, a saint. He would be with us no more. What can you hope for when you are faced with a terminal diagnosis?

I think people can recognize when a battle has been lost. Chuck and I experienced this in the cancer ward with the physical demise of our brother, but we've also seen it many times in the counseling room. A physical cancer often brings a heart to the abyss of despair in the same way a difficult marriage can produce an emotional and spiritual death in the heart. The cancer of the heart is not the pain of loneliness and hurt as much as it is the strident energies of "bitterness, hot tempers, anger, loud quarreling, cursing, and hatred" (Ephesians 4:31, GW). Sadly, many hearts become cancerous and lose the joy of life when conquered by a difficult marriage. We want to affirm what many know but few acknowledge: Pain in a difficult marriage can be agonizing. The truth be told, sometimes the pain of death is more manageable than the perpetual shredding of a heart in a destructive marriage. But in order to thrive, the battle you must fight involves keeping the pain from turning into a ravenous cancer that destroys your heart and stops you from loving well.

Our passion as marriage counselors is to communicate to those in a difficult marriage that while it may feel like it, you are not in the cancer ward. The vacant eyes associated with despair can be filled with life. The frail shoulders now communicating that strength has been depleted can someday exude power. And the bitter voice can lose its cynical tone and begin to laugh again. Life is not over if your marriage feels like a death from a horrible disease. You will not have terminal cancer if you choose to thrive despite your pain. Joy is possible. Our brother Mark taught us this. Even when life was stolen from his body, his heart thrived in ways that caused him to rise above his pain. God refined him in the fire. What the Enemy could never take from him was hope. While he

always wished for physical healing, he discovered hope in a good God that transcended his need for a cure from cancer. His hope in a powerful, loving God, who would give him courage to face his pain and offer a promise that all was well despite cancer, resulted in a transformed heart and a joy that could be seen in his penetrating eyes, the windows of his ecstatic soul. The Enemy had lost the battle. As Scripture tells us, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

### DAVE AND PATTY

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*“You are our last hope. We’re going to give this one more try. If you can’t fix us, we’re going to divorce.”* Dave and Patty sat grimly across from me (Mike) on my well-worn red couch. The tension in the room revealed the pain the couple carried in their hearts. They were longing for relief from the agony of a marriage that continually wounded their souls and offered no hope for the future.

I began the session addressing them honestly, “Dave and Patty, you’ve been to counseling before, and you’re in a good church, yet nothing has helped. Let me ask both of you, what would make a difference so that you could have hope that your marriage would change for the better?”

“I don’t have much hope,” Patty said. “I’m willing to change, but he isn’t. I know that if he would stop being so angry, life would be a whole lot better. He just hates the world—and me. Nothing I do pleases him. I’ve tried to tell him how hard it is to live with him, but he just doesn’t get it. He only cares about himself.”

“You’re always blaming me, like you’re the great Christian woman, and I’m nothing. I’ve made lots of changes and what do I get for it? You know, just once I’d like to come home from work and think you were really happy to see me. Just once! If you’d act like a wife for a change and not be so cold and judgmental—don’t look at me like that,

you know what I mean. If you weren't such an ice princess, maybe I wouldn't be so angry! Whatever . . .”

A thousand thoughts ran through my mind. They needed to learn how to talk constructively. A book on forgiveness would be helpful. Individual counseling for anger management might work. I wondered if they ever prayed together. Did they know how to lighten up and just have fun as a couple? Perhaps sexual abuse was in her background. Does he have a drinking problem? Had they ever had good biblical teaching on the roles a husband and wife assume in marriage? Demon oppression? Do they understand their needs, fears, selfishness, and desires? How about that intensive marital retreat I just read about? Books, seminars, Scripture, and CD series were retrieved from the library of my mind. All good, all helpful. But I went a different route.

I wondered if any of these strategies would help Patty and Dave turn from their destructive patterns and find joy in their marriage. Patty's and Dave's energies were focused on blaming each other for their problems. How could I help them if their marriage remained difficult and a source of ongoing pain? I reviewed two paths often followed when dealing with a difficult marriage. Neither the “Happily Ever After” nor the “Noble Misery” path showed a way to find contentment and joy when having to live in a painful, difficult marriage. I then wondered if God had a way to help people thrive despite facing a future in a troubling marriage. As I continued to ask this question and worked with Chuck and other mature counselors and friends, the “Thriving Despite” path became clear. Let's discuss the first two paths and then take a look at a new path, “Thriving Despite.”

## HAPPILY EVER AFTER

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We have three options for dealing with struggling marriages in the church. The first is to work hard to have a winning marriage by following the “Happily Ever After” model. Some suggest that every marriage can

be fixed and filled with deep satisfaction by finding the right principles or skills, or what could be called the “engineering” of relationship. The myth is that a positive, permanent resolution is available for all problems by finding the right engineering. In a success-oriented, can-do, technological society, we often reduce complex problems into a list of right and wrong behaviors and attitudes. This list is made into a series of practical steps which, if followed correctly, will resolve the problems. We see these as the “how to’s,” or the engineering of living. Nowhere is this more true than in our understanding of how good marriages work. But finding and committing to the right engineering cannot guarantee a great marriage. Be cautious of writers and speakers who are “marriage motivators” and guarantee success for those who apply their revolutionary tools.

The truth is most couples can enrich their marriages by working hard on them and developing strong relational skills. The Christian community has countless resources for troubled marriages or good marriages in which the couple wants to get better. In our counseling practice we are continually searching for the best techniques to help troubled couples. Thankfully, many of these techniques and skills have improved marriages dramatically. We love to tell and hear stories of couples who have turned their marriages around by learning each other’s love language, learning to control their negative emotions, or deepening an understanding of each other’s needs. We see couples holding hands in church and smiling because all is well. But those whose marriages remain difficult kick themselves (or their spouses) and sink into despair when they see these happy couples. The “Happily Ever After” model has some significant problems.

First, while everyone desires to be happy, this is not a biblical purpose for marriage. Marriage can hold times of great happiness, but God does not promise a lifetime of ongoing happiness. What he does promise is a life of peace, contentment, joy, fulfillment, and many other things—but not perpetual happiness. Should we seek happiness if we have a terminally ill child? Though we may be joyful or content, can you see that the desire for happiness doesn’t fit the situation? We are waiting

to be convinced that Christ was happy on the road to Gethsemane. He experienced many emotions as he loved in the most profound way imaginable, but it's doubtful he was happy. The idea that happiness is the greatest good and is the ultimate measure of well-being is a completely secular concept and demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of God's intention for life this side of eternity.

Second, some people never take responsibility for their behavior. They make their spouses pay for a lifetime of unhappiness. There is great power in the role of a victim, and some spouses will use their role as *victim* as a way of life. Blame shifting, denial, distortion, lying, and rationalization are some of the ways responsibility is avoided. We are all selfish and self-seeking. Many spouses who feel unjustly treated simply are hardened and not accessible. They will never look at their part in the marital difficulties. If both people do not take responsibility for their part of the problems in their marriage, full intimacy and healing are not possible.

Third, some people are not easy to live with. Many spouses are unpleasant and not likely to change. Difficult spouses range from "good but flawed" to "evil and destructive." For example, living with a physically or emotionally ill spouse is hard. Marriage to a hateful person who continually tries to put you down is like trying to survive on the battlefield while having no gun. Insisting one should have a happily-ever-after marriage with a difficult spouse is like expecting rotting food to be able to nourish your body.

### **Noble Misery**

The second choice we have for surviving in a difficult marriage is to live in "Noble Misery" and suffer ongoing wretchedness since divorce is not an option. You must minimize complaining and do your best to survive the mess you've committed your lives to. Many people reading this book live in painful marriages that hold little to no promise for healing. For reasons of commitment, children, or finances, divorce is not viewed as an alternative. When you are faced with the reality of living with a spouse who has caused or is causing enormous pain, you may not only

experience despair—you may be on the road to clinical depression. The martyr or perpetual victim trudges on with nobility and brokenness of spirit. Consigned to a life of misery, the suffering spouse prays for the strength to endure. While we have the greatest compassion for someone in this situation, the “Noble Misery” model has several flaws.

First, no one has to live as a victim. As we will see, living as a victim can be destructive to self and others. You can choose to draw your energy from your pain or from the hope that God places in you. Life is possible even if you have been harmed or wounded in your marriage. Even someone who has truly been victimized has a choice to not live as a victim.

Second, a spouse cannot be your only hope for a meaningful existence. If this is true, then your spouse has become an idol and not a spouse. Living as a defeated person in noble misery keeps you tied to your spouse as your only hope. While a good marriage can provide much joy, God offers life with meaningful satisfaction in many areas other than marriage. Learning to respond to marital difficulties with strength and courage can provide satisfaction even if your spouse will not embrace your love. Refusing to thrive because your spouse and marriage remain difficult is laziness and irresponsibility.

Third, it is possible to thrive while sorrowful. A difficult marriage causes sorrow, but the sorrow doesn't need to be terminal. Jesus was a man of sorrows and was acquainted with grief, but that didn't stop him from moving ahead with his life of great passion. It is possible to live in paradox: being ever sorrowful yet filled with joy (see 2 Corinthians 4:8).

### Thriving Despite

Let's consider a third model for people who find themselves in difficult marriages: a commitment to being alive and passionate in a marriage that has ongoing difficulties. We'll call it the “Thriving Despite” model. In other words, *I've got one life to live, and I will live it well no matter what trouble comes my way*. While every attempt should be made to heal a troubled marriage, the lack of a smooth-running marriage should not

stop a person from engaging in life. Many people have never considered that life can be satisfying even if their marriage is difficult. We suggest that if a person commits to thriving despite marital troubles, he or she will be in the best position to not only live life well but also offer healthy resources toward their marriage and family. As we begin to discuss the “Thriving Despite” model, let us put a few precautions in place.

First, we are not saying people can’t change and therefore you should give up on your marriage. Never, ever give up hope. Marriage demands that we work hard. Go to counseling, study the Word, read books, pray, attend classes, and go on weekend retreats. If you can find something to improve your marriage, utilize it. But don’t put your life on hold until your marriage is healed or until your spouse gets it and changes in the way you desire. We *are* saying that some people don’t significantly change. If you are married to such a person, your life’s ambition can’t be to get your spouse to change. If you put your life on hold waiting for your spouse to change, you may wake up one morning and realize you have wasted your life.

Next, we are also not saying that you should just forget about your spouse and focus on your own self-fulfillment. This is not a book about justifying selfishness. In reality, by accepting your spouse and not demanding change, you will be free to love from a stronger, healthier, more godly perspective. When your perspective changes from looking for a change in your spouse to strengthening your own heart, you’ll be able to offer a love that is hard to dismiss.

With this method we are not promoting the “Parallel Path” model of marriage. In the “Parallel Path” model, which many in the “Noble Misery” model end up following, difficult marriages are managed by spouses choosing to learn to coexist in peace while they seek their deepest life satisfaction outside of marriage. They basically remain closed to each other and give up all hope of finding meaning and joy in their relationship. Though pulling away from the destructive dynamics a difficult spouse presents is important to thriving, quitting on the marriage is not what we are suggesting. We’re saying that the path of thriving

THRIVING DESPITE A DIFFICULT MARRIAGE

frees a person to no longer require marriage or the spouse to heal his or her wounds and provide ongoing life satisfaction.

THE THREE ROADS FOR A DIFFICULT MARRIAGE

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HAPPILY EVER AFTER	NOBLE MISERY	THRIVING DESPITE
Happily ever after	The unsuccessful marriage	The well-lived life
My spouse will change	My spouse won't change	I accept my spouse may not change
My marriage will be blissful	My marriage is miserable	My marriage may remain difficult
I will be happy	I will always be unhappy	I have joy
My future will be happy	My future is to grin and bear it	I have a rich future
My kids will have a great family	My kids will survive	I can provide hope for my kids
God is blessed by me	God suffers with me	God can delight in me
My marriage and I are a success	My marriage and I are a failure	I am imperfect but offering my best
I am happy to go on	I have no choice but to go on	I will go on and thrive, despite
The goal is happiness	The goal is just to survive	The goal is to thrive and live well

THE NEED FOR WISDOM

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As we've discussed these ideas about thriving in a difficult marriage with friends and clients, they invariably say, "I like the idea, but how do

you do this? What are the steps? (What's the engineering?)”

While being practical is a good thing, beginning to practice the “Thriving Despite” model requires a shift of thinking. *The key to thriving despite a difficult marriage is developing wisdom.* Wisdom doesn't require that we master a set of technical skills but rather that we enter a path guided by exercising core convictions. These convictions include:

1. ***Marriage means partnering with God.*** Holding a belief that God is in it.

He loves you and your spouse and is molding and shaping you. When we stand before a holy God and commit our lives to another, we become involved in a threesome. God is intensely involved in our marriage, whether it's an easy or trying one. From the backyard to the bedroom, God is there. His heart desires good things for us. Yet we must understand that marriage is one of the prime ways he will shape our character. If you will commune with God, he will show you your passions and your selfishness as they are played out with your spouse. You'll be challenged to love and grieve with an energy and wisdom that can be drawn only from his resources. He will not abandon you in your marital struggles. You are not journeying alone. Your pain is not without purpose. Thriving will not be possible unless God is working through you.

2. ***Marriage is bigger than you.*** Maintaining a conviction that marriage is worth giving yourself to no matter the cost.

You marry and invest in someone you believe is most likely to bring you meaningful life satisfaction. It is the rare person who understands that marriage is greater than the two individuals who have vowed to remain together for a lifetime. Marriage has a meaning and purpose far beyond personal happiness and the need for satisfaction. In the same way you're not in your marriage simply to have your needs met, you don't remain in your marriage just to keep your vow or commitment. A belief in marriage means that you are willing to yield yourself to the requirements your marriage presents you. In a difficult marriage that may mean that you learn how to love and endure when you receive little in return.

3. ***Marriage requires honesty.*** Possessing a willingness to relentlessly pursue truth about yourself, your spouse, and the state of your marriage.

You need to know yourself, who you are, what you've done, and what you want. You also need to know your spouse in the same way. We are masters at believing what we want to believe and choosing to deny the truth. The human denial and distortion system is one of the great mysteries of our being. A person can be a raging alcoholic and yet really believe he or she has his or her drinking totally under control. One has only to watch a reality show like *American Idol* to recognize that few people have an accurate view of themselves. Even the most off-pitch, unmusical singer believes he or she is the greatest talent in the country—despite direct feedback to the contrary. Few people are able to correct wrong self-perceptions even when given accurate evaluations by others.

Only when people earnestly desire to know the truth about who they are and who they are married to can they begin to deal honestly with the struggles in their marriages. A willingness to continually pursue an authentic awareness of the good, bad, ugly, and beautiful about yourself and your spouse will eventually shatter the denial and distortion system and lead to a refreshing freedom that only honesty can bring. Part of knowing the truth includes having knowledge of what you can and cannot do. You can't change your spouse. You are not responsible for your spouse's behavior or attitudes. However, you can take responsibility for your response to your spouse. The ability to respond to difficulty from your godly, redeemed nature as opposed to your selfish, corrupt nature is something you can do with God's help.

4. ***The battle is in the heart.*** Having a passion to maintain integrity of heart and keep hope alive.

We suggest that the real struggle in marriage is in the heart. Our Enemy will attack our hearts so they become devoid of love and passion. Your commitment must be to never allow that to happen, no matter what troubles your marriage may bring to you. Paul understood this

struggle accurately when he explained in 1 Corinthians 13 that performance and behavior, even of the most sacrificial nature, are meaningless if they are driven by a heart without love. You are on the right path when you understand that the true problem that needs to be addressed doesn't concern the defects in your spouse but rather the darkness that emerges from your own heart while in a difficult marriage. Change can occur when you look in the mirror and say that you don't like what you see. You find your heart becoming hateful, weak, disrespectful, or numb. The path of wisdom dictates that you must repent of the directions your heart has taken as opposed to justifying them because you have a tough marriage.

## HOPE

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This third model of marriage has a unique understanding of hope. The hope in the “Happily Ever After” marriage is for personal fulfillment and pleasant circumstances. In the “Noble Misery” model the hope is that God will provide enough strength to survive the mess. In the “Thriving Despite” model, the concept of hope looks like this:

Your hope is that God will give you the wisdom, courage, and strength to defeat the Enemy's attempts to corrupt your heart so you can remain alive and passionate. With a thriving heart you will be able to live vibrantly and allow God to offer a powerful love through you to whomever he puts in your path, especially your spouse. The result is that God will be honored and life will be immensely fulfilling.

The goal of this book is not to offer another strategy to get your spouse's attention or to find the way to successfully heal your marriage. But someone who commits to thriving despite will be in the best position to have a strong marriage. A thriving person is willing to accept

who the spouse really is without an agenda to change the partner. Thriving people are prepared to accept that certain things may never happen in their marriage and to grieve the loss. For example, they may never have a spouse they can truly trust or be with a mate who pursues them passionately. By accepting and grieving the loss of things that will not happen (what is *not* possible), a person becomes free to focus on what *is* possible in the marriage. For example, you may find yourself thinking, *Okay, you will never be a great spiritual leader or encourager of dreams, but I will discover something in you that is valuable and we can enjoy, even if it's only in passing moments.*

### HOPE FOR PATTY AND DAVE

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“You both are saying that your hope for a better marriage is dependent on the other person changing. My guess is that you are experts in telling each other how badly you are being failed. I’m sure you have communicated countless ways the other could change so that you could be happier. And you’re sitting here hoping that I can get your message across to your spouse so you can get some relief. I want to challenge you to consider another way. Dave, what if Patty never changes into a woman who enjoys sex with you or appreciates you as a man? Patty, what if Dave stays angry and negative and doesn’t value your needs?” The feeling of tension in the room changed to the sound of groaning.

“Look, you’ve spent years being angry and hurt. You are so tired of being in pain. You’ve tried everything to fix this marriage—mainly to get each other’s attention about how the other person is messing up. You are enslaved by your hurts and hopelessness. Neither of you is free to love—your hearts have become corrupt. Would you consider that you can be alive and enjoy life only after you stop trying to survive and fix each other?”

## WHAT IF:

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You believed God was less concerned with whether or not your needs were being met and more concerned with the state of your heart?

You were able to give up all efforts to become happy by trying to change your spouse?

You no longer desired to show your spouse how poorly you are being loved?

You had the capacity to accept your spouse as he or she is and have a lifestyle of forgiveness?

You knew God's grace in a way that freed you from guilt and shame so you could honestly explore the ways you don't love well?

You believed in God's love for you so deeply that you were confident you could love strongly and wisely no matter what?

You committed to finding purpose and passion for life that didn't depend on your spouse's response or approval?

Your heart was no longer characterized by bitterness, despair, pride, or apathy?

You were able to disengage from the destructiveness of your marriage while developing a desire to constructively engage in what was God-honoring?

The look in Patty and Dave's eyes told me they had never considered really being alive and thriving if their spouse never changed. Yet the idea captured something in their souls: There is another way. Hope is alive.