

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

# *Countdown for Couples*

PREPARING FOR THE ADVENTURE OF MARRIAGE



*Dale Mathis, M.A.  
& Susan Mathis*



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*Countdown for Couples*

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In *Countdown for Couples*, Dale and Susan Mathis have provided couples with the tools they need to build a strong foundation for a lasting marriage. For any couple planning to get married, this book is a must!

—GARY D. CHAPMAN, PH.D.

Author of *The Five Love Languages* and  
*The Five Languages of Apology*

What a gift to every young couple seriously considering marriage! Dale and Susan Mathis have addressed crucial issues in a positive, personal, and passionate way. Their warm approach creates an atmosphere of exploration and honest discourse for young men and women willing to examine themselves and their relationship. Anyone doing premarital counseling can benefit from this workbook-style resource.

—LOUIS MCBURNEY, M.D.

Marble Retreat Worldwide

So many couples spend months preparing for their wedding day but take almost no time to prepare their hearts and minds for the marriage that will last a lifetime! *Countdown for Couples* is an excellent resource that tackles issues such as expectations, finances, in-law challenges, and more. Take time to read what Dale and Susan Mathis have put together. You'll be so glad you did!

—PETER J. LARSON, PH.D.

Vice President of PREPARE/ENRICH

Dedicated to our five adult children:  
To Mark, for your creative spirit  
To Bruce, for your gift as a physician  
To Erik, for your dedication to the education of children  
To Sean, for your love of God's creation  
To Janelle, for your passion to help the poor  
and take the gospel around the world



And to you, our readers, who are preparing for the adventure  
of marriage with wisdom and discernment.  
To each of you—and to each of your mates—may God's love  
live in your hearts and lives.

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Thanks to our friends who have enriched our lives—and to those who graciously shared your stories with us and with our readers. This book is richer because of you.

Thanks to the team at Focus on the Family who worked so hard to make this project all it can be: Larry, Brandy, Cami, Kellie—and to our friends and colleagues in the periodicals and family ministry departments, especially Pam, Andrea, Sheila, and Scott, who supported us through it all.

Thanks to each of you who has encouraged and helped us see beyond our inabilities so we can tap into His abilities. We trust you realize who you are and how much you mean to us.

Thanks to you, our readers, for entrusting your hearts and your relationships to God's Word and these pages as you get ready for the best adventure in life—marriage.

And most of all, thanks to God. May we ever live to know You and make You known.

## Preface

# GETTING STARTED

Isn't it great? The thought of marrying the one you love, the ecstatic feelings of sheer happiness, the excitement of planning a wedding and counting down the days. But wait! There's all that other stuff—the “for better *or worse*, for richer *or poorer*, *in sickness* and in health, till *death* do us part”—the daily living-together stuff.

Marriage is a huge commitment and not to be taken lightly, so you're wise to take the time to assess your relationship and learn all you can before your big day. This book will help you do just that. We'll review the basics, such as what love is really all about, but we'll also go deeper and address things you may never have thought you needed—or wanted—to talk about.

If you see this premarital preparation as a countdown to an adventure, a journey that will take you deeper into the life of the one you love, it'll be one of the most exciting and important things you've done together so far. That's the way we viewed our premarital learning, and even today we see it as one of the greatest gifts we have given each other.

This book provides premarital information based on a biblical worldview that is practical, time-tested, sound, insightful, and most of all, useful. By sharing the truth of God's Word on the subject of marriage preparation, we hope to help you better understand God's plan for this awesome aspect of life.



Here are the four main purposes of this book:

- To help you better understand yourself, your future spouse, and your future together
- To alleviate your fears, doubts, and worries about yourself, your future mate, and your marriage
- To prepare you for living together and loving each other forever
- To launch you on your marriage journey and a lifetime of growing together

As you use this book to prepare for your marriage, you'll explore many facets of who you are, who the one you love is, and what it will be like to live together and love each other for the rest of your lives. You'll talk about the spiritual, emotional, social, relational, and physical intricacies of being married.

You'll also review your past and understand better how your family and your experiences have molded your life. You'll try to articulate your expectations, beliefs, attitudes, concerns, fears, and struggles about marriage, and even assess how ready you are to marry at this time. And you'll grow to know your future mate better—more than you ever dreamed possible.

You'll hear from experts on such topics as communication, marital roles, in-law challenges, sexuality, finances, conflict resolution, and so on. The following chapters will also provide you with extensive resources for continuing to grow in your marriage throughout your entire life together.

A couple who is willing to take the time to prepare for marriage and sees the value in doing the work it takes to get ready will often have the same attitude and behavior after marriage. And the opposite is true too. If one of you thinks you know it all, beware! That same resistance to work on your relationship may hinder your marriage from growing to its full potential.

Be careful that you don't enter marriage hoping to change your future mate, or you'll likely be disappointed. Lifetime habits don't usually change; people are who they are. Walk into this preparation time with the view that you want to know yourself and your future mate better. Be willing to grow

together, learning new ways to make your marriage a success. Hey, you're mature enough to realize that neither of you is perfect!

To be effective, it's essential that you choose, right now, to be open, honest, and vulnerable with each other. If you try to hide anything, we can almost guarantee that it'll come up after you marry, and by that time, it might be much more hurtful to your spouse and your relationship than it will be now. By talking through the issues before you marry, you'll build trust, understanding, and intimacy.

As you work through the pages of this book, we suggest you do it with a pastor, a counselor, a mature couple, or a small group. Other people can help you through areas that are confusing, scary, or hard to discuss. They can provide you with a fresh perspective when you need it and keep you accountable.

But if you choose to go through the book without outside help, both of you need to commit to working through every chapter. Set aside a specific time each week to read through one chapter, or maybe two, and allot time for discussion.

Part of our motivation for writing this book is to help you explore areas we were too unaware of, too naive, or too inexperienced to know how to handle in our first marriages. Since we both experienced the trauma, grief, and heartache of failed marriages early in our adulthood, we want to prevent others—especially you—from going through the same experience.

We're also aware that one of the reasons for our failures is that we didn't have a manual like this to help us ask the tough questions before we said "I do." Marriage can get complicated, and knowing some of its complexities and secrets ahead of time can help you be more successful than you could ever be without preparation. We hope to help you avoid frustrations, hurts, and failures by informing you about those issues that can cause trouble for couples.

In fact, I [Dale] decided to get my first master's degree in counseling in 1971 so I could identify some of what went wrong with my first marriage, learn how not to make the same mistakes, and help others avoid them too.

Though I earned my advanced degrees in secular universities, I'm convinced that Christ at the center of a marriage makes all the difference.

I [Susan] have been honored to choose, review, edit, and publish literally thousands of articles on marriage and family life during my tenure as *Focus on the Family* magazine editor and editorial director, and I've learned truths that have helped me and countless others.

As we wrote this book, we not only had lots of fun together, but we also learned so much from and about each other, all of which helps us in helping others. As a couple, we consider it a privilege and a joy to regularly empower future mates to start out on the right path together, whether we're working as facilitators in our church's premarital ministry, with a young couple still in college, or in private counseling with an older couple. In our years of serving in premarital ministry, we've found that couples who take the time to really prepare for their future together walk into marriage with a confidence and security they wouldn't have otherwise.

Throughout the book, you'll read about some of the lessons we learned the hard way. We'll also share stories of other couples and their successes and struggles. We know you'll make your own mistakes along the way, but we assure you that the Lord will faithfully walk you through them as you trust in Him. Our prayer is that you'll make fewer and far less serious mistakes than we made in our first marriages.

We suggest you work through this book at your own pace, but try not to skip too quickly through topics you think you understand. We also recommend that you do no more than two chapters per week. You may find you need to slow down when you hit speed bumps where the two of you disagree, or when you find it difficult to work through a topic.

But don't give up. Persevere together. Take your time and glean everything you can from each chapter. Whether this is your first marriage or, like us, you've experienced a failed marriage and are hoping to avoid making the same mistakes again, this book offers the practical advice and tools you need to succeed. And if you find you need more help with a specific topic, you can

read the sidebars throughout the book, where experts discuss the topic. Get their books, check out their Web sites, and find out more.

In addition to your reading this book, Susan and I [Dale] strongly encourage you to assess your relationship by taking the Premarital Personal and Relationship Inventory (PREPARE), an assessment used by professional counselors, pastors, trained and certified mentors, and churches that conduct premarital courses. (For more information, go to [www.family.org/couple-checkup](http://www.family.org/couple-checkup).) We've used this assessment with numerous couples and find it to be accurate and reliable.

By taking the PREPARE, you can assess your potential for marital success as well as learn about the strengths and weaknesses in your relationship. Then you can discuss issues, some which are difficult or may have been overlooked. The objective is to encourage and inform, not to discourage you.

By reading this book and taking the PREPARE, you'll begin marriage with some newly acquired skills. You'll also gain an understanding and appreciation of your future mate as well as get to know yourself better. Your expectations will be more realistic, and you'll be more committed to your marriage.

Finally, please know that we've changed many of the names in our stories to protect the individuals' privacy, but the examples are real-life situations couples face.

Now, let's get started.

# A MARRIAGE OF THREE

## *What's God's View of Love and Marriage?*

I [Susan] was so excited. Dale and I had driven to Estes Park, Colorado, to get away and visit some friends. We sat gazing at the beautiful mountains, asking question after question of each other and discussing the possibility of our future together. Before considering marriage, we had promised to reveal our thoughts, fears, goals, and needs to each other completely.

After our time in the mountains, every night for several weeks Dale and I went through lists we'd made of things we wanted to know about each other—everything from how we were raised to finances to roles and goals to expectations and pet peeves to sex and health issues to our relationships with God, and so much more.

As adults, we had both been single for more than a decade. We'd been deeply hurt by our earlier failed relationships, and we worried that we might not be able to be successful in the future. Although we had tried to learn all we could about love, relationships, and God's plan for marriage, being open and honest with each other made us feel very vulnerable. We realized that this kind of openness could make or break our budding relationship. But we also decided that without complete honesty, we'd both be marrying a person we didn't really know.

We realized that we needed to start by establishing a solid foundation for our relationship.

Scripture says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18, KJV). In addition to talking through important topics and sharing our feelings with each other, we discovered a principle we want to share with you: The best way to begin planning for your future together is by deciding now what your vision is for your marriage.

What did this look like for us? Dale and I agreed that our vision was to live the message of Jesus Christ’s redeeming love through our relationship. By caring for each other physically, emotionally, spiritually, and every other way, we wanted to create a fully intimate and inspiring relationship that could show our children and grandchildren, family, and friends the beauty and promise of God’s plan for marriage.

Every couple’s vision will be different, of course, but a clear vision for your marriage will guide, inspire, and motivate you as you grow through the stresses of life. When you have a positive and exciting vision for life together, you can work toward that goal, even when times are tough.

A vision for your marriage goes far beyond just learning and practicing relationship skills. Understanding God’s perspective is critical to the success of your marriage.

God has given us that vision in His Word. He has given us His definition of love, His blueprint for covenant commitment, and His grace-filled plan for marriage.

Let’s take a closer look at God’s design for marriage.

## THE VERY FIRST MARRIAGE

When God created the first marriage between Adam and Eve, He said it wasn’t good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Why? Because we’re all made in His image, the image of a completely relational God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who work together unselfishly for the good of humankind and

## Ask the Expert

Author Al Janssen imagines the moment of creation and a heavenly scene in his book *Your Marriage Masterpiece*:

“Amazing.” Abdiel watched as God stepped back, glowing with pride, and the man and woman gazed at each other, touching only their fingertips. “Yes, God has created two like Himself . . .”

“Not exactly like Him,” corrected Zephon.

“No, not the same. Yet, you see glimpses of Him in the two of them together.”

Zephon understood. “Yes, He is three yet one. They are two yet one.”

“Two, maybe. But with the Creator that makes three!”

By now, all of the angelic audience saw what Abdiel and Zephon had recognized. In this man and woman, joined together, God had provided a reflection of Himself for all His creation. Two incredible creatures, brilliant and beautiful, each unique, but together revealing deeper aspects of the intricate beauty of their Creator.

Truly, this was a work of art. This was God’s masterpiece.<sup>1</sup>

In *Your Marriage Masterpiece*, Janssen shows us how God’s vision for marriage is His supreme artistic achievement. He teaches us how we can make our marriages fulfilling and reflect God’s masterpiece in our relationships with our future mates.

for God's purposes. Because we were created to be like Him, there's an inner yearning for that same deep, intimate relationship.

Adam and Eve exemplified the deepest, most intimate relationship as a couple. Scripture says they were naked and not ashamed (Genesis 2:25), not just in a physical, sexual way, but, we think, they were "naked" emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually as well. They were vulnerable with each other. From the very first married couple, we see that marriage is taking two unique people and uniting their souls and bodies for a common purpose, for the rest of their lives.

## WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

Marriage is the legal, social, and spiritual contract between a man and a woman. It's a covenant agreement made before God. It's a commitment to each other—a pledge to live together, to serve each other, and to remain faithful to one another. Marriage is also God's way of showing His love for us, showing His marriage plan to the world, and helping us become more like Him.

Socially, marriage is a public contract that says "We are one" as we share our lives with others. Emotionally, it's being vulnerable, transparent, and honest with each other as with no one else. Intellectually, it's sharing our thoughts, opinions, and desires with each other. Physically, it's everything from a tender kiss to passionate sexual intercourse. Spiritually, it's praying together, worshiping together, and growing together in our faith.

Marriage is about working on our character; extending love, grace, and forgiveness to each other; and growing through our mistakes. None of us is perfect, and understanding and accepting this up front is important. We are all works in progress. When we see marriages fail, we sometimes think those marriages must have been mistakes. But remember, marriage is taking two imperfect people and putting them in a committed relationship so they can safely grow and mature together as they work on their imperfections and



problems. It's about giving, helping, trusting, forgiving, caring, learning, and living through the ups and downs of life.

## WHAT IS LOVE?

If marriage is a picture of God's love for us as well as an opportunity to show love to each other, it's imperative that we have a good understanding of what love is. But how can we define *love*?

A good place to start is the Bible. The Love Chapter is 1 Corinthians 13. You've probably heard it before. But what does it really say? Let's look at verses 4–8.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails.

Most, if not all, of us have tasted the pain of love lost, and none of us wants to experience that again. These few verses provide a good framework to help us understand how we can love well. They show us the ideal, the perfect model of love. But the truth is that although the characteristics of love are great, we don't always love perfectly. Sometimes we simply fall short. If you understand this, you'll give each other space and grace to make mistakes. And God can use your marriage to show others that real love and grace can make people different, even better.

Throughout this book we'll continue to unpack 1 Corinthians 13 as you learn how to better love the way God intended for you to love each other. You'll also learn practical and helpful ways to put God's love into practice.

## WHAT'S COVENANT COMMITMENT?

In our living room there is a symbol we used in our wedding ceremony. It's a three-strand cord of red, white, and gold. For us, it symbolizes that the commitment we made to marriage wasn't just between the two of us. The covenant was made by three of us, with God at the center. Scripture says, "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

A commitment to marry is more than just signing a contract. Marriage is a sacred covenant, a plan God created for our benefit. In the Bible we read that God made covenants with His people. But people like Jonathan and David, Ruth and Naomi, and others also made covenants *with each other*. They were committing to love, serve, and care for each other. Covenant promises are unconditional; there are no escape clauses and/or money-back guarantees. Covenants are made on the foundations of faith and love, and they are permanent.

We all know couples, maybe even our own parents, who divorced. Maybe they just grew tired of each other. Or maybe the marriage was plagued by abuse, addiction, or infidelity. Whatever the reason, the couple broke the commitment they made to each other, and the painful consequences of their choice affected many others besides themselves.

But most of us also know couples who have been married for decades and are happy despite the challenges they've faced through the years. Our friends Bob and Gayle just celebrated 55 years together. They love each other dearly, are the closest of companions, and remain deeply committed to each other. As Dale says, "When we grow up, let's be just like them!" These are the kinds of couples who can give us hope for our marriages.

As you begin your marriage, it's a good idea to find one or two couples you can look to as a model of what you hope your marriage will eventually look like. Especially if healthy marriages have been rare in your life, looking to others who have successful marriages can be beneficial. We'll talk more about this a little later.

Marriage is all about choice. It's about making the right choices to love, honor, and care for the one you commit your life to, even when it's tough. We have to choose to love each other on a moment-by-moment basis every day of our lives together. This type of commitment involves more than just romantic feelings; it's a choice to be physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually faithful to each other every day.

## LEAVING AND CLEAVING

Jesus said,

Haven't you read . . . that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. (Matthew 19:4–6)

Leaving and cleaving—uniting—are choices every married person must make to leave his or her parents and the single lifestyle and to cleave to the union, security, intimacy, joy, and even struggles of life with his or her spouse.

When a couple enjoys this covenant commitment, when they truly leave and cleave, they feel secure emotionally and physically. A wife feels that her husband is truly devoted to her and looking out for her best interests. A husband has the surety that he is important, valued, a priority, and worthy of investment or sacrifice. This is why cohabitation before marriage lacks permanence and creates a false sense of security. A relationship without covenant commitment lacks true intimacy.

Karen misunderstood the concept of leaving and cleaving early in her marriage with Rick. As soon as they returned from their honeymoon, she started calling her mother daily. She shared with her mother the most intimate details of her marriage, and she relied on her mother's advice and opinions for

everything. Soon Rick began to feel betrayed, so he quietly stepped into the background and busied himself with other activities until he couldn't take it anymore.

It took several painful discussions before Karen understood that she needed to leave and cleave to Rick. Of course she needed her mother, but she also needed to leave the single life and family ties of her childhood. When she married, she became "one" with her husband, and she needed to act accordingly. That meant putting him first when it came to her time, interests, privacy, and more.



This covenant you're about to make affects more than the two of you. It affects everyone who comes to your wedding, everyone you know. When you say your vows before an audience on your wedding day, you'll be doing much more than performing a ceremony and allowing your friends and family to celebrate a special occasion with you. They are witnesses to a sacred covenant, which you freely choose to enter into. But while we want to emphasize the fact that marriage is a major commitment and takes work, we also want to assure you that the right kind of marriage can be the greatest blessing of your lives.

Congratulations! You're on your way to becoming ready for the most amazing adventure of life: marriage!

### *What About Me?*

Looking back on what you've learned about covenant and commitment, each of you write your own definition of a covenant commitment in marriage.

## *What About Us?*

What's your vision for marriage? Read Psalm 127:1, Proverbs 24:3–4, and Matthew 7:24–27.

Having a marital vision is having common goals that are bigger than your everyday circumstances and feelings. Maybe you hope to be a couple who strives to support and build up each other, helping one another reach your full potential. Maybe you have a deep desire for your marriage to be a place of safety and love. Maybe you want your marriage to be an adventure in which you work together to make your goals and dreams come true.

Whatever your vision is, make a united plan and be strategic about carrying it out. Set goals for your marriage.

List five things you want to include in the vision for your marriage.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Share with each other what your vision for your marriage entails. What does it look like to you? How will you fulfill it? Your ideas may be different, but that's okay.

If your ideas are different, you'll need to work together to find a united vision in the midst of those differences. If you can't resolve your differences, be sure to consult with someone who can help you work through them now. As you develop and refine a clear vision for your marriage, the exciting vision

of the marriage God has for you will become clear to you. Revisit your vision statement often. Establish one-, two-, and five-year goals as well as a lifetime vision.

### *Just for Fun!*

What one question would you like to ask God?

What event in the Bible would you most have liked to witness?

### *What Does God Say?*

Read the following scriptures together, and answer three or more of the questions as you reflect on what you've read so far.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. (Ephesians 5:31)

How do a man and a woman become one?

Jesus replied: "‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’" (Matthew 22:37–39)

What are God's priorities for love?

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. (Galatians 5:13)

How should you love each other?

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34–35)

As a couple, what's your ultimate purpose on earth?

Read Ephesians 5:22–33 in your Bible. What is God's vision for your marriage?

# NOTES

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## CHAPTER 2

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