BEFORE WE BEGIN

Introduction

Great marriages grow when we let God do the building.

Sommer and I were married in November of 1997. In the weeks leading up to our wedding, we spent significant time in premarital counseling with Steve and Pat Fontenot. We talked about communication, love, expectations, intimacy, problems, faith, and the many things two people need to learn if they are going to build a life together. We could not have known then how valuable those conversations would become.

Many of the foundational ideas in this book reach back to that material. Over the years, we have continued to use versions of those original lessons in premarital counseling and in conversations with couples trying to make their way through difficult times. The emphasis on communication, three distinct forms of love, preparing for problems before they arrive, and several other principles in these pages were shaped by what Steve and Pat taught us all those years ago.

Their material gave us more than information. It gave us categories for thinking about marriage, and marriage has a way of turning categories into real life. It is one thing to discuss communication before you are married. It is another thing to communicate when you are tired, hurt, busy, raising children, paying bills, making decisions, navigating change, and discovering that you and the person you love see the same situation very differently.

Sommer and I have had plenty of opportunities to find out whether these ideas actually work. They do, not because they remove every difficulty, but because they continually call us back to the kind of people God wants us to be and the relationship He designed marriage to become. Jesus stands at the center of all of this. He is at the center of our faith, our marriage, and this book. We believe that as husband and wife draw closer to Him, they can increasingly find one another there - learning to love, serve, forgive, and build from the same foundation.

A LONG PROJECT

Twenty-Nine on the 29th

Our twenty-ninth anniversary falls on November 29, 2026. That date has made me think about how long these ideas have been part of our life together. We began preparing for marriage before our wedding, and those early conversations shaped our hopes. They were only the beginning of what marriage would teach us.

Decades of preaching about marriage, countless Bible studies, and our own experiences have deepened our understanding. We have grown, lived in different places, and raised four children. There have been unexpected challenges, seasons of change, and lessons we could never have learned in advance. Through it all, we have faced them together.

We have also learned a great deal from counseling and studying with other couples. Listening to their experiences —their struggles, discoveries, and victories—has helped us see familiar principles in new ways. We have been encouraged by their faithfulness and challenged by their honesty. Their stories remind us that every marriage has something to teach us.

Over the last eight years, the *Excel Still More* podcast has given many of these ideas another place to grow. Episodes on the six foundational principles, the love languages, Marriage and the Cross, the background music of our lives, and other themes in this book helped sharpen the language and applications. You can find these and other marriage episodes on the Excel Still More podcast.

> **THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK**
> This book is not built on the assumption that something must be wrong before there is something to work on. Strong marriages still have room to grow, and struggling marriages still have something worth building.

The goal is not perfection, but intentional growth. We hope these pages help you understand your spouse more clearly, examine yourself honestly, and build habits that strengthen your marriage. Psalm 127:1 reminds us, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” When we let God lead, He can build something wonderful, faithful, and strong.

THE RHYTHM OF EACH LESSON

Read. Reflect. Prepare.

Each lesson follows the same eight-page rhythm. The structure helps you move from learning to reflection, conversation, and practices you can revisit throughout the week. You can do this on your own, but the material is designed for couples, each with their own book. We believe it can also be profitable in a class setting.

PAGES 1-4 - READ AND THINK

The first four pages introduce biblical and practical ideas. Read together or separately, slowing down to notice what the material reveals about you and the relationship you are building with your spouse.

PAGE 5 - MAKE PERSONAL COMMITMENTS

Page five belongs to you before the conversation. Consider each commitment privately and decide what kind of spouse you will be, rather than evaluating your spouse. Be prayerful about these commitments.

PAGE 6 - PREPARE BEFORE YOU TALK

Page six is also completed on your own. Think through the questions honestly and consider how your spouse might answer. The goal is to prepare yourself to listen and learn. And with the check-ins, evaluate yourself honestly.

PAGE 7 - TALK TOGETHER

Page seven brings you together for a guided conversation. Discuss the questions, offer reassurance, listen carefully, and seek understanding rather than winning a point. This is a place to start building together.

PAGE 8 - PRACTICE, PRAY, AND REVISIT

Page eight can be completed together or on your own. It gives you realistic goals, a prayer, and space for takeaways. Return to it during the week so the lesson becomes something you practice, not merely something you finished.

Do not worry about doing any lesson perfectly. The goal is to create a healthy rhythm of learning, reflection, conversation, and practice. Even one honest discussion or one small change carried into the week can strengthen the home you are building together.

COME BACK TOGETHER

Talk. Practice. Pray.

Each chapter lays a foundation, then moves toward shared work. The guided progression moves you beyond vague answers into understanding. Take your time, speak encouraging words, listen without defensiveness, and ask questions. The purpose is not to decide who has been the better spouse, but to understand each other and decide what you can build together.

Finally, each lesson culminates in prayer and taking action. The goals, prayer, and takeaways are meant to be revisited throughout the week, not completed and forgotten. Healthy marriages are strengthened through repeated ordinary choices more than dramatic gestures, and these sections are designed to help carry the lesson into everyday life and into the days ahead.

You do not need to rush through this book. Take one lesson, read it, think about it, make your commitments, have the conversation, practice what you discussed, and then move forward. Some lessons will lead to easy and encouraging conversations. Others may expose areas that need more attention. Both can be useful when you approach them with honesty, humility, patience, and a shared desire to grow.

Sommer and I began learning these principles before we ever said our vows. Almost three decades later, we are still learning them. That may be one of the most important lessons of all. There is always another way to listen more carefully, serve more generously, grow more intentionally, love more deeply, and keep choosing our marriage.

> *Marriage is never finished simply because another milestone has passed. There is always another way to grow, another way to strengthen what you have, and another reason to excel still more.*

FIND YOUR WAY

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