

Building a Fail-Proof Marriage

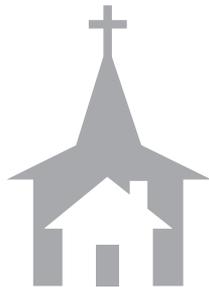
BY JIMMY SCROGGINS



BUILDING FAMILIES

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All Scriptures are from the ESV Bible unless otherwise noted.

Glynn “Scotty” Wolfe was remembered as the “marrying marathoner.” In 89 years, he married 29 times. He married teenagers and grandmothers, his high school sweetheart and drug addicts, virgins and prostitutes, dancers and thieves. Marriage for Scotty became as commonplace as changing a light bulb.

Scotty died penniless and alone in 1997. His body, with the symbolic forearm tattoo of a tied knot, went unclaimed. None of his 29 wives, none of his 40 grandchildren, none of his 19 great-grandchildren, and only one of his 40 children attended his funeral service. *“There is way that seems right to a man,”* God says, *“but its end is the way to death”* (Proverbs 4:12).

Then there is Herbert and Zelmyra Fisher who celebrated 86 years of marriage. This couple survived the effects of World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights movement and 15 Presidential administrations. Shortly before his death, Herbert said of his marriage’s longevity, “[I’m amazed!] I didn’t know I would be married this long.” Through the ups and downs of marriage, neither of them ever considered divorce. Zelmyra adamantly opposed the idea of divorce and remarriage. In 2011, she said, “I didn’t know it would be as long as it is now,” referring to her 86 years with the same man, “but I knew that I wouldn’t be looking for another husband.”

When asked, “What’s the one thing you have in common that transcends everything else?” they replied, “We are both Christians and believe in God. Marriage is a commitment to the Lord. We pray with and for each other every day.”

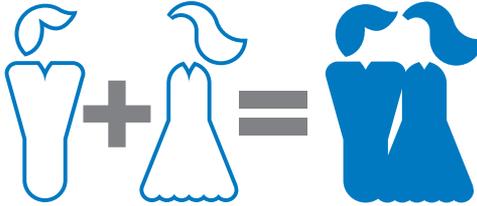
Clearly these are extreme examples. However, they illustrate for us two drastically different views of marriage. Scotty took the marriage commitment lightly. He was willing to make—and break—his “until death do us part” vow once every three years. The Fishers, on the other hand, viewed marriage as a commitment to God first, and then as a commitment to each other. They undergirded that commitment with prayer, which is dependence on God. Our goal is to help people build marriages like that—marriages that are fail-proof.

You may think the advice contained here seems like a bunch of rules—do this and do that—don’t do this and don’t do that. Let me assure you this is not about rules. You may also think some of what’s written here seems formulaic. If you do A, then God will do B, and the result will be C ($A+B=C$). But God is not a God of formulas. God, as He has revealed Himself through His Word (the Bible), is a God of relationship. So as we consider how to build fail-proof marriages, it all starts with a relationship.

BUILD A PRIORITY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them and on them and He called it all good. When God created mankind in His own image, He called it **very** good. However, when He saw that man was alone, He said this was **not** good. So God created woman to be a helpmate to the man and *“that is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh”* (Genesis 2:24).

God created us to be in relationship—first with Him and then with one person of the opposite sex with whom we are joined together forever. This is God’s design:

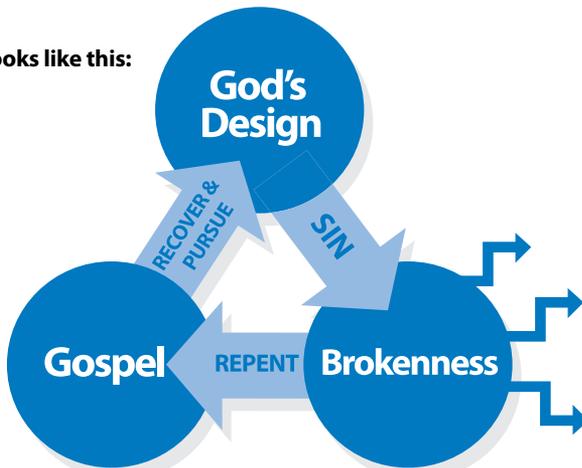


It didn’t take long for mankind to depart from God’s design. Adam, the first man, and his wife, Eve, broke trust with God by disobeying Him and from that moment on, every human born falls short of God’s perfect design (Romans 3:23).

Fortunately for us, after man sinned God made a way for our relationship with Him to be restored. He did it by sending His Son, Jesus, to die the death our sin deserves. Jesus—perfect, sinless Jesus—took on my sin and your sin and the sin of the whole world when He died on the cross. Jesus died, was buried, and on the third day He rose again. His death, burial, and resurrection defeated sin and death once and for all. When we place our faith in Him, our relationship with God is restored. We receive eternal life—whole life—the **very good** life God designed for us! This is the gospel—the Good News—and once we believe it, all is right with God. No matter the size of our sin, the gospel allows us to recover and pursue God’s design.

A relationship with God through the gospel not only restores us from past sins; it protects us from future sin. That is why the Bible says, *“I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”* (Philippians 1:6).

Gospel living looks like this:



The life of a believer is lived in the context of the gospel. Building fail-proof marriages begins with the transforming power of the gospel. Everything else on these pages assumes you have a relationship with God through His Son, Jesus.

A believer isn't a perfect person; a believer is a pursuing person. A believer is a person who is determined—through the cycle of sin and brokenness and repentance and the forgiveness found in Jesus—to pursue God and His design for life. It is only in the context of the gospel that the following principles will help us build marriage relationships that last!

BUILD AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR SPOUSE

Every football coach will tell you that the best defense is a good offense. This is why pursuing God's design for marriage starts with building intimacy. I already referred to God's "one flesh" design for marriage in Genesis 2:24, but He didn't stop there. God goes on to say, "*And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed*" (Genesis 2:25). "Naked and not ashamed" is God's way of describing His original design for intimacy in marriage.

Intimacy is a relationship with no fear of rejection—a perfect reflection of our relationship to God. Marriage needs to be a safe place where this kind of intimacy can flourish. Because all of us depart from God's design for sexual intimacy, we come in to the marriage relationship broken and that brokenness does not magically disappear on our wedding night. Even though we have committed our lives to that person and vowed to stick with them "until death do us part," we still have to work toward true "naked and not ashamed" intimacy.

Since men and women are so different, it makes sense that intimacy is nurtured differently for women than it is for men. According to Willard Harley in his best-selling book *His Needs, Her Needs*, we each have a "love tank" and our spouses either fill or deplete our love tanks. He says most women need the following from their man: non-sexual affection, conversation, honesty and openness, financial support, and family commitment. Most men need the following from their woman: sexual fulfillment, recreational companionship, an attractive wife, peace and quiet at home, and admiration. As we strive—by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us (Colossians 1:29)—to fill our spouse's love tank, our satisfaction in marriage and joy in life will be maximized!

BUILD AN INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR SPOUSE

Do you remember what it was like when you first started dating your spouse? When we were dating, my wife and I were together a lot. We did things that the other person enjoyed doing even if we didn't really enjoy doing them ourselves. We were just happy being together. We were a couple of crazy-in-love kids! But as we all know, life happens. We start working, having kids, getting involved in our kids' activities, and getting involved in our own activities and the next thing you know, we are like two ships passing in the night.

Most people make the mistake of viewing marriage as the destination. We work so hard to get there that we think our work is done. We are the knight who has rescued his princess. She is the princess who has found her prince. Now it's time to live happily ever after. Happily ever after is a fairy tale, however, if we do nothing to

keep our relationship alive.

Married couples—especially couples with children—have to be intentional about spending time with each other. We need to remain interested in what our spouse is interested in like we did when we were dating. We need to cultivate common interests that fit our current lifestyle. I encourage regular date nights, reading a book together and planning romantic getaways. This kind of intentionality will fuel intimacy and further safeguard our marriages against an enemy attack.

BUILD TRANSPARENT RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHRIST-FOCUSED FRIENDS

Marriage is under attack and although we can point our fingers at societal norms, political correctness, and pop-culture immorality, we know where the attack on marriage originates. God says it originates with the *“spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”* (Ephesians 6:12). Marriage is under attack because it’s God’s chosen vehicle to put His glory on display. God’s design is for every Christian marriage to be a visible representation of Christ’s love for His church (Ephesians 5:32).

Husbands, love your wives like Christ loved the church (Christ’s bride) and literally lay down your life for her. Wives, respect your husbands like you respect Jesus and are amazed by His love for you (Ephesians 5:22-33). This is no easy mandate. Marriage is not for wimps. We need real friends with whom we can get real to help us fight for our marriages. Find them. Engage them. Meet with them regularly. Pray with them and for them. Let them point you to the gospel. When you depart from God’s design, go to them, confess to Jesus with them, and let them help you recover and pursue God’s design for your marriage. Together we can win this battle and show the world a compelling representation of God’s covenant-making, covenant-keeping love.

Our church has intentionally created small group studies called Growth Groups in order to help individuals enter into transparent relationships with Christ-focused friends. It is an expectation that every member of our church join a Growth Group as a means of encouragement, strengthened community, and stronger marriages!

BUILD A DEFENSE AGAINST “SECRET WORLD” RELATIONSHIPS

People who are serious about protecting their marriages will defend against what I call “secret world” relationships. There’s a simple formula I’ve developed that defines the size of a person’s secret world:

$$\text{Affluence} + \text{Technology} + \text{Autonomy} = \text{Secret World}$$

It doesn’t take a genius to do the math—clearly there are more secret world opportunities than ever before. It used to be that you couldn’t get a phone call without someone else knowing about it or fearing that someone in another room was listening on another phone. Now we all have personal communication devices strapped to our bodies on which we can receive—and erase—all kinds of conversations and images. We can email, text, Tweet, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat anybody, at any time, without anyone else knowing.

I strongly urge married people to aggressively limit the third factor (Autonomy) in the above equation. Since God’s design for marriage is two people becoming one flesh, we really are no longer autonomous. Simply put, a marriage in which one spouse maintains

a hidden identity is heading for huge trouble. Our spouses should have our passwords and passcodes, giving them complete access to our “secret” world and rendering it ineffective. If possible, it is even wise to have shared email and social media accounts. God says there is an enemy prowling around looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8) and we don’t want it to be our marriage. *“Sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it”* (Genesis 4:7).

BUILD A FRAMEWORK TO DISCOURAGE ONE-ON-ONE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE OPPOSITE SEX

We all need healthy frameworks within which to operate. Years ago, I created a framework for myself as I strive to be intentional in honoring God, safeguarding my marriage, and protecting my family. Married Christ-followers should consider adopting a framework similar to this:

- 1. I shall not** visit the opposite sex alone at home.
- 2. I shall not** go to lunch alone with the opposite sex.
- 3. I shall not** be in an automobile alone with the opposite sex.
- 4. I shall not** show affection that could be questioned.
- 5. I shall not** confide in the opposite sex while I am alone.
- 6. I shall not** discuss marriage problems with a person of the opposite sex.
- 7. I shall never** discuss sexual problems in my marriage with the opposite sex.
- 8. I shall not** communicate privately with a former love interest.
- 9. I shall be** careful in answering cards, letters, emails, texts and private Facebook messages from the opposite sex.
- 10. I shall pray** for the integrity of my marriage and the marriages of people I care about (my parents, children, pastors and other Christ-focused friends).

I realize that in today’s world it may be difficult to keep all of these, all of the time. However, I will just point out that the chances of you having an affair if you are never alone with a non-relative of the opposite sex are pretty close to zero. Most relationships cross from platonic to intimate when people of the opposite sex are alone!

BUILD BARRIERS TO DETRIMENTAL RELATIONSHIP

We hear it when we’re kids. We tell it to our kids. And then we forget to practice it ourselves. We know that *“bad company corrupts good character”* (1 Corinthians 15:33 NIV). It’s true when we’re 12 and when we’re 22 and when we’re 72.

In case you haven’t noticed, God’s design for marriage isn’t exactly “in” these days. There are plenty of people who will urge you to get on the crooked path to deal with the sin in your life, in your spouse’s life, and in your marriage. “You deserve to be happy” is their mantra. Few and far between are the people who believe that the antidote to brokenness is to repent, turn to Jesus, and recover and pursue God’s design. People who don’t believe in Jesus will never point you to the gospel. God says, *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned”* (1 Corinthians 2:14).

These days, who we hang around may not even be a person. It may be a TV, computer, cell phone, or any other device that can barrage our minds and hearts with messages designed to tear marriages apart. “I wouldn’t feel this way if my husband were like that,” she might say to herself while reading a certain kind of book. “I wouldn’t need to do

this if my wife looked like that," he might say to himself after looking at a certain kind of image. Each of us is wise to continually examine who and what we hang around. We need to be willing to eradicate that which constantly feeds our human bent to distrust God and doubt that His design for marriage is best.

THE FINISHED PRODUCT: A FAIL-PROOF MARRIAGE

I have never built a house. I would never even attempt it. But some of you have so you know what it takes—from the plans, to the materials, to the contractors, to the subcontractors, to the inspectors, and all the way to the finished product. It takes a lot of time, energy, and money to build a house that looks just the way you want it to look. But it all starts with having the right foundation. Even the most expertly-built house won't last if it's built on a faulty foundation.

Jesus once told a story about two homebuilders (Matthew 7:24-27). He said there was one man who went to all that effort to build his house, but he built it on sandy ground. So when the storm hit—the rains fell, the wind blew, and the floods came—his house crumbled to the ground. The other man in Jesus' story built his house on the rock. So when the storm hit, his house remained standing. Jesus said the moral of the story is this: *"Everyone then who hears these words of mine **and does them** will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock"* (Matthew 7:24, emphasis mine).

Building a fail-proof marriage starts—and finishes—with building our lives on the gospel. My challenge to all of us is to keep the gospel front and center in our own lives and in our dealing with others. It's the only way any relationship lasts. We need to constantly recognize the sin that leads to brokenness. We need to let our brokenness result in repentance. Every time we acknowledge that Jesus died for all our sins, His mercy and grace wash over us anew. Then we are ready to recover and pursue God's design for our lives and marriages.

There's a lot more at stake here than a physical structure. God wants our marriages to be the place where His perfectly designed life is on display for the whole world to see!



Jimmy Scroggins

Becoming a Christian at age six, Jimmy Scroggins' desire was to live his life for Jesus. Intending to pursue a military career, law school, and political involvement, he accepted an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point. Shortly thereafter, a bout with cancer resulted in a change of course and ultimately a sense of God's calling to preach.

He married his wife Kristin in 1994 and they are the proud parents of eight children: James, Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaac, Stephen, Anna Kate, Mary Claire, and Caleb.



Jimmy graduated from Arcadia High School and earned his Undergraduate Degree in Economics from Jacksonville University in 1993. He earned his Master of Divinity Degree and his Doctor of Philosophy from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1996 and 2003, respectively. Prior to his call to pastor the First Baptist Church of West Palm Beach in July 2008, Dr. Scroggins served in dual roles as Dean / Professor of Youth Ministry and Evangelism at Boyce College, and Teaching Pastor at Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.



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