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The Marriage You've Always Dreamed Of

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Some of the names and details in the illustrations used in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the people who shared their stories.

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Dear Reader,

In a time when marriage books are more prevalent than ever and the divorce rate continues to be unchanged, it's fair to ask, "Why would another book make a difference?" Unlike most of today's resources, the principles of this book were uncovered in a very successful marriage-counseling program. The Smalley Marriage Institute's Couples Intensivesm program works with couples who are in crisis, and the program is delivering remarkable success. Even though the majority of couples who participate in the intensives are at or near divorce when they arrive, more than 90 percent stay together and report marked improvement in their marital satisfaction.

The Marriage You've Always Dreamed Of translates the principles from this life-changing program into simple and practical steps for you and your spouse. Don't live another day feeling stuck, stale, or simply surviving in your marriage. Begin your own personal journey to the marriage you've always dreamed of today.

This book is scheduled to be published by Tyndale House Publishers in the early spring of 2005. This preview copy is unedited and will likely see some changes before final publication, but the message is life changing and had to be made available sooner.

Here's to a marriage revolution at your house!

Dr. Greg Smalley

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INTRODUCTION

MEET THE DOC

THE WISEST PATIENTS always do a little investigating before they entrust their physical well-being to the care of a new doctor. They want to know something about this person—details about his or her educational background, work experience, style of practice, philosophy of medicine. They want some assurance that they've come to the right place.

I think those who seek help on how to nurse a sick marriage back to health (or guidance on how to strengthen a basically sound one) ought to have the same concern. They should know a little about the one to whom they come for counsel—*especially* if that doctor claims to equip his patients for a move toward something he calls “Promised Land marriage.”

Therefore, before we begin our journey toward a satisfying, healthy marriage, allow me to introduce myself. Permit me to describe a little of my own personal journey so you can feel “comfortable” with the guide and “confident” that he is the right one.

FOOLISH BOY

I grew up in the home of Dr. Gary and Norma Smalley, and as their son, I thought that I had this business of marriage all figured out.¹ So when I married Erin in 1992, a year into my master's degree program in counseling psychology at Denver Seminary, I thought my biggest struggles lay behind me.

Foolish kid!

Consider just one example. In our second year of marriage, Erin and I got into a huge argument early one morning. At the time we were living in Denver Seminary's on-campus apartments and as yet didn't realize just how thin those walls were. Our disagreement made her late for work, so right before she slammed the door as she left, she offered one final, belittling comment.

It really ticked me off, not only that she got in the last word, but also that we hadn't resolved the issue. And I wanted to do something to draw attention to my displeasure.

We used to stuff our dirty clothes into a gigantic mesh bag, then drop the bag, bombardier style, to the laundry room three stories directly below. I had planned to do the laundry that day, so as I noticed the enormous bag sitting on the floor, a spectacularly unwise plan began to form in my fevered brain. I decided to make my point by dropping our clothes as near as possible to Erin as she walked to her car. I didn't want to hit her, just to startle her. Then I'd pretend, "Oh, I'm sorry. I was just dropping the laundry."

A stupid plan? Of course. But remember, I had only seconds to think it through. As I saw my wife angrily rushing down the stairs and hurtling toward her car, I impulsively grabbed the bag, carefully gauged her speed, and let it go.

Unfortunately, my dumb bomb clipped her. It didn't crush her neck or anything nearly so disastrous, but it did launch her off her feet and knock her to the ground. As she lay sprawled out on the turf, she looked up—and saw me still staring out the window.

At that instant it dawned on me: *I'm in huge trouble.*

While I knew my wife had run track in college, I never fully realized how fast she could climb stairs. I had only seconds to decide what to do. Erin's tough, and I didn't know whether she would pummel me or sling me out the window to join our laundry. I hastily retreated into our apartment and quickly turned the lock. Seconds later I heard her banging furiously on the door. I slinked back against the wall, careful not to make a

sound, madly hoping that she might think I had left. I knew only one thing: whatever happened, I was *not* about to open that door.

Our worried neighbors heard the commotion and started streaming out of their apartments—and their curiosity saved me. Unnerved by all the watching eyes, Erin bounded down the stairs and drove off in a cloud of dust.

By the time she returned home that night, I had neatly folded all of the laundry and piled it in the living room so she would know I had done everything. I also strategically positioned four or five bouquets of flowers around our apartment.

We managed to smooth things over that evening, and I apologized for my angry behavior. Erin and I have grown since then, but it wasn't until we began to employ some of the skills and techniques described in this book that we learned how to use conflict as a doorway to greater intimacy.

FURTHER INSTRUCTION

I had enrolled at Denver Seminary to earn a degree in marriage and family counseling, and we stayed on for a third year just to learn from Dr. Gary Oliver, a marriage expert whom I deeply respect.

After Denver I decided to get a doctorate. I applied to and was accepted by Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University in Los Angeles, where I specialized in marriage and family issues. There I read innumerable books and completed exhaustive coursework, all in an effort to try to understand how I could best help couples.

And I grew increasingly frustrated.

The more I read and studied, the less confidence I felt. So many theories and ideas competed for my attention. Which ones actually *worked*? And how did all of this effectively come together?

When I finished at Rosemead, Erin and I returned home to

Branson, Missouri, and there I continued my quest for understanding. What did I really believe about marriage? And how could I help married couples to get the most out of their relationships?

Doctoral grads who want a license to practice in the state of Missouri must complete a postdoctoral residency, which requires a specialization. My choice to specialize in marriage therapy meant further marriage counseling, reading, and research. Yet the more I read, the more frustrated I became.

During that period I worked personally with about twenty couples each week. My efforts appeared to be helping a few of them, but everything seemed to be so hit or miss. I just couldn't put together a complete framework. I couldn't say, "Here's what you need to do to make your marriage stronger. This is why you need to do these things. And when you are done, this is what your marriage will look like." So I continued my quest—asking all of the experts, reading, praying.

And early in the morning on two separate occasions, I believe I heard from the greatest Expert of all. God spoke to me in two vivid dreams that continue to inspire and shape my ministry. I'll tell you more about them later, but for now, it's enough to say that the first dream provided the general outline for this book, while the second supplied the motivation to do something about it.

THE IDEA SHARPENS

As I meditated on and developed the ideas in this book, eventually I began to put them into practice. Under the leadership of Bob Paul and with the help of a team of talented colleagues, we started to offer two- and four-day "marriage intensives," in which couples on the brink of divorce received concentrated help with their relationships.

One day a few summers ago a board member approached me and said, "Greg, I really need to talk to you about something. I can't tell you what to do, but God has laid it on my heart to say

something to you. I believe he's saying that you're supposed to help lead a marriage revival."

"*What?*" I asked, dumbfounded.

"I don't know," he replied, shaking his head. "But that's what's on my heart. I just wanted you to know, for what it's worth, what I feel God is leading me to say to you."

I made no reply. What could I say? But I thought, *Well, okay. Whatever.*

A couple of weeks later, two business consultants came to Branson to help our board decide a future course for the Smalley Relationship Center. After meeting with the staff for a full day, the consultants returned the next morning and said to me privately, "We need to meet with you."

When we were alone, both men said to me, "We spent some time praying last night, and then this morning we spent some quiet time alone. As we were driving over to this meeting, we started talking. God has laid it on our hearts to tell you that you're supposed to help lead a marriage revival."

"*What?*" I almost shouted.

"We know this is unusual," they said, assuring me that they had arrived at the idea separately, without coordinated efforts. "But we both feel it. And we both thought we should tell you."

"Wow," I whispered. "A couple of weeks ago someone else said the very same thing to me."

The whole idea really made me uneasy.

For the next several days, I kept asking the Lord, "God, are you trying to tell me something? Is this for real? Are *people* saying this, or are *you* saying this?" I didn't know for sure, and neither did my wife.

A few days later, while helping to brainstorm about another project, a godly man unconnected to any of this said to me, "Hey, Greg, I want to meet with you before you leave."

When we found a private spot, he cleared his voice and said, "Listen, we've been talking about marriage for the past several days. And you know what? I believe you're supposed to do

something. I feel a marriage revival is supposed to take place, and you're supposed to help lead it."

I cut him off. "All right," I demanded, "who have you been talking to?"

He looked genuinely surprised. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Tell me that you've been talking to people," I said.

"I don't know where this is coming from," he replied evenly, "but I believe that's what I'm supposed to tell you."

His words shook me, and I thought, *All right, not one of these people knows the others. No one seems to be plotting anything. Could this really be God?*

Shortly after that encounter I had the second dream, which I'll describe in the next chapter. And finally I admitted what I already knew: *All right, God. It appears as if you're speaking to me. You seem to be saying that I'm supposed to help lead something. Still, I don't understand. It's way too intimidating.*

And at last, on my knees, I said to the Lord, "All right. I submit."

After I returned home, I said to my wife, "I think God is truly calling me to something unique. He wants a marriage revival, and to whatever degree and in whatever way he sees fit, he wants me to be a part of it. So that's what I have to do. If I can stay here in Branson and do it, great. But if he wants me somewhere else, he'll reveal that. Let's just keep praying."

A MOVEMENT TO COVER THE GLOBE

God has continued to lead since then in astonishing ways. We established the Smalley Marriage Institute, where a sharp team of professionals helps at-risk couples who come for the marriage intensives. We can hardly keep up!

Today we find ourselves working with some of the world's top experts on marriage and family issues. Regularly we draw on the expertise of bright university professors around the country all because we're deeply committed to helping ignite a marriage

revival, a Spirit-filled movement that God wants to cover the globe.

Why do I tell you the story of my journey? First, it's always exciting to share how God works in our lives. Second, I want you to see that God is behind the beginnings of this marriage revival. Third, I suspect that many of you share my concern for marriages. You may have friends or family members whose marriages are stuck, falling apart, or worse, have already disintegrated. Maybe the marriage falling apart is your own.

The material in this book will give you not only hope but also some significant direction, perspectives, and tools that you can use in your own marriage.

I believe with all of my heart that God wants a marriage revival to rock this country. And I'm certain that he wants your own marriage to blossom and grow in the Promised Land.

I hope that all of this background helps you to get to know me a little. Any good doctor wants patients to feel confident in his or her ability to furnish quality care, and I'm no exception. I'm eager to help you get or stay on the road to marital health—and as your “doctor,” I promise that this road really does lead to the Promised Land.

MARRIAGE 911

*Give honor to marriage, and remain
faithful to one another in marriage.*

HEBREWS 13:4

NOT LONG AGO I took my family on a vacation to Florida. One evening my two young daughters and I were building a sand castle on a beautiful, powdery white beach. As we worked, I noticed a young boy, about nine years old, circling our growing fortress. He stayed about ten or fifteen yards away from us as he tossed a football to himself. No one seemed to be with him.

Eventually I asked the boy to throw me the ball. We played catch for about five minutes, and then I turned to the girls and asked if we should invite the boy to build with us.

“Sure!” they said.

“Hey, son,” I asked, “would you like to help us?”

“Oh, yeah!” he replied enthusiastically.

We all sat in the sand to continue our construction project. Soon I asked the boy, “What’s your name?”

“Zachary,” he said with pride.

“Nice to meet you, Zachary,” I replied. I then introduced my family.

“What are you doing out here?” I asked. “I haven’t seen you with anybody.”

“Well, I’ve been at my dad’s house,” he explained. “Now I’m here at my mom’s house.”

Immediately I assumed his parents had divorced, but to avoid presuming anything, I said, “Really? So your dad lives somewhere else?”

“Yeah, he lives in Alabama,” Zachary replied. “And now I’m here with my mom in Florida.”

“Really,” I answered. “And what does that mean, Zachary?”

I’ll never forget his answer. This nine-year-old boy momentarily took his sandy hands away from the castle, looked up with fear in his eyes, and said in a wavering voice, “I’m not sure, but my mom says it means that I’m now the man of the house.”

A feeling of utter sadness washed over me. I was sad that a nine-year-old boy thought that he had to be the “man of the house.” This is the job of a father, not of a young boy. I saw the panic in his eyes that he had to do something beyond his years—that he had to grow up quickly. But the thing that broke my heart is that he longed for his daddy. Nothing can ever replace a father in a child’s life—especially the daily interaction. This is where a young boy learns how to be a man. Zachary learned that a dad quit and left him home alone to fend for himself.

But as heartbreaking as Zachary’s story is, do you know the saddest thing of all? Millions of Zacharys live all around this country. Untold numbers of hurting little boys and girls grow up in broken homes, forced to accept adult responsibilities long before they’re ready. You probably know some of these children too. And they’re frightened.

Behind every child affected by divorce stand two people who lost their dream of a lifelong, satisfying marriage. Many of them are frightened too. They are often sad, lost, and confused.

THE NEED FOR A MARRIAGE REVIVAL

It shouldn’t take a sad story like Zachary’s to make us realize

that America urgently needs a marriage revival. Did you know that

- every day 2,700 children will watch their parents either separate or divorce?¹
- under current trends in the U.S., younger people who marry for the first time face a 40–50 percent chance of divorce?²
- second marriages fail at a rate about 10 percent higher than the rate of failed first marriages?³
- many first marriages end in divorce in the first three to five years? In 2000, for example, among women aged 25 to 29 whose first marriages ended in divorce, the median length of marriage was 3.4 years.⁴
- at least one researcher suggests that fewer than half of the marriages that avoid divorce can be described as truly happy?⁵
- marital distress puts both adults and children at increased risk for mental and physical problems? Common maladies include increased incidence of illness, decreased work productivity (especially for men), suicide, violence, homicide, significant suppression of the immune system, mortality from disease, and increased rates of automobile accidents.⁶

These are more than statistics when we realize that the people they represent are our neighbors, our family members, our friends, our coworkers. Just looking around us, we can see that this nation urgently needs a marriage revival. The welfare and happiness of countless couples—not to mention the millions of little Zacharys—depend on it.

Yet all revivals, of whatever type and wherever they occur, start small. The marriage revival that we need so badly will begin only when individual couples consciously choose to do the hard work necessary to avoid the pain of divorce and instead enter into the satisfaction and joy of a Promised Land marriage.

It's this vision that makes me passionate about helping couples to resolve their marital problems. I have dedicated my life to equipping couples to understand, find, and experience God's best for their marriage. But it took two dreams—literal ones, mind you—to get me on track.

A DREAM OF FREEDOM

About two o'clock one morning, I sat bolt upright in bed after experiencing one of the most vivid dreams of my life. The images not only captivated me but also promised to help me put together some pieces of a difficult puzzle that had confounded me for a long time.

In my dream I stared as the Old Testament patriarch Abraham's descendants enjoyed "the good life" in Goshen. I watched as God freed the children of Israel from Egyptian slavery. I observed as the ancient Hebrews struggled and learned in the wilderness. I witnessed their supernatural triumph at Jericho. And finally I saw them take possession of the Promised Land under the able leadership of Joshua.

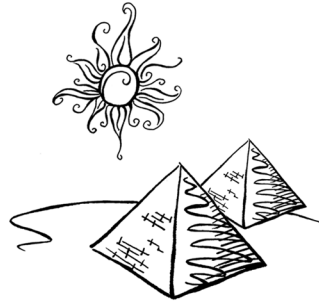
Yet somehow I knew that this dream served as far more than a historical replay; I understood that these ancient Israelites represented contemporary married couples. And I knew that what happened to God's chosen people in biblical history could happen to husbands and wives *right now*.

"Whoa!" I murmured the moment I opened my eyes. I bolted out of bed, turned on the computer, and started typing. Here's the artwork for the idea that came to me that morning. It still serves as the framework for my understanding about how best to help couples leave the "slavery" of marital hurts and disappointments in order to enter the Promised Land—all that God meant marriage to be.

JOURNEY TO THE MARITAL PROMISED LAND



MARRIAGE



EGYPT



EXODUS

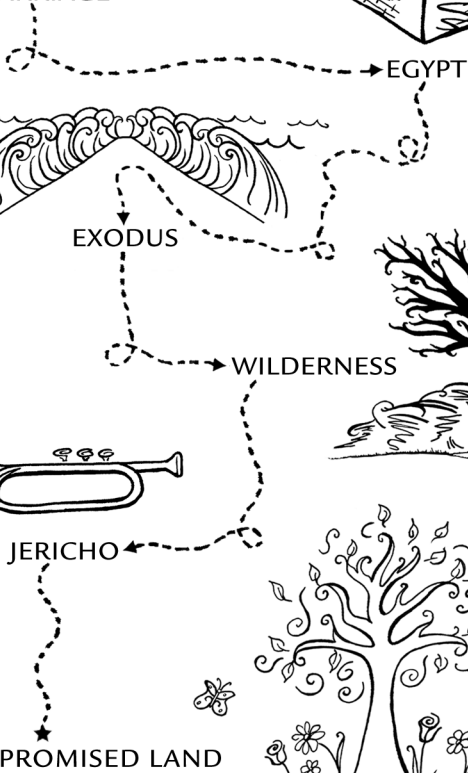
WILDERNESS



JERICO



PROMISED LAND



We'll unpack this map as we make our way through the book, but for now it's enough to grasp the general idea. The biblical story of Israel's flight from being stuck in Egypt to a new life in God's Promised Land provides a model with the power to point modern marriages to health, courage, and renewed strength. I could never have asked God for such an insightful dream.

TASTE THE DUST

Like nearly everyone else in the country on September 11, 2001, I sat glued in front of my television set as the World Trade Center towers disintegrated into a pile of rubble. I could hardly believe that terrorists could stage such a hideous attack, let alone comprehend the vast number of deaths they could inflict so quickly. The attack rattled me to the core.

The following month I traveled to Pasadena, California, for a seminar. And for the second time in my life, an impossibly vivid dream awakened me in the wee hours of the morning.

In my dream, I saw the World Trade Center towers still standing, looking down on the rest of the New York skyline. I felt helpless as two hijacked planes once more smashed into a pair of defenseless targets. And I felt weak as I watched both towers crumble into dust.

This dream felt so real that I could taste the dust and smell the smoke. It felt as if I were really *there*.

I realized that, like my previous dream about the ancient Israelites fleeing Egypt, this dream was symbolic, with the collapsing towers representing a husband and a wife. In the shadow of their catastrophic fall stood dazed children, wounded families, and crippled communities, all bleeding profusely from the devastation of divorce.

In my dream, I was driving a vintage M*A*S*H ambulance. With me rode a team of men and women whose faces I couldn't see but who nevertheless made up a crucial part of the team. On one side of the ambulance, as clear as day, I saw some words stenciled in classic M*A*S*H style: **MARRIAGE 911**.

And then I woke up.

A flood of emotions swept over me. Right there in the hotel room, I broke down and sobbed. Despite my mixed feelings, I got out of bed, booted up the computer, and started writing. I recorded my whole dream. When I finished, I logged on to the Internet and discovered that no one yet owned the rights to the name “Marriage 911.” So I grabbed it.

And in those emotion-filled, early morning hours, I knew God had set my agenda for the foreseeable future.

WHY THIS BOOK?

Why have I written this book? To offer help and encouragement to searching husbands and wives? Surely. To create a practical tool that God might be pleased to use in a marriage revival? That would be terrific. But that is not my core reason.

A deeply personal motive drives me to publish this book. I’m writing for all the Zacharys who live all around us. I can never forget that poignant moment on the beach and the desperate longing that I saw deep in Zachary’s eyes. I know that those same eyes peer out from millions of little boys and girls all over the country. But behind every Zachary is a distressed couple, a husband and wife who wanted desperately to make their marriage work but couldn’t find the way. The eyes of these couples haunt me.

I write this book for them.

I’ve dedicated my professional life to helping couples everywhere not only to make sense of their marriages but also to enjoy them in a way they never thought possible. The goal in our work at the Smalley Marriage Institute is, as we say on our Web site, “not to ‘cure’ the relationship. Instead, the objective is to assist a couple in moving its relationship onto the road to a healthy, satisfying relationship.”⁷ Our mission is building, renewing, and restoring the promise of a great marriage. When a husband and wife leave from their experience, they are equipped with a clear plan and direction for how to reach their desired marriage.

In an effort to make this goal become a reality, we've created, under the leadership of Bob Paul, two- and four-day "marriage intensives" in which couples come to the Institute for concentrated relationship help. We've been tracking the performance of these sessions for the past few years and have felt delighted to discover that they consistently enjoy more than *90 percent* success—that is, less than 10 percent of the couples who complete the program end up filing for divorce, and those who stay together report a significant improvement in their level of marriage satisfaction.

When my dad heard about the phenomenal success we've been enjoying in this program, he expressed the desire to understand what we do; so he helped lead an intensive a short while ago. Subsequently I overheard him tell a friend, "I was shocked to see what they're doing. These couples fly in from everywhere and often come in separated from each other, hurt and hostile, having suffered through affairs or any number of horrible things. These husbands and wives don't even know each other when they show up—but at the end of the four days, they leave appearing to be lifetime friends. They return home holding hands."

This book represents my attempt to bring you the benefits enjoyed by the couples—some in serious relationship distress—who leave our marriage intensives arm in arm and hand in hand. What happens in those intensives can also happen wherever you live. And it can start *today*.

JOIN ME! SEE CHANGES!

Are you ready for a marriage revival? More to the point, are you ready to revive your own marriage? If so, I invite you to join me.

I'm thrilled at what God is doing through our work at the Institute and pleased that I have some small place in it. I'm delighted that our marriage intensives have racked up a 90 percent success rate—but I'm no longer surprised by it. In one sense, *of*

course we're going to have 90 percent success because this marriage revival is God's idea.

I believe with all of my heart that God wants a marriage revival to spread over the whole world. And I'm certain that he wants your own marriage to blossom and grow in the Promised Land.

Do you want that, too? Then join us. Read this book. Try the principles out in your marriage. Share hope with the couples around you. Be part of God's work to strengthen marriages all around the world.

So, where do we start? We start where ancient Israel started: in the giddy days of a fresh beginning.

ENJOYING THE PROMISED LAND

The land you are about to enter and occupy is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, where you planted your seed and dug out irrigation ditches with your foot as in a vegetable garden. It is a land of hills and valleys with plenty of rain—a land that the Lord your God cares for. He watches over it day after day throughout the year!

DEUTERONOMY 11:10-12

“WE NEVER KNEW it could be like *this!*” How many times have I heard those words, or something very like them, from couples who found themselves in the Promised Land? I’ve lost count. But I still get goose bumps each time I hear them.

I suppose I get especially charged because I know where many of these husbands and wives started out: angry, bitter, and loud—or depressed, withdrawn, and hopeless. We first met because they felt their marriage had reached the end of the line. Before dissolving their union, they agreed (oftentimes reluctantly) to give the relationship one last shot. So they came to meet the team at the Smalley Marriage Institute and wondered whether they’d leave as a couple.

We like to check up on our clients at set intervals after the marriage intensives, and most of the time we get very good news. Not every couple who returns home reaches the Promised Land

swiftly, of course; most have just left Egypt and have a lot of work to do before they can set foot in the land of their dreams. But some couples catch on quickly, learn and master the critical skills, wholeheartedly give up control to God, and sooner than they imagined possible find themselves enjoying the pure milk and delicious honey of a Promised Land marriage. It's these couples who tell us, "We never knew it could be like *this!*"

And they're only beginning to discover the riches of a land God has prepared for their blessing and enjoyment.

A LAND GOD CARES FOR

Shortly before the Israelites crossed the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land, Moses reminded them that the Promised Land was not like Egypt. The new land was fertile; that is, it was a land God cared for.

When the chosen people of God first began their long journey, the Lord himself had promised to bring them up out of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey (see Exodus 3:8). Years later, after the tribes of Israel had entered the Promised Land but before they had completely subdued it, some advance scouts described it as a land "lacking in nothing" (Judges 18:10).

The Israelites found the Promised Land to be just as advertised, a land flowing not only with milk and honey but also with grapes, pomegranates, figs, cattle, trees—everything they needed to make a bountiful life for themselves. God had truly blessed them.

EVERYTHING GOD INTENDED IT TO BE

I use the term *Promised Land* to represent all that God intended marriage to be.

When we escape from slavery, when we learn and master a few crucial relationship skills, and when we relinquish control to God and allow him to work through us, we place ourselves in a position to enjoy a fulfilling relationship like nothing else on earth.

Not many people reach a Promised Land relationship. A book published a few years ago claimed that only about one percent of marriages reaches the ideal.¹ Another 50 percent of couples divorce, 25 percent get stuck in an unsatisfying relationship, and only a small percent of the remaining couples ever reach a Promised Land relationship.

Why? Because it takes a lot of work to reach the Promised Land. Our unredeemed flesh fights tooth and nail against relinquishing everything to God. And living in the Promised Land still takes a great deal of effort.

But at the same time, those who make the Promised Land their goal and who work toward achieving it can reap a wonderful relationship beyond their wildest imaginations.

WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE FOR YOU?

I'm about to ask you to take everything you've learned from this book—from understanding your Fear Dance to learning about your Honor Dance—and out of that mix sketch out a clear, visible, tangible picture of your own Promised Land.

As you continue on your journey, I want you to be clear about how you envision your own Promised Land marriage. You have enough information by this point to have an idea of where you'd like to end up. I'd like to give you an opportunity to cast a vision for your relationship.

It may be that you're reading this book while still in slavery. Or perhaps you've just escaped from Egypt and feel as if you're floundering in the wilderness. That's okay. Wherever you are on your journey, the following exercise can give you a powerfully motivational picture of what life could be like for you in the Promised Land. You're more likely to keep moving ahead when you have a good idea of where you're headed.

We always ask couples, "If things were ideal in your relationship, if things were a 10, what would that look like? What would your Promised Land contain?"

And now I'd like to ask you the same thing. If things were a 10 in your relationship, what would it look like?

When you and your spouse sit down *together* to develop a clear picture of what your Promised Land might look like, you'll have a concrete target to shoot at. And when you begin with a desired end in mind, you'll be far more likely to reach the destination of your dreams.

A BATTERY OF HUMAN NEEDS

My counseling office fills up with troubled people who, sadly, never understood or fulfilled their spouse's needs. To better grasp what those needs might be, I spent a year doing a great deal of research on relational needs. I wanted to discover what people really wanted in a relationship.

I read countless studies and many books on "love language" by noted authors such as Gary Chapman. Eventually I constructed a list of almost fifty relational needs that repeatedly surface in the literature. Then I put that list in front of more than 10,000 husbands and wives who attended various conferences. I asked each couple to rank these needs from most to least important. Finally, based on their responses, I came up with a "top ten" list of the most important relational needs (we'll look at this list a little later).

My survey of relational needs led to an interesting conclusion: the list of couples' top *needs*, when unmet, looks identical to the list that nationally known researchers have identified as the most common reasons *why couples argue*.

What does this mean? When needs are not being met, look out! Your marriage is at stake. Your spouse will become overly defensive, argumentative, jealous, belligerent, withdrawn, or degrading. When our deepest relational needs go unmet, we tend to feel more irritated, discouraged, edgy, hypersensitive, and reactionary to average events that occur in a typical marriage.

Furthermore, the need for companionship in a long-lasting relationship is so strong that most men and women will go to

any length to satisfy it. If marriage isn't meeting their needs, they may go outside the marriage and into an emotional or sexual affair. Or they will get their needs fulfilled at work, at play, through relatives, friends, children, or in the community at large.

Think of relational needs as a ten-cell battery, each cell wired to one of your spouse's top basic needs. Consider each of these needs as an individual power cell. As the cells drain through everyday living, work, care of children, and other responsibilities, your spouse must get them recharged, just as a car battery needs to be recharged after neglect or overuse.

To understand the current state of your spouse's relational battery, you must examine his or her feelings. Feelings provide a gauge to see whether those needs are being met. Feelings that indicate a low battery include hurt, frustration, and fear, while indications of a fully charged battery include joy, happiness, and ecstasy.

I remember one trip when my battery nearly drained.

ASK AAA

One day Erin and I drove from Springfield, Missouri, to Nashville, Tennessee, to attend a conference. In the days leading up to the trip, Erin had asked me to consult AAA about the best way to get to Nashville. As a guy, I resented her request and felt I could get us there as well as AAA could. I spent several hours diligently studying maps. Eventually I realized that no straight line exists between Springfield and Nashville.

This felt very painful for me. The only thing I remembered from high school math was the axiom "The shortest distance between two points is a straight line." So I continued to draft a route as straight as I could. Finally, I finished. I had done the impossible! I had found a route that came close to a straight line. As I stood back to bask in the glory of my accomplishment, I knew I had to share my success with "the boys." I knew Erin would not appreciate my route like my guy friends would. As

each friend held up my map, it felt as if they were holding directions to the Holy Grail. Their eyes moved slowly up and down the page while they muttered things like, “Wow . . . unbelievable . . . impossible . . . you da’ man!”

I must admit, I felt impressed.

When word of my accomplishment finally reached Erin, I received no praise or applause. I got no homage, not even simple adoration. Nothing. To make matters worse, she pleaded for me to have someone “check out” my route.

Her words of doubt deeply offended me. I could not cave in and ask for directions. I had to remain strong, for the sake of all guys around the world. I knew that much more was riding on our trip than simply getting there. Men everywhere counted on me to show my wife that, as a man, I could find the way, unaided.

Several hours into the trip, I felt great; my route seemed perfect. We were beating AAA’s schedule by thirty minutes. I had become king of the road!

But just like that, disaster struck.

As the sun began to dip behind the horizon, providing us with an incredible view, Erin and I were laughing and singing. Miles back she had stopped asking me if I knew our location. Then the laughter stopped.

“Did you see that sign?” Erin asked. “I think it read Dead End.”

“Nice try,” I joked. “You just can’t admit that I was right and you were wrong.”

“I’m serious,” she begged, “I think this road dead *ends*.”

“This road does not dead end,” I shot back. “Don’t worry. Trust me!”

Have you ever uttered something you so wish you could take back? For me, “Don’t worry. Trust me!” remains one of those sayings.

We continued to drive for about an hour, neither of us speaking a word as we waited for the truth to be revealed. The surrounding area began to grow less populated until it became cornfields as far as the eye could see. And then it happened.

Dead end!

I barely stopped the truck in time to avoid crashing into the large Dead End sign.

“That’s impossible!” I shouted in disbelief. “This wasn’t on the map!”

The worst part? Erin didn’t have to say anything. She just sat there with a look of disdain, shaking her head from side to side. So I did what any man would do in this situation. I got out of the truck to survey the area.

As I gazed down at the mighty Mississippi River, I could see my road form again on the other side.

“It’s not my fault that the map didn’t show that a bridge wasn’t here!” I shouted back toward the truck. Then I began to wonder what would happen if I drove around the barrier and . . .

Erin’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “Don’t you even *think* about it!” she yelled. “Take us back the way we came!”

I reached to study the map, and Erin jerked it out of my hands. I didn’t even try to get it back. I slumped in defeat. As I sat there dejectedly, watching my wife attempt to determine our location, I began to notice how cornfields can look scary at night in the middle of nowhere. It didn’t help that buzzards had begun circling overhead, squawking excitedly. I started to remember a movie about murderous children who lived in cornfields, but couldn’t recall whether the movie was based on a true story. The bottom line? We needed to leave. Immediately.

Erin and I didn’t speak for quite some time as we retraced our trip. When she finally started to say something, I felt certain she was going to give me a piece of her mind—and no doubt I deserved it. But she didn’t yell or tease me. In fact, she did the same thing you can do to begin to unlock the most important relational needs of your spouse.

Speaking in a calm voice, Erin said, “I believe we can learn a great deal about each other’s relational needs by answering the statement: ‘I feel loved when you . . .’”

I gulped and nodded, grateful to escape what could have been well-deserved wrath.

“Well,” she continued, “I feel loved when you ask AAA about our trip route.”

Touché!

THE BENEFITS OF KNOWING AND MEETING RELATIONAL NEEDS

Why focus on relational needs? How do they contribute to the health of a marriage? To answer this question, consider how some surveyed groups of couples answered another question: What are the benefits of sharing relational needs? Note what they said, in order of importance:

- *Increases positive communication.* Talking about relational needs fosters healthy communication by fulfilling the need to share wants and desires. The key is to focus on understanding and validation. This strengthens the relationship because a spouse does something that his or her spouse perceives as important and positive. If one spouse starts to degrade or dishonor the other's important needs, communication ultimately ceases. Therefore husbands and wives must guard this sharing of needs as a priceless treasure. No one and nothing must be allowed to harm it.
- *Increases understanding.* When your spouse shares a relational need, he or she reveals a deep part about himself or herself. You begin to deeply understand what he or she needs in order to feel cared for and loved. Understanding is knowledge, and knowledge is power.
- *Promotes action in the relationship.* Once you know your spouse's needs, you can act on that knowledge.
- *Fosters trust, security, and safety.* As you gain the right knowledge and take action to meet your spouse's needs, you promote security and trust in the relationship.

- *Promotes conflict resolution.* Conflict in a marriage is inevitable. But if relational needs are getting met, then the conflict usually does not grow as intense as it might otherwise, and it gets resolved faster.
- *Increases honor in the relationship.* The essence of honor is making someone feel that his or her needs and wants are important and valuable.

Can you see how relational needs provide an important key to a life of blessing in the Promised Land? If both partners understand and try hard to meet their spouse's relational needs, they can look forward to a long time of enjoying world-class milk and honey.

LOVE IS ALL WE NEED

One thing is certain: before you can begin meeting your spouse's deepest needs, you have to know what they are.

Consider the first law of fulfilling needs: "Everyone has different needs." Relational needs are based on our unique personalities, backgrounds, and expectations. Before anything else, you must learn to recognize your spouse's individual needs (as well as your own).

My research with more than 10,000 couples helped me to uncover the top ten relational needs. To help you remember them, I've listed them under the letters of a fabulous word: LOVE. The acronym stands for

Listen

Offer yourself

Value and honor

Embrace

I can find no better description of true love, and it plays strongly into the idea of relational needs.

- Engage in activities you both enjoy.
- Realize that time together must be mutually fulfilling to cause a feeling of connectedness.
- Look for ways to make any moment together one of quality.

10. *Maintain a Mutually Vibrant Spiritual Relationship*

- Pray together. As we've already noted, research has shown that couples who pray together every day have a divorce rate of less than one percent (1 out of 1,152)!²
- Study the Bible individually and together.
- Faithfully attend church together.
- Get involved in church activities.
- Hold each other spiritually accountable.
- Maintain a Christ-centered relationship by seeking God's will, living by biblical principles, and making God your top priority.
- Discuss spiritual growth or ask spiritually challenging questions.
- Read spiritual books, and seek other spiritual development.

DRAWING OUT YOUR SPOUSE'S RELATIONSHIP NEEDS

Because emotional "safety" within a relationship is so important, I asked couples attending our seminar this question: "On a scale of 0-10 (10 being completely secure), how secure do you feel in your relationship to share those needs?"

On average, respondents rated their degree of safety in the relationship at a 7. Keep in mind that because most seminar participants seek marriage enrichment, they generally feel more satisfied with their relationship than most couples do. The respondents cited the following techniques as the most effective ways to draw out their spouse's needs:

- *Validate.* Your spouse wants to feel that you hear and understand him or her. This can be accomplished by saying back what you hear. Remember the meaning of LOVE? Apply it to your marriage, and your spouse will feel safe enough to share his or her needs.
- *Ask.* Although it's your spouse's responsibility to share his or her needs, realize that at times you must take the initiative.
- *Focus on your spouse's needs.* When your spouse shares his or her needs, provide nonverbal feedback so he or she knows you are listening.
- *Create a positive environment.* People share their deepest needs when they feel free from distractions, both physically and emotionally.
- *Reciprocate.* As you share your needs, your spouse will be more likely to share his or hers.
- *Honor.* Help your spouse feel that you value his or her needs.
- *Provide security.* Your spouse needs to trust that the information he or she discloses will be protected not only from your ridicule but also from that of others.
- *Follow through.* Your spouse must trust that once he or she opens up and reveals relational needs, you will act on them. It feels discouraging if nothing changes after relational needs are disclosed.

JUST TWENTY MINUTES PER DAY!

Because I do a lot of premarital counseling, every once in a while I'm asked to take part in a wedding ceremony. On one such occasion, after thinking long and hard about what to say, a brilliant idea hit.

At the wedding I talked about the flowers in the bride's bouquet and then held up a package of seeds. "Your marriage is like this packet of seeds," I explained to the couple and their many

guests. “You need all four aspects of LOVE in order to grow the seeds of your relationship into a beautiful marriage bouquet.”

Everything seemed to be going wonderfully well until I got to the concept of spending twenty minutes per day meeting a spouse’s relational needs. I had chosen to use a gardening analogy, so to make my point I confidently stated, “Much like fertilizer helps a flower to grow strong and healthy, if you want a healthy marriage, you must spend at least twenty minutes each day fertilizing each other.”

The church roared with laughter—and I had no idea what sounded so funny. The analogy had made so much sense in my head that I never looked at it from any other perspective. I think the groom realized my cluelessness, so he joked, “Can we get on with the ‘I do’s’ so I can begin my twenty minutes of fertilizing my wife?”

I could have died.

Perhaps I should try a different analogy to make the point. Maybe it would be safer to return to the battery image.

The “needs battery” requires constant recharging. How can we best do it? First, you have to discover your spouse’s needs. The examples I’ve given turn up most often in large groups, but every person has unique relational needs. You need to find out which needs are most important to your spouse, and I’ll help you with that shortly.

You recharge your spouse’s relational batteries by attending to his or her needs. According to John Gottman and Nan Silver, you can do this effectively in *only twenty minutes a day!* Their research revealed that the difference between a couple who divorces and one that stays together (but feels unhappy) is ten minutes a day of “turning toward” each other. By this, he means that a husband and wife must encourage and build up each other every day through positive words or affirmative interactions. Furthermore, Gottman and Silver found that happy couples who stay together “turn toward” each other an additional ten minutes each day.³

From these discoveries, we can safely declare that a total of

twenty minutes a day of “turning toward each other” in substantial ways can make the difference between divorce and staying together in a happy, satisfying relationship. Just twenty minutes a day!

GET A TASTE OF HEAVEN NOW

It may be that although you’ve read this far, you haven’t yet reached the Promised Land. That’s okay. Not everything I’ve talked about has to happen in strict, sequential order. The happy truth is, you can start enjoying some aspects of a Promised Land marriage regardless of where you are in your marital journey.

Right from the start you can begin to enjoy some of the exquisite milk and honey available in the Promised Land. Even a hurting couple can start to put a down payment on some excellent real estate right now. A husband can find new ways to honor his wife. A wife can ask her husband about what he needs relationally and then begin to meet those needs.

In other words, it doesn’t hurt to have a taste of heaven to want to get there. We all need such a taste. It gives hope. It builds success. It’s important.

It’s also important to ask, “What does the Promised Land look like for *us*?” I think every husband and wife need to clearly define a vision for their marriage. In that way, they have something concrete to shoot for. So that’s what I’d like to focus on next.

NOW IT’S YOUR TURN

It’s time for you to create your own Top Ten list. What things need to happen in your marriage in order for you both to say, “*That’s* our Promised Land”?

And don’t worry—it won’t be as hard as you might think. For the most part, you’ll be working from a list that we’ve developed over the years in our work with thousands of couples. Why a list? Because if you’re at all like me, you need it.

If you were to ask me, “Greg, what do you really want or need in your relationship?” I’d more than likely say, “I don’t know.” I’m pretty laid back and easygoing, and without a list I tend to struggle. So use the list (with our blessings) to discover the contours of your own Promised Land.

Remember the exercise that Erin and I completed on our trip to Nashville: “I feel loved [or I feel cared for] when you . . .”? I found it easy to fill in the blank. In fact, I quickly filled up two pages, single spaced, with about seventy items. “I feel loved when you cook me breakfast.” “I feel loved when you initiate a date.” “I feel loved when you give me a hug or hold my hand.” An exercise like this helps us to see what the Promised Land looks like for each of us. So, here’s your assignment:

UNDERSTANDING YOUR TOP TEN NEEDS

On a sheet of paper, each of you fill in the blank: I feel loved or cared for when you _____. Be sure to record all of your responses. This information is a gold mine of relational material and will help to give you a clear picture of your own Promised Land.

The following questions give you another way to help you crystallize your most important relational needs. Because it’s important for both spouses to discover their top ten needs, we have placed a copy of these questions in appendix B at the back of the book. You can answer the questions in one of two ways: (1) you can write in the book (one spouse writing here and one writing in appendix B); or (2) you can make two photocopies of the questions in appendix B and both write on the photocopies.

1. In order to understand which of the following needs are most important to you, rank each one from 1 to 10. If you have needs that are not listed below, write them on the “other need” lines at the end of the list. Begin each need with the words “I have a need . . .”

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

STILL BETTER THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE

Now that you have a clear idea of what your Promised Land might look like, allow me to let you in on a little secret: *The real thing will be a lot better than anything you can imagine.*

If you were to ask a little boy to name the best thing in the world, he might tell you, “A vanilla ice cream cone!” And a vanilla ice cream cone is great. But if you were to ask that same kid the identical question thirty years later, you’d almost certainly get a much different answer. Why? Because as we mature, our idea of “great” rises to higher levels, based on an expanded storehouse of information and a larger field of experience.

Right now, you have developed an appealing picture of your own marriage, and that should help you to keep marching toward the Promised Land. But you know what? God wants to do something in your marriage far better than anything you can imagine. You’re thinking about reaching Jupiter, and he’s got a whole different galaxy in mind.

It’s good to let God do the driving!

APPENDIX A

IDENTIFYING YOUR FEAR DANCE

1. Describe a recent conflict or negative situation with your spouse—something that really “pushed your button.” For the purpose of this survey, be sure that you and your spouse write down the *same conflict*.

2. How did you feel in response to this conflict or situation? How did that conflict or negative situation make you feel? Check all that apply—but “star” the most important feelings:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure | <input type="checkbox"/> Uncomfortable | <input type="checkbox"/> Embarrassed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apathetic | <input type="checkbox"/> Confused | <input type="checkbox"/> Frightened |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Puzzled | <input type="checkbox"/> Worried | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Upset | <input type="checkbox"/> Dissatisfied | <input type="checkbox"/> Horrified |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sullen | <input type="checkbox"/> Disgusted | <input type="checkbox"/> Disturbed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sad | <input type="checkbox"/> Resentful | <input type="checkbox"/> Furious |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hurt | <input type="checkbox"/> Bitter | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Disappointed | <input type="checkbox"/> Fed up | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wearied | <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrated | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Torn up | <input type="checkbox"/> Miserable | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shamed | <input type="checkbox"/> Guilty | |

3. How did this conflict make you feel about *yourself*? What did the conflict say about *you*? What was the “*self*” message—the message that it sent to *you*? Check all that apply—but “star” the most important feeling:

✓ or *	“As a result of the conflict, I felt . . .”	What That Feeling Sounds Like
	Rejected	My spouse doesn’t want me; my spouse doesn’t need me; I am not necessary in this relationship; my spouse doesn’t desire me; I feel unwanted.
	Abandoned	My spouse will ultimately leave me; I will be left alone to care for myself; my spouse won’t be committed to me for life.
	Disconnected	We will become emotionally detached or separated.
	Like a failure	I am not successful at being a husband/wife; I will not perform right or correctly; I will not live up to expectations; I will fall short in my relationship.
	Helpless	I cannot do anything to change my spouse or my situation; I do not possess the power, resources, capacity, or ability to get what I want.
	Defective	Something is wrong with me; I’m the problem.
	Inadequate	I am not capable; I am incompetent.
	Inferior	Everyone else is better than I am; I am less valuable or important than others.
	Invalidated	Who I am, what I think, what I do, or how I feel is not valued.

APPENDIX B

IDENTIFYING YOUR TOP TEN NEEDS

On a sheet of paper, each of you fill in the blank: I feel loved or cared for when you _____. Be sure to record all of your responses. This information is a gold mine of relational material and will help to give you a clear picture of your own Promised Land.

The following questions give you another way to help you crystallize your most important relational needs. You can answer the questions in one of two ways: (1) you can write in the book (one spouse writing here and one writing on pages 236–240); or (2) you can make two photocopies of these pages in appendix B and both write on the photocopies.

1. In order to understand which of the following needs are most important to you, rank each one from 1 to 10. If you have needs that are not listed below, write them on the “other need” lines at the end of the list. Begin each need with the words “I have a need . . .”

Not Important

1 2 3

4

5

6

7

Extremely Important

8

9

10

___ to feel connected through talking.

___ to feel connected through sharing recreation/fun times together.

___ to be touched nonsexually.

___ to make love.

- to receive verbal tenderness.
- to receive physical tenderness.
- to receive genuine appreciation, praise, and affirmation.
- to be physically attractive.
- to know that we'll stay together and feel secure in love.
- to know we'll stay together and feel secure in finances.
- to know that my spouse needs me.
- to feel accepted and valued for who I am.
- to feel accepted and valued for what I do.
- to feel safe when I share who I am.
- to be included in most decisions that affect my life or marriage.
- to gain agreement and harmony in decision making.
- to receive gifts.
- to maintain a mutually vibrant spiritual relationship.
- to receive genuine appreciation for my service.
- to have my spouse become emotionally healthy.
- to have my spouse support my desire to live by human laws.
- to have my spouse support my desire to live by God's laws.
- to have my spouse support my desire to give money away.
- to have my spouse support my desire to give gifts to others.
- to have my spouse support my desire to serve others.
- to have my spouse support my desire to have alone time.
- to have my spouse support my desire to assist the younger generation in developing and leading useful lives.
- to have my spouse apologize and seek forgiveness.
- to have my spouse cope with crises and stress.
- to have my spouse understand our personality and gender differences.
- to have my spouse demonstrate a willingness to change (flexibility).
- to have my spouse be passionate and romantic.
- to have my spouse maintain careful control over his or her expectations.
- to have my spouse notice our positive relational history.
- to have my spouse accept my influence.
- to have my spouse periodically update his or her knowledge of my greatest needs.
- Other need: _____.
- Other need: _____.

NOTES

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1. For those of you who don't know my dad, he has been speaking and writing about marriage for the past three decades.

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