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YOUR MARRIAGE CAN BE SAVED



12 Truths for Rescuing Your Relationship



JOE & MICHELLE WILLIAMS

“We know Joe and Michelle Williams, and if anyone knows how to save a marriage—it’s Joe and Michelle! They are the experts. Even marriages that look or feel too far gone don’t have to be, thanks to this advice from Joe and Michelle. Every couple could benefit from reading about issues that, if ignored, can undermine happiness. We all need a few copies of this book on our shelves to give away to friends in need.”

—Bill and Pam Farrel
Directors of Farrel Communications,
Best-selling authors of *Men Are Like Waffles—
Women Are Like Spaghetti*

“This book is highly readable and amazingly insightful. What Joe and Michelle say really works. Lives have been changed by their counsel.”

—H. Norman Wright
Marriage and family counselor and author

“Joe and Michelle Williams have written a knowledgeable, candid guide to reconciliation between spouses. Joe and Michelle are taking the success they achieved in rescuing their marriage from divorce and are passing it on to the rest of us. Their delivery is honest, relevant, and relatable. The twelve truths they examine regarding a marriage in crisis are significant, and the discussion questions they provide at the end of each chapter for enlightenment are extremely valuable. This book speaks eloquently to the current cultural reality that is divorce and gives an alternative choice not often mentioned in today’s society: reconciliation.”

—Eric and Jennifer Garcia
Co-Founders, Association of Marriage
and Family Ministries (AMFM)

“If you’re considering the ‘D’ word, immediately stop and read this book. Joe and Michelle Williams share their own personal story of how God restored their marriage—even after separation—and gives Bible-based help and real hope for saving your marriage God’s way. We highly recommend this book!”

—David & Claudia Arp

Authors of the *10 Great Dates* series
and *The Second Half of Marriage*

“Our culture offers little hope for couples in crisis. Most simply divorce. Yet, according to Paul, Christ ‘gave us the ministry of reconciliation.’ Acting on that assurance and armed with the experience of their own failed marriages and separations, Joe and Michelle Williams offer new insights on reconciling and healing for even the most troubled and hopeless relationships. They have turned their personal pain into a passion for healing marriages. No couple is better qualified to offer guidance for the difficult journey of recovery. Full of practical do’s and don’ts, *Yes, Your Marriage Can Be Saved* is the long overdue guide hurting couples have been waiting for.”

—Mike and Harriet McManus

Co-Founders and Co-Chairs of Marriage Savers



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yes,

YOUR MARRIAGE CAN BE SAVED



JOE & MICHELLE WILLIAMS



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Yes, Your Marriage Can Be Saved

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People's names and certain details of their stories have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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Contents

Introduction	1
1. Prayer and Church Attendance Are Not Enough	7
2. You Need to Build a Safe Support System	17
3. God Will Answer Your Prayers, His Way	31
4. Identify Secret Motives	49
5. Spouses May Change After Marriage	65
6. Anger Can Be Handled God's Way	87
7. Even Little White Lies Are Big Trouble	109
8. You Can Develop Healthy Boundaries	133
9. Make Changes—Even with an Unwilling Spouse	157
10. Listen to the Right Counsel	179
11. Battle Outside Opposition	199
12. Reconciling—God's Way	219
Notes	231

Introduction

When we separated in 1987, we were angry and confused. We were also left wondering where the “church” was in our seemingly hopeless situation. Because we’d both experienced marriage and divorce in our pasts before we became committed Christians, we were determined to figure out a way to deal with our problems and avoid yet another failed marriage. We knew enough of the Bible to believe that God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), and we wanted desperately to keep the promises we made when we renewed our marriage vows as Christians only a few months before.

During our time apart there were many resources we lacked, which only prolonged our struggle and our separation. One of the most critical things we lacked was a healthy support system of people who understood our needs. Since we were never on the same page at the same time, couples counseling, marriage retreats, and classes geared for husbands and wives to attend together never worked for us. In fact, these things only seemed to make our situation worse because of the expectations imposed on the spouse who wasn’t fully willing to participate.

Another problem we encountered during our separation was that the married couples we knew couldn’t relate to what we were going through. Some people tried to rescue us and fix our marriage, but that only resulted in their burnout and frustration when our marriage crises continued to escalate out of control. Others avoided us altogether because they simply didn’t know what else to do. We mistakenly believed they didn’t care.

Wanting desperately to be a happy couple, we tried everything to

mend our marriage, but nothing worked. While our separation was lonely, painful, and embarrassing, we now understand that God was grooming us for the “ministry of reconciliation,” based on 2 Corinthians 5:18. Through trial and error, and in God’s perfect timing, we reconciled nearly two years later.

In 1990, shortly after our reconciliation, we knew God was calling us to help other couples in crisis and provide them with the resources we didn’t have when we were separated. Seven years later our first publication was a workbook titled *Reconciling God’s Way*, which was based on the challenges we faced in our marriage and separation. The workbook and leader’s guide allowed us to provide classes in our community and to assist pastors worldwide to implement ministries of reconciliation in their local churches. In 1999 we cofounded the International Center for Reconciling God’s Way, Inc. and went into ministry full time.

Over the years, we’ve talked with hundreds of couples and individuals whose marriages were in crisis, as well as the pastors and leaders trying to help these couples. While the *Reconciling God’s Way* workbook served as the basic outline for helping couples to reconcile their marriage, the book you are holding in your hands presents new tools and exercises, as well as the numerous misconceptions so many people have about marriages in crisis—including the Christian community.

While it will certainly be beneficial if you and your spouse read and discuss the tools and complete the exercises in the book together, we have found that most couples are like we were when our marriage needed help: One spouse is usually more interested in working on the marriage than the other. If your husband or wife shows little or no desire in reading or utilizing the tools and exercises right now, realize that this is common and just commit to doing your part.

We are continually amazed at how God blesses the couples and

individuals who persevere in the midst of a crisis marriage, and we have no doubt that He will do the same for you.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN: RATE YOUR MARRIAGE

Without discussing it with your spouse, take a moment and rate the level of your marriage.

___ **Level One:** Arguments happen, but I am committed to our marriage.

___ **Level Two:** Quarrels are left unresolved and there is a lack of intimacy in our marriage.

___ **Level Three:** In the midst of arguments, one or both of us voice threats of separation or divorce.

___ **Level Four:** At least one of us is seriously contemplating separation or divorce.

If you rated your marriage at level two or higher, your marriage is in crisis. If you rated it at a level one, are you certain your spouse would rate it the same?

We receive calls daily from distraught husbands and devastated wives whose spouses have announced they want out of the marriage. According to most of our callers, the announcement took them completely by surprise. We also receive calls from frustrated men or women who are unhappy in their marriages and want to attend couples counseling or seminars, but their spouses refuse to participate.

Regardless of the level of crisis in your marriage, you can have harmony in your home and hope for your marriage, even if your spouse is unhappy or unwilling to do his or her part. However, first you must be honest about your situation and put a plan together. We have designed the tools and exercises in this book to be implemented with a support system over a 12-week period. In preparation for the

discussion time each week, underline or take notes while reading each chapter. Here are some suggestions as to how you can best benefit from the format of the book:

1. *You can read the book and implement the tools as a couple.* If your spouse is willing to participate with you, schedule a time each week that the two of you can sit down together without interruptions. Discuss the questions at the end of each chapter, as well as the tools and exercises or anything you underlined in each chapter. Don't get overly concerned if your spouse does not want to fully participate. Count it a blessing if he or she is willing, but refrain from imposing unrealistic expectations on your spouse. Give God a chance to work things out *His* way and in *His* time.

2. *Be accountable to a "support partner."* Even if you and your spouse are going through this book as a couple, it's wise for both of you to ask a same-gender friend or acquaintance who is supportive of your marriage and spiritual growth if he or she would be willing to hold you accountable and pray for you as you implement the tools and practice the exercises. Having a same-gender support partner will take pressure off you and your spouse, and provide you both with some extra accountability and prayer support. Schedule a time to meet with this person each week for the next 12 weeks and use that time to discuss the questions at the end of each chapter, as well as the ways in which the tools and exercises are working in your marriage.

3. *Read the book and implement the tools in a small group.* If your marriage is in crisis and your spouse is unwilling or unable to implement the tools in this book, meeting with a small group (as well as your support partner) will create a double portion of accountability and support for you. Try to assemble two to six people (same gender) who would like to improve their marriages and who would be willing to meet weekly to go through the discussion questions and tools in each chapter.



We pray that you will be comforted through what we and others will share with you in the pages of this book—and that one day you will provide the same support for those who are hurting.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

Prayer and Church Attendance Are Not Enough

Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.

—JOHN 4:13-14, NASB

*W*e've just celebrated our 25th year of marriage. Our five children and ten grandchildren celebrated with us. We have so much to be thankful for: the joy we feel serving side by side in ministry; the comfort of knowing that no matter how upset we might get with each other, we will never threaten separation or divorce; and, most important, the mutual love we share for one another with Christ as the center of our marriage. We are best friends and we have fun together—but it hasn't always been that way.



When Michelle and I married in January 1982, neither of us thought it was necessary to seek premarital counseling. We thought the mistakes

from our past marriages and divorces would equip us for dealing with anything we might encounter in our relationship. But it turned out that being a stepdad to Michelle's three daughters (two of them teenagers) was more difficult than I ever could have imagined. In fact, Michelle and I were married less than a month when we had our first big argument over parenting issues. I walked out the door of our house and into a local bar and returned home after having more than a few drinks. Neither Michelle nor I discussed the incident for fear of starting the argument all over again. Instead, we buried it—a bad habit we continued for years to come.

Soon after we married, Michelle got pregnant, and we thought having a child together might help our marriage. We were wrong. Not only did our troubles continue, but we separated for three months when our son, Mick, was less than a year old. When we got back together, we made a promise not to separate again and things seemed great between us. But our “honeymoon period” was short-lived, and soon we were right back to our same old pattern: arguing and making up, but never resolving anything. I would often go to a bar and drink too much when we argued, and this destructive cycle continued for about three years. Then, one night after going to a bar, I returned home to find that Michelle and the kids were gone. When I located them at her mom's house the next day, she said she wasn't coming home unless I moved out. I tried to get her to change her mind, but she was adamant. So, I decided to pack a few things and go to my hometown of Santa Maria, California, to stay with family and wait for Michelle to cool off so we could work on getting back together.



I (Michelle) was so fed up with our arguments and Joe's drinking that I was relieved when he went to Santa Maria. I started living as if I were

single again and refused to talk to him each time he called. Then, a few weeks later, I ran into an old high school friend, and she invited me to attend church with her. Joe and I had taken the kids to church a few times, but had never attended regularly. I accepted her invitation, and even though I didn't give up my "single" lifestyle, I started going to church every week.

One Sunday morning a few weeks later, the pastor invited people to the altar who wanted to receive Christ. The pastor also explained the importance of Christians who had been living outside of God's will to rededicate their lives to Him. I knew God was speaking to my heart and telling me to change my ways once and for all. Although I had prayed to receive Christ and was baptized in 1975 during a week-long Christian crusade, I never got involved in a church or studied the Bible. As a result, my relationship with the Lord didn't grow, and I continued to look for significance from the love of men rather than God. That Sunday I repented of my ways and prayed to rededicate my life to God. The woman I prayed with encouraged me to attend a weekly class on the foundations of the Christian faith.

Not long afterward, Joe called from Santa Maria. "Michelle," he said, "I miss you and the kids. I want you to sell our business and move here to Santa Maria with me."

"You've got to be kidding!" I told him. "I'll never do that. There's no way I'm going to live with you again. I know you're still drinking when you get angry, and I'm not going to walk on eggshells in my own home. If you miss the kids, then you can move back here, but I'm not moving six hours away." I concluded the conversation with the big clincher: "Besides, I've started attending church regularly, and I've found out that we are 'unequally yoked.' So, I don't have to reconcile with you."

Unequally yoked was a term someone shared with me from the passage in 2 Corinthians 6:14 about Christians not partnering with

unbelievers, and I was happy to misuse it as biblical confirmation that I didn't have to reconcile with Joe. Even though I had stopped dating other men and made a recommitment to follow Jesus, I was still doing things my way rather than God's, and I was determined to live life without Joe. I enjoyed the peace in our home now that we were apart.

Joe was pretty frustrated when we hung up, but a week or so later, he came back to Modesto and moved in with one of his friends. The following Sunday he showed up at the same church I was now attending. When the pastor gave the invitation to receive Christ, Joe walked forward. *He's just trying to trick me into going back with him by pretending to become a Christian*, I thought angrily.



I (Joe) didn't want another divorce and hoped to save our marriage by moving back to Modesto. My parents went through a bitter divorce when I was young, and my dad never modeled how to be a godly husband or father. It seemed I was following in his footsteps. When I relocated to Modesto prior to meeting Michelle, my son Jason, from my first marriage, was a teenager. After Michelle and I got married, I saw Jason only a couple of times a year and, as a result, I was not the dad he needed me to be. I knew that if I didn't start living life differently, the same thing was going to happen in my relationship with my son Mick.

When I walked forward to receive Christ that Sunday, I meant it. I made a commitment to change and I wanted to become a godly husband and father. The following week, I went to the same foundations class Michelle was attending, but that made her angry.

"Joe, this is my church! Get your own," she said one night. She even refused to use my last name and, instead, used her middle name. She also sat across the room in the foundations class and acted as if she

didn't even know me. Regardless of her reactions, I continued to show up at church and attend the class. I was baptized a few weeks later.

I think Michelle finally got worn out from trying to stay mad at me. One night after class, she asked me if I would consider meeting with the pastor and his wife to discuss our marriage situation. Because she wasn't using my last name and refused to sit with me, they never connected us as husband and wife. We all had a good laugh when they realized I was the husband Michelle had been complaining about all those months. A short time later, we renewed our vows—as Christians—in front of the whole church.

CHURCH AND PRAYER PRODUCE SOLID MARRIAGES, RIGHT?

In the fall of 1987, about eight months after we renewed our vows, I sat beside Joe as we waited for the leader of an evangelism class at our church to give us instructions. We thought that taking the class and serving God as a couple might make our marriage stronger. People at church had told us when we reconciled that as long as we prayed together, attended church as a family, and served in ministry together, we would avoid separating again.

The leader began, “Please condense your Christian testimony into a two-minute presentation for the purpose of sharing it with unbelievers. Fill in the blanks in the following sentences: *Before I was a Christian, I _____.* And now that I am a Christian, I _____.”

As I sat in class that evening, thinking about how my life had changed since rededicating it to Christ the previous year, I came to a troubling realization: My life had not really changed that much at all. Despite our best attempts to make it appear otherwise, our marriage was, once again, in crisis. As Joe sat beside me effortlessly filling in the

blanks on his paper, I wondered what in the world he could possibly be writing. Did he think we were happy just because we told people we were? Did he really think he had changed since becoming a Christian several months earlier? Hadn't he noticed that although we were regularly attending church and praying together, we still hadn't learned how to express our frustrations without deeply hurting one another? I wondered whether all the other couples in the class and in our church were as happily married behind the scenes as they seemed to appear on the outside. Or, like us, were they simply covering up a lifetime of hurts with polite smiles and hearty handshakes? (In fact, within that year, two of the couples in the class divorced, and two years later the pastor leading the class left ministry altogether because of a crisis in his marriage.)

The weeks that followed turned into a battle of wills between Joe and me.

"Joe, we need to go to counseling or to one of those weekend retreats that help couples get to the root of their marital problems," I demanded most every time we got into one of our heated arguments, which often ended without resolution.

"No, it's too expensive! Besides, we usually end up fighting over what the counselor says anyway!" he would shout back, digging his heels in even deeper.

The familiar feeling of hopelessness was beginning to return. The thought of facing a third separation was overwhelming. Because we were now both Christians, we imposed expectations on ourselves that weren't there the first two times we separated. To make matters worse, we had renewed our vows in front of the entire church only a few months earlier, and our pastor often used us as an example of how God could heal a marriage and bring hope to any situation that seemed utterly hopeless. To admit we were in crisis again meant we might cause despair for those who looked to us for hope in their own situations.

In an effort to grow closer with each other and other couples, we joined a home fellowship group. One night, the leaders of the group asked if anyone needed special prayer. Without thinking I blurted out, “Yes, we do! Joe and I are struggling again in our marriage.” I felt a sense of relief as the truth came out, but what happened next took me by surprise.

We were asked to sit in the middle of the room so that everyone could pray over us. Neither of us had ever been “prayed over” before, but I was willing to try anything at that point. Everyone was so loving as they each asked God to heal and bless our marriage and to help us resolve our differences; I didn’t have the heart to tell them their prayers were not working. Instead, when one of the members asked us how things were going the following week, I lied. “Thank you so much for praying over us. Yes, your prayers worked and things are so much better between us.”



I was as frustrated as Michelle when our marriage troubles resurfaced. From the start of our marriage, we fought over everything: money, parenting, my family, her family—you name it, we fought about it. Our natural tendencies of dealing with conflict only made matters worse.

I tended to stuff what I really felt and during the years leading up to the renewal of our vows, I would lose control with the aid of alcohol. Michelle could take it for only so long before she would explode in rage when keeping the peace in our home became more than she could handle. I had expected things to change after we became Christians and renewed our vows in the church, especially because I’d stopped drinking. But when our arguments started escalating again a few months later, it was hard to know where to turn.

Finally, Michelle convinced me to go with her for a weekly counseling appointment with one of the pastors at our church. But unfortunately, after the third week of counseling we started fighting over new things: what one of us said or didn't say during the session; whether or not we completed the assignment the pastor gave us; or even whose side the pastor was on regarding issues we brought up during the appointment!

I finally told Michelle I wasn't going back. Refusing to attend definitely didn't help our situation. One night during an argument, I packed my bags and left. I wanted to visit my family in Santa Maria and take a break from all the fighting.

When I took off that night, I didn't intend for our separation to be permanent. But when I tried to go back home a couple of weeks later, Michelle said the only way she would let me stay was if we went into counseling again. I didn't want to do that. Since neither of us would back down, I decided to get an apartment. I figured we would settle our differences in a month or two, once we both cooled off.

I had no idea it would take two years.



While it is true that attending church and praying together are good for couples, it is a misconception that doing so will prevent separation or divorce. The truth is that churches across America are filled with couples who have made a commitment to Christ, attend church and pray together, and whose marriages are in crisis. If you have made a commitment to Jesus and consider yourself a Christian, there is no guarantee that your marriage will be crisis free. However, if you will allow Jesus to walk beside you during your crisis, He will provide everything you need to get through it.

THE WELL OF “LIVING WATER”

In John chapter 4, Jesus addressed a woman at a well in Samaria. She had been married five times and was living with her lover. Jesus drew her to Himself during their conversation because He knew she was trying to fill the emptiness in her life with love from men rather than God. Jesus promised to give her His living water, and she left the well that day never thirsting for love again.

Because of our pasts, the pastor who helped us renew our vows lovingly refers to us as “the man *and* the woman at the well.” But the Samaritan woman’s story is applicable to all of us. Jesus wants to draw everyone to a place where they will come to Him to satisfy their thirst with the Holy Spirit. In spite of different pasts and experiences, we all share a common thirst that entices us to the well of living water. Why some choose to drink and others walk away is a mystery to us, but we know that Jesus brings everyone to His well—His way. Could God be bringing you to the well through a crisis in your marriage?

GROUP OR SUPPORT-PARTNER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Were you raised in a home with religious values? How did that shape who you are today?*
2. *Did you have a good relationship with your parents while growing up? What about now?*
3. *Did your parents model a good marriage? Explain.*
4. *How do you tend to handle stress in a crisis situation?*
5. *Look up and discuss John 14:1-3.*
6. *What is one thing that you are grateful for in your spouse?*
7. *What is one thing that you need prayer for?*

