

THE
 |  FOUR
SEASONS



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OF  | 

MARRIAGE

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The Four Seasons of Marriage

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PART I

The Four Seasons of Marriage





THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE

In the early days of my career, I was an avid student of anthropology. During my undergraduate and graduate studies in that discipline, I explored ethnographies compiled through the years by various anthropologists. One conclusive finding of these studies was that marriage between a man and a woman is the central, social building block in every human society, without exception. It is also true that monogamous, lifelong marriage is the universal cultural norm.

Of course, some people will deviate from this practice, as in polygamy (which is still found in a few nonliterate cultures) and serial monogamy (which has become common practice in some Western cultures), but these exceptions do not erase the cultural norm of lifetime monogamy from the human psyche. In fact, in spite of the widespread acceptance of divorce in the United States over the past forty years, a recent poll of never-married singles ages twenty to thirty indicates that eighty-seven percent planned to marry only once.¹ Many of these people have seen their parents divorce and that is not what they want for themselves.

The social institution of marriage is first and foremost a *cove-*

nant relationship in which a man and a woman pledge themselves to each other for a lifetime partnership. In the biblical account of creation, God's expressed desire is that the two "will become one flesh."² At the heart of marriage, therefore, is the idea of *unity*. It is the opposite of *aloneness*. Again from the creation account in Genesis, it is abundantly clear that God did not intend for men and women to live alone.³ Something deep within a man cries out for companionship with a woman, and the woman has a similar desire for intimacy with a man. Marriage is designed to satisfy this deep search for intimacy. Thus, marriage is not simply a relationship; it is an *intimate* relationship that encompasses all aspects of life: intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, and physical. In a marriage relationship, a husband and wife share life with each other in the deepest possible way. They view themselves as a unified team, not as two individuals who happen to be living in close proximity. Because the desire and drive for intimacy are at the very heart of marriage, the individuals involved become troubled about their relationship when such intimacy is not attained.

Marriage is also a *purposeful* relationship. All research indicates that an intimate marriage provides the safest and most productive climate for raising children, for example. But procreation is not the only purpose of marriage. Each person is also endowed by God with certain latent possibilities. The partnership of marriage is an ideal environment for nurturing and developing these gifts and abilities. As the writer of the ancient book of Ecclesiastes observes, "Two are better than one . . . If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!"⁴ Every married couple has experienced the reality of this principle. Two are better than one.

Husbands and wives are designed to complement each other.

When the man is weak, his wife is strong; when she stumbles, he is there to pick her up. Life is easier when two hearts and minds are committed to working together to face the challenges of the day.

THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF MARRIAGE
Committed
United
Intimate
Purposeful
Complementary

After forty-plus years of marriage, I look back and realize that many of the things I have accomplished would never have come to fruition were it not for the encouragement and help of my wife. I'd also like to think that she has accomplished more with her life because of my support. This brings me a great deal of satisfaction. Together we have committed ourselves to seek and follow God's plan for our lives. We help each other discover our unique giftedness and encourage each other to use these abilities to serve God and to promote good in the world. As we do this, our lives point others to God and we accomplish our highest end. Our marriage relationship enhances the effectiveness with which we serve God.

King David captured the vision for us in Psalm 34:3: "Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together." From a biblical perspective, the purpose of life is not to accomplish our own objectives. The purpose of life is to know God and to bring glory and honor to his name. For most people, marriage enhances the possibility of achieving this objective.

ADAPTING TO THE CHANGING SEASONS

Marriage relationships are constantly changing. Attitudes shift, emotions fluctuate, and the way spouses treat each other ebbs and flows between loving and not so loving.

Sometimes, change is beyond our control. For example, when Ben's wife, Nancy, was told she had cancer, the diagnosis changed the fabric of their lives and their relationship. They could adapt to the situation, but they couldn't control it. The same was true of Tricia and her husband, Rob, a member of the National Guard. When his unit was activated, he was sent into a war zone half a world away. Rob and Tricia could adapt, but the circumstances were beyond their control. When it became clear to Jon and Carol that her mother could no longer live alone, they had to respond to a change that they couldn't control. Life is full of unanticipated changes. Our only choice as couples is in how we will respond.

Other changes we create for ourselves, but sometimes with unexpected consequences. When Ken and Melinda moved to Kansas City after living near her family in Chicago for ten years, it created numerous changes that they now had to face together. The decisions we make regarding vocation, child rearing, education, civic and church involvement, and other areas of life create changes that affect our marriage relationships. The manner in which couples process these changes will determine the quality of their marriages.

In the natural world, the four seasons are created by certain inevitable changes that occur as the earth turns on its axis and revolves around the sun. Likewise, the changes we face in life (and the way we process and respond to them) create the seasons of marriage. The birth of a baby, the death of a loved one, illness, in-laws, getting a job, losing a job, the demands of a job, travel, vacations, weight gain, weight loss, financial ups and downs,

moving, staying, depression, disagreements, moods, teenagers, aging bodies, aging parents, hobbies, habits, sex, impotence, infidelity—all these are examples of situations and circumstances that put pressure on a marriage and demand a response. If we respond well, in harmony with our spouse, we can keep our marriage in spring or summer. If we don't respond well or if our response clashes with our spouse's response, we can feel the chill of autumn or be thrust into the icy cold of winter—sometimes before we know what hit us.

Some changes, such as sexual infidelity, strike at the very heart of a marriage. Other changes are simply a natural part of life, such as illness, aging, or a new job. Our response to change consists of emotions, attitudes, and actions. The combination of these three factors will determine which season our marriage is in at any given time.

The thesis of this book is that the natural seasons—winter, spring, summer, and fall—provide us with an apt analogy for the changes that occur in our marriage relationships. As we experience life through the five senses—hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching—we feel emotions, develop attitudes, and take action. The interweaving of our emotions, attitudes, and actions creates the quality of our relationship in the various seasons of marriage.

It has become popular in Western culture over the past forty years to exalt emotions as the guiding light that determines our actions. After more than thirty years of counseling couples, I am convinced this is a misguided notion. Don't misunderstand me: I am not suggesting that emotions are not important. Emotions tell us that something is wrong or right in a relationship, but emotions must lead to reason, and reason must be guided by truth if we are to take constructive action. We must not short-

circuit the process and jump straight from emotions to action without the benefit of reason. Many couples who have done this have found themselves in winter when they could have ended up in spring or summer.

EMOTIONS moderated by REASON guided by TRUTH = CONSTRUCTIVE ACTION

Let's begin our journey by defining the four seasons of marriage. In the next four chapters, we will look at the common emotions, attitudes, and actions that create a particular season. We will do this by visiting with couples who have chosen to communicate to me the joys and sorrows of their season of marriage. Names and places have been changed to protect the privacy of the couples involved, but the stories are real and for the most part are told in the words of the people themselves.

Perhaps you will discover yourself in one of these seasons of marriage. If not, the Marital Seasons Profile at the end of Part I will help you identify the season of your marriage. In the second part of the book, I will introduce seven practical ideas for weaving your emotions, attitudes, and actions together to move from one season to another.

In Part III, we'll recap the seven strategies and answer some of the common questions I've been asked about the four seasons of marriage.

Finally, to help you use this book in a small-group setting, or to facilitate your own understanding, we've included a study guide intended to promote conversation about the four seasons of marriage and the seven strategies. My hope is that all these features will help you and your spouse enhance the seasons of your marriage.