

When You Fight for Someone to Live

Editor's Note: Bo Stern's husband is fighting a rare disease called ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease.

People sometimes dance around questions with me about marriage and terminal illness. They wonder how it changes things, if it changes things. I think it does and it doesn't.

We are who we have always been inside. We have always been careful fighters. We watch our words because we've learned in 28 years that it's really hard to take them back. But while we're careful, we have not had a conflict-free marriage. Not by a long shot. And we still don't.

This seems to surprise people who assume a terminal diagnosis is such a game-changer that nothing is now worth fighting over. I get that. I would have thought so too, but it's not true. At least, not for us.

We still sometimes fight because this diagnosis did not fully dismantle our humanity, which came pre-loaded with the desire to be right and to get our own way. While it's true that fewer things matter now than before, there is also the added pressure of sorrow and strain that accompanies ALS that tends to heighten the emotion connected to the things that do matter. The result is that an argument can escalate quite quickly and unexpectedly. I am neither proud nor ashamed of this; it just is because we are real people, made of dust and lost without grace.

So, yeah, we argue like we used to. But we also stay mindful of what matters in ways that we didn't before. We hang on to beautiful moments with both hands, and sometimes I can feel us both recording them in our memories for a day when we'll need them.

I write things down in a sacred, secret journal, one I will

never share with the world outside our marriage, and sometimes I wonder if I'll ever have the courage to go back and read it myself. But I write it down because, no matter what the future holds, I will want to relive the story of the friendship God has given me with a man I do not deserve.

This memory-keeping, secret-holding part of our marriage is new and beautiful and not without pain, but it's the right kind of pain. It's the pain that reminds you you're still living. Like a sharp pinch on the skin, it tells you you're still awake, still in the game, still a part of a brilliant team. It reminds you the only reason this journey is so gut-wrenchingly difficult is because you've built something you really, really don't want to lose.

The statistics on couples divorcing after a terminal diagnosis are grim and tragic. It makes my stomach hurt to think of it. But I do believe that any sort of Really Big Battle in a marriage mostly makes that marriage more of what it was before the battle.

Suffering makes the hard harder and the lovely lovelier and the tempers hotter and the forgiveness sweeter. And however difficult this fight, we're in it together in a way we've never been together in anything before, together every breath this side of eternity.

I think Steve would agree that knowing we may not have all the time in the world has made us better people and better at marriage. If I could bottle up the "better" without the battle, I surely would. I would package up these feelings of deep appreciation and love for the life we share, and I would give it to every couple just now saying "I do."

I would give it to them for the days that go bad, for the fights that aren't careful, for the words that land hard. Because this appreciation doesn't keep those things from happening; it just changes how we respond to them. And that, friends, is the real game-changer.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly-released Beautiful Battlefields (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore.

The Key to Growing in Your Faith

Being faithful means having the basic truth of Christ—having faith not in ourselves but in God. Faith is the essence of all our strength in God.

Faith is in what we know. We know we have a Creator and a Redeemer. In faith, we strive to know Him in spirit and in our actions. Paul said, “I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection” (Phil. 3:10, NIV).

Our very first petition should be that we become intimate with Christ so we live in His presence and constantly seek His guidance, His wisdom, His knowledge and His strength. We know that He is real and relevant.

Knowing God comes by staying in His Word, allowing it to be made real in us. When we let the Word of God dwell in us richly, the Spirit transforms our minds and shapes our focus and desires (Ps. 1:2-3).

Meditating on the Word every day and seeking the Lord through

His Word will give us a mindset of peace. Memorize Scripture, and pray the Word back to the Lord. Then stand on those claims that are written about us as His children.

When Isaiah wrote, “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you” (Is. 26:3), he was implying he had peace when he read God’s Word. He trusted in it rather than his own intelligence.

If we are to have perfect peace, our minds must be fixed on God and His kingdom and not on the world. Devoting time to reading the Bible helps us fight worry. And one of the best ways to get the Word of God into every part of our lives is to memorize it (Prov. 4:20-22).

We must be ready for the Word so that when it is sown into us, it will give a hundredfold return. We must meditate on the Word and have that Word dictate the thoughts of our hearts.

Joshua 1:8 reads, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”

Here God is telling Joshua that if he follows God’s directions and if he is rooted in the truth, then God will provide. The same is true for us.

Faithfulness requires that we must come to know God through His Word—His truth. We must pray it, proclaim it, believe it and then live it. This is the only way to be a faithful servant of the Lord.

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One Thing You Can Do That Will Endure Forever

Several months ago she showed me a picture of teacups, so we started gathering these for the wedding.

I pulled out my grandma's teacups from the basement; cousin Kayla filled a few boxes from the thrift shop; and my mom got on a stepladder to pull hers down from the top cabinet. Into the dishwasher they all went, on the China setting. After that my preacher man, the investigator, turned them all over to see where they were made.

A cousin took this sweet picture of the teacup she sipped from at the wedding, and it just so happened, out of all that porcelain, she chose this set.

That's my great grandma's teacup, my mom said, breathless.

There were little touches of family all through the wedding –the earrings Earl gave to my mother-in-law years ago, a borrowed necklace from Aunt Karyn, and that yellow flower pattern on cup and saucer.

A legacy of family is here, I told my momma.

More than jewels and dishes, there was a set of grandparents teaching Jesus to their kids decades ago. My mom and dad teaching Jesus to us. Me and that preacher man teaching Jesus to our kids.

And then my daughter stood at the altar, and I held it together during a heart squeezing moment in the ceremony (*I will not cry, I will not cry*) when that young man walked our girl to the Lord's supper table, tenderly put his left arm

around her waist, and opened his Bible with his right hand. We couldn't hear him, but we could see.

We could see him there, teaching Jesus to her and setting the table for one more generation to know the love of God. Someday my grandkids?

(Lord, have mercy. At least let me get the linens washed and returned to the church first.)

So I ask you, **if one fragile teacup can last from one woman to another to another to another, how much more our love for God?**

*Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.
(Deuteronomy 7:9)*

There's something you can do this very day that will endure.

Fear God. Love him.

And someday your great, great, great granddaughter will enjoy the beauty of what you have left for her.

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Living on the Right Side of

'However'

I am discovering the power of one little word. It's a conjunction, and if, like me, you were raised on a steady diet of *Schoolhouse Rock*, you will now have that song stuck in your head indefinitely. Sorry about that. But you'll also remember that a conjunction is the little word that connects two phrases or thoughts and makes them one.

However is a unique word, in that it usually joins two opposing ideas. When we see *however* in a sentence—and certainly when I see it in my life—it signals a change or a turn. Is the change good or bad? I think that depends on which side of the conjunction we choose to set up camp.

It may seem odd, but so much of my peace, joy and sanity in life right now hinges on how I view the *howevers* I face. Last week's vacation is a great example.

Consider this sentence: *We were able to get away to our favorite spot on the Oregon coast; however, the wheelchair van broke down on the way home.*

True story. Accurate sentence. But what actually happened is that it broke down just two miles out of town so we could go back easily. My brother-in-law was able to come with a trailer and pick it up. We had enough room in our other vehicles to get everyone home that day. The delay enabled us to spend a sweet afternoon with my sister, Lila, which also enabled Steve to rest before tackling the rest of the trip home. The *however* wasn't a good one, and I'm not pretending I'm glad for a car repair, but many good things found their way into the equation, and all of us felt it. We felt grace on that whole *however* situation.

So, the sentence is better written (and better lived): *Our wheelchair van broke down on the way back from vacation; however, all the details worked out, and we made it home just*

fine.

Here are others:

Our family had to deal with the reality of Steve's condition while we were away; however, we made the most beautiful memories, and we all became stronger and grew closer through it.

It is very difficult navigating a wheelchair on a sandy beach; however, it was the most we've laughed in a long, long time.

For so many years, I lived on the wrong side of the *however* word. I squashed every happy with a sad. Eventually, that evolved into including even the possibility of sad: *My schedule is good today; however, something will probably go wrong at work.* This constant slant toward the negative produces anxiety, frustration and, if left unchecked, bitterness. So much changed for me when I began to let Jesus steer me toward a new perspective.

This may sound like a fancy way of saying "Look on the bright side," but it's bigger than that. Though both sides of each situation are true, one side is the *stronger* truth because it's redemptive truth.

My flesh and my heart may fail; however, God is the strength of my life and my portion forever.

They took Him down and buried Him in a tomb; however, God raised Jesus from the dead.

Do you see how redemption follows and swallows the despair in those sentences? Both sides are true, but they are not equal truth because—and this is the kicker—the despair is temporary and the rescue is permanent. Isn't that the coolest thing? It is. Because sometimes in the darkest nights of life, finding the upside can feel like looking for the *Mona Lisa* at a garage sale. But when we can't see a single speck of redemption,

salvation enables us to push our vision out beyond the horizon of our timeline and peer into the promises of a world with no *however*s.

My husband has ALS; however, his life is hidden with Christ, who stole death's sting, bought Steve's freedom and dries every tear.

That's the right side of *however* for me. I'm trying to learn to live there.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of *Beautiful Battlegrounds* (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends, and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Oregon.

Disarm the Power of Deception in Your Life

One of the instructions given to us in the Bible is to have the mind of Christ. We read in Philippians 2:5, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (NKJV). Have you ever wondered how this is possible?

Certainly, we know how important it is. God created the human mind as a combination of conscious and unconscious processes (thoughts) of the brain that direct our mental and physical behavior. Our thoughts influence our actions. It follows, then, that if we want to act like Christ, we must also think like Him.

With the mind we exercise the power of reason, conceive ideas and use judgment. It stores our intellect, as distinguished from emotion or will.

There are many benefits to having the mind of Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). One is that we will come to "the full knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ" (v. 2). Here are some others:

Peace. Romans 8:6 tells us that "to be spiritually minded is life and peace."

Increased intimacy with God. Isaiah 1:18 says that God wants us to come and reason with Him. He wants us to know His will for our lives (Heb. 13:21).

Desire to live a life of obedience to Him. The psalmist asked God to give him understanding in keeping His laws and walking in His commandments so that he might "turn away ... from looking at worthless things" (Ps. 119:33-37). Having any mind other than Christ's causes us to live a life of disobedience and rebellion.

David Wilkerson of Times Square Church in New York City wrote, "Rebellion ... is a refusal to seek His [God's] mind in all things. We can never obtain the mind of God by relying on our own reasoning."

To have the mind of Christ, we must think as He thinks. This is difficult for us because, as the prophet points out, our thoughts are not God's thoughts (Is. 55:8). The foundation for them—our beliefs, ideas and paradigms—are based on perceptions of reality that were developed in our families of origin and life experiences.

If the people and circumstances that influenced our mental processing were godly, we will find it easier to fix our thoughts on Jesus. If we were raised under dysfunctional,

abusive conditions, we may struggle with evil, carnal thoughts. This is certain death to living a godly life, as the Bible states “to be carnally minded is death” (Rom. 8:6).

Having the mind of Christ clarifies any distorted thinking we may have. Otherwise we are subject to our own carnal minds. And the carnal mind—as the apostle Paul points out—can’t understand the spiritual mind (vv. 6-7).

Renewing the Mind

The Bible tells us how it is possible to have the mind of Christ in spite of our life history. We are to “be transformed by the renewing of [our] mind[s]” (Rom. 12:2).

One method we can use to renew our minds is to meditate on God’s Word. The psalmist says: “My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times. Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors” (Ps. 119:20, 24, NIV). Like the psalmist, we can find joy and knowledge in the Word when we choose to dwell on it.

One of the most important ways we can renew our minds is to think on the things that are listed in Philippians 4:8: “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Included in the list are things that are “true.” Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary explains that we are to “make those (true) things the subjects of our thoughtful consideration” or “carefully reflect on them.”

God is a God of truth. In fact, the Bible says it is impossible for Him to lie (Heb. 6:18). He gives us His truth in every situation to apply to our thoughts. “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32, NKJV). If you’re not free, which lie of the devil are you believing as truth in your life?

As stated earlier, we live our lives according to our perception of what is true—according to what we perceive is real. But if our perceptions are false, if we do not think on the truths of God, we will easily be led astray by Satan’s deceptions and counterfeits.

Philippians 4:7 says that the peace of God guards our minds. I believe one reason God protects us in this way is that wrong thoughts are a breeding ground for Satan’s lies. Another name for Satan is deceiver: He can mimic truth, but “there is no truth in him” (John 8:44).

We are not immune to “the devil’s schemes” (Eph. 6:11, NIV). In fact, we must constantly be on guard lest, “just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, [our] minds may somehow be led astray” (2 Cor. 11:3).

As a counselor, I listen to clients share the hurts and struggles that develop within them on their life journeys. The Holy Spirit reveals the lies of the enemy that they hear and receive as truth. My goal is to help them uncover the lies so that they can live in the freedom of God’s truths.

Thoughts vs. Feelings

How can you know if what you are hearing is the truth or a lie? One way is to determine the difference between what you “think” (a mind issue) and what you “feel” (a heart issue).

Paul prays in Ephesians 3:17-19 that Christ will dwell in our hearts and that we will know the love of Christ so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God. Both feeling and thinking are important.

One method we can use to help us separate our thoughts from our emotions is validation. When we validate ourselves, we are acknowledging our feelings. You say, “I feel” and then complete the statement with a word that expresses feeling,

such as “lonely,” “angry” or “sad.”

Feelings are necessary. They are given by God in order for us to experience emotions. The Bible tells us that Jesus experienced joy, wept and had righteous anger. But He distinguished His emotions from reason, and so must we.

Let’s use the feeling of anger as an example. Anger was created as an internal alarm to warn us of potentially threatening situations or conditions.

To feel anger is not a sin (Eph. 4:26). But the ungodly behavior that often accompanies the emotion of anger is sin. If we discipline our children, for example, by using our anger in ways that devalue them, discourage them or provoke them to anger, we misuse the emotion.

The feeling of fear is another internal alarm. But if we allow feelings of fear to paralyze us from taking biblical action, such as confronting someone in truth and love about their abusive behavior toward us, we misuse the emotion.

Even though feelings are important, we should not allow them to direct our behavior. In the *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, William MacDonald defines having the mind of Christ as “To see things as He would see them, and to respond as He would respond.”

Many Christians, however, respond as the world responds. Generally, the world’s approach to living is, “If it feels good, do it.” Their thought process looks like this: My thoughts ** my feelings ** my actions.

But the approach of a Christian who has the mind of Christ is, “I know what I think and how I feel, but I will do what God says to do.” That process looks like this: My thoughts ** my feelings ** God’s thoughts ** my actions.

The second set of thoughts is based on God’s Word (Heb

4:12)–aligning our thoughts with His thoughts before we act. “A prudent man gives thought to his steps” (Prov. 14:15).

Discerning the Truth

Let me give you an example of how this works in real life. A husband and wife exchange cross words. The wife says, “I feel you don’t love me.” In actuality, the idea that her husband doesn’t love her is a thought, not a feeling. The feeling is probably hurt or rejection.

The wife needs to examine her belief from a rational perspective. Is the thought that her husband doesn’t love her the truth or a lie? Usually it is a lie of the enemy to put spouses at odds with one another.

The truth is that her husband does love her but needs to learn ways to show his wife his love in order to minimize her feelings of hurt and rejection. If the wife can see this truth, she is able to cast down an argument that goes “against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5, NKJV). What could have escalated into a battle can become fertile ground for unity, growth and change.

Let’s say you make a mistake at work. The feeling you have as a result is probably frustration or disappointment. But the thought that goes through your mind might be something like this: “I’m so stupid. I can’t seem to get anything right.”

This is a lie, of course. God’s Word says that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14).

Learning to replace the lies of Satan with God’s truth is the key to having the mind of Christ and living a life that is pleasing to God. God will honor you as you seek to align your thoughts with His. “I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve” (Jer. 17:10, NIV).

Ask the Lord to show you the lies you have been believing and living out in your life. Replace the lies with God's truths so that your relationship with Him, yourself and others will improve.

Read a companion devotional.

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WATCH: 7 Secrets of a Confident Woman

Watch Joyce Meyer's teaching at the "Confident Woman" conference:

7 Honest Questions You Need to Ask About Your Marriage

Karen and I have been married 40 years, but the first three years of our marriage were miserable. We thought once we were married, things would be great and we would live happily ever after. Were we ever wrong! And our naïveté almost ended in divorce.

Thankfully, it didn't. And that's due in large part to our

commitment then—and now—to marriage maintenance. Yes, that's right: I included now in that equation. Because whether you're on the brink of divorce or thriving in your partnership, marriage requires continual upkeep. Karen and I learned that the hard way, but hopefully you don't have to.

Have you checked under the hood of your marriage lately? Here's a seven-point checklist to keep your marriage well-oiled and running smoothly.

1) How is your relationship with God?

Your spouse can't meet your deepest needs, and you can't meet theirs. That may fly in the face of what our culture wants you to believe, but it's true. When God paired Adam and Eve in the garden, He walked with them in their midst. That's the picture of how marriage works—with God at the center. When Adam and Eve rebelled, their marriage suffered as they lost the garden God had created for them to share.

When Karen and I married, we were believers but didn't know how to rely on the Lord daily. Because of that, we tried to get our deepest needs met through each other, which only resulted in frustration and bitterness. We thought we'd made a mistake in marrying each other—but we didn't. Our mistake was in trying to squeeze God out of each other.

The most important thing Karen and I do for our marriage every day is to start each day with prayer, the Bible and seeking God. That's where we take our cares, needs, hurts and desires. In that daily prayer time, the Lord heals, fills and empowers us with His incredible love.

Because here's the truth: Our deepest needs are acceptance, identity, security and purpose. These driving needs motivate us daily whether we realize it or not—and only God can meet those four needs on the deepest level of our lives. When we lack a relationship with Him in which those needs get met, we automatically transfer that expectation to our spouse, thus

setting up our marriage and our mate for failure.

The most important issue in your marriage is your personal, daily, dynamic relationship with God. If you're rusty in this area, you probably need to apologize to your spouse for putting too much pressure on them—and to the Lord for not keeping yourself in well-tuned, daily fellowship with Him. When you've been with God, you can love your spouse properly. You'll find your expectations right, your heart healthy and yourself ready to love out of the overflow of God's love that's already in you.

2) How are your marriage disciplines and traditions?

In marriage, it isn't what you can make happen but what you can keep happening. Many married couples become distracted after a period of time and stop caring for each other's needs. Then they begin to fight and a big blow-up hides just around the corner. If they work through it, they may go for a second honeymoon or romantic getaway. But once that phase is over, they go right back into the negative cycle of distraction, fighting, making up and so on. The longer this cycle recurs, the more dangerous it becomes and the harder it gets to make up and keep going.

Good marriages prioritize regular disciplines and traditions that ensure the right things keep happening. For example, almost all good marriages include a date night or date day in the weekly or monthly routine. It isn't in response to a fight or a crisis. It is a proactive discipline in the relationship.

Early in our marriage, Karen and I walked together every morning for an hour and a half. We would pray for 45 minutes and talk for 45 minutes. It was one of the best things we ever did with each other.

Do you have a date night (or day)? Do you prioritize your marriage and protect the time and energy you have together? Don't wait for a convenient time. Make it happen, and keep it

going.

3) Are you emotionally bilingual?

You're no doubt familiar with the old saying "Marriage is about becoming one." But maybe you haven't heard the cynical response: "Yes, but which one?"

In many marriages, a battle is forged to see which language gets spoken in the home—the man's or the woman's. But we are different by God's design, and we have different needs. Men need honor. Women need security. Men need sex. Women need nonsexual touch and affection. Men need to be friends with their wives. Women need open and honest communication. Men need their wives to be domestically centered. Women need their husbands to lead.

The essence of romance is speaking in your spouse's language as you meet their needs in love. Romance is not a language lesson; it's a language *demonstration*, where you enter your spouse's world and speak love the way they understand it. When a husband and wife both do this, they are in heaven. But many marriages never make it to that point.

For your marriage to succeed, you'll need to meet needs in your spouse that you don't have. And they'll need to do the same for you. The greatest marriage is two servants in love who sacrifice for each other. The worst is two selfish people who demand to be served.

Again, we are different by God's design, and it is unchangeable. Because of this, one key to a great marriage is becoming emotionally bilingual. Don't speak love in your own language; speak it in your spouse's language. As you do, you'll see them light up and respond.

Are you emotionally bilingual? What's your spouse's language? How can you speak it today—and every day?

4) Do you make decisions together as equals?

Marriage is about sharing. Yet it's amazing how many couples don't share decisions. Either one spouse dominates the relationship or both people share the same house but live separate lives.

Karen and I make all our important decisions together, and this is crucial to the intimacy and goodwill of our relationship. We don't bully each other or make each other pay a price for being honest. When we make decisions, we first submit them to God and pray. Our marriage is not a battle of wills; it is a search for His will. Then, because we share all the big decisions, there's no chance for resentment or division to creep into our life together.

Do you and your spouse make decisions together? Do you respect your spouse's input? Are you willing to compromise, or is it your way or the highway? This is a big issue with a big payoff when you make the commitment to slow down, pray, talk and agree.

5) Who are your friends?

Paul doesn't pull any punches when he says, "Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits'" (1 Cor. 15:33). Your friends are your future. You become like the company you keep. If you don't believe that, you're deceived.

Karen and I are committed to our local church and Christian friends. None of our friends are perfect, and we aren't perfect either, but we're all committed to living for Christ and to our marriages. In 40 years of friendship with dozens of couples, only one of those couples has divorced—and prior to that divorce, the husband left church and developed a close friendship with a ungodly man.

We live in an immoral, evil world. There's never been such a strong pull of sin on all our lives. In response, we must be

honest about our vulnerabilities and need for each other. I doubt Karen and I would be together today if it weren't for the support and encouragement we received when we needed it most from our church and believing friends.

Realize that the "company we keep" includes entertainment, computers, Facebook and television. We must be careful and accountable about these things, as they have become prominent features in our culture and can be just as impactful on us as our friends.

Are you a committed member of a local church? Do you have friends who are committed believers and committed to their marriages? Are you accountable concerning your entertainment? The degree to which you take these things seriously is the degree to which your marriage has a chance to thrive.

6) Are you empathetic to your spouse?

Marriage research reveals one of the most important features in successful marriages is the ability to empathize with one's spouse. That simply means we are sensitive to them and "feel for them." It means we care about how our actions affect them. It means caring for what they are going through and just caring for them in general.

When we date and fall in love, we are naturally empathetic to the other person. We work hard at trying to please them. We're sensitive and try to do things to make the other person feel good.

But then life happens. And in the process of paying the bills, of children, of sickness, of money stress and work stress, of in-laws and the IRS, we wake up one day to find issues crowded between us. If those issues aren't dealt with properly, we end up hardened toward the other person. The empathy we once felt becomes frustration. We focus no longer on our spouse's feelings but our own.

When Karen and I were on the verge of divorce, I had become very angry with her. I felt mistreated and that I'd made a mistake in marrying her. It was all about me. As issues accumulated between us, I began focusing on the negatives in her and feeling sorry for myself. The young man who was so tender-hearted toward Karen when we dated became a hard-hearted husband who couldn't care less about how my behavior affected her. I was convinced that if Karen would just change, everything would miraculously become fine.

Even as I believed that, Karen suffered from my dominance and verbal abuse. The change in our marriage only began when God broke through my hard heart and let me see myself as I really was. At that moment, I realized how domineering and damaging I had become. Standing at the brink of divorce, I finally began to empathize with Karen again. I put myself in her shoes and came to the stark realization of what it must have been like to be married to me.

Being empathetic is a choice, not an emotion. Regardless of the condition of your marriage, start thinking about how your spouse might be feeling. Forgive them, and ask the Lord to give you the grace to act above your emotions.

7) Is your marriage first?

Genesis 2:24 says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and be joined to his wife." As I'm sure you already know, marriage requires leaving and cleaving. In other words, for marriage to work, it has to be first in your life. It won't work any other way.

Back when Karen and I were on the verge of that divorce, I was addicted to golf. I played almost every day. Karen complained about it because it kept me away from our family, and when I was home I was exhausted. Even though I told her she was first, it wasn't true. In real terms, golf came before her.

Part of the healing of our marriage came when I hung up my

golf clubs for Karen. In doing so, I expressed to her in real terms she was first. The result was a resurrection in the garden of our love that had been destroyed through my distraction.

In real terms, your marriage must come before your children, your church, your friends, your smartphone, your family, your work and everything else going on in your life. This is the way God designed marriage, and it simply won't work another way.

Making your marriage first means saying no to other things. It means saving time and energy for your spouse every day and protecting your marriage from intruders. It means doing little things like turning off your phone when it's time to talk to them, ignoring incoming calls and texts, making eye contact when they speak, turning off the TV or computer to spend time together and putting down the newspaper so you can have a real conversation.

Does something else come before your spouse right now? Is your marriage really first? Keeping your marriage first—along with all these other checkpoints required for healthy maintenance—is crucial for keeping your marriage on the open road.

Jimmy Evans is founder and CEO of MarriageToday, a ministry devoted to helping couples thrive in strong and fulfilling marriages and families. He has served as senior leader of Trinity Fellowship in Amarillo, Texas, for more than 30 years and has authored more than 10 books, including his latest, *When Life Hurts*. Jimmy and his wife, Karen, have been married 40 years.

Jimmy Evans discusses five key standards for achieving

successful communication in your marriage at

EXCLUSIVE: Jonny Diaz Reveals Heart Behind ‘Thank God I Got Her’

Jonny Diaz’s “More Beautiful You” is a hit song that encourages women in a culture that prizes physical beauty. He recently released another song, “Thank God I Got Her,” inspired by his wife, Libby, that Mandisa tweeted about: “I hope my future husband can sing bcuz I’d like to be serenaded w/ this @jonnydiaz song at our wedding. Amen ladies?” Leilani Haywood, editor of *SpiritLed Woman* eMagazine, visited with Johnny via email about his new project, pickup lines and baseball.

Leilani Haywood: Hey Jonny, I see that you played baseball in college. Who is your favorite baseball team?

Jonny Diaz: That’s right, I played college ball at Florida State University, so obviously, they’re my favorite college team. For Major League Baseball, my brother spent most of his time as an Atlanta Brave, so I have to be a good brother and root for the Braves!

Leilani: Do you miss the smell of the grass, throwing a baseball and swinging a bat?

Jonny: I miss the competitiveness. Growing up the youngest of four boys, I was always trying to compete. I’ve been able to replace baseball with physical activities like CrossFit and golf, but nothing makes up for the competitiveness of playing

at that level.

Leilani: If you were offered a pro contract, would you go for it?

Jonny: I don't think so. However, maybe that answer is easy to give simply because I know it wouldn't happen.

Leilani: What inspired you to write the song "Thank God I Got Her"?

Jonny: My wife, Libby. I have learned so much in our six years of marriage. However, the No. 1 thing I've learned is that I'll never fully understand her ... and that's OK!

Leilani: Why do you think that song is resonating with women?

Jonny: I think most women are pretty willing to admit that they don't always make sense. This song acknowledges their quirks without trying to change them. Most women hear the song and say, "That's me!"

Leilani: Tell us the backstory on how you came up with the song.

Jonny: When I first thought of the idea for the song, I thought I'd try to pitch it to a country artist. It has that story type of feel. As I wrote the song with Mia Fieldes, I started thinking that maybe my fans would resonate with it as well. I still have hopes that one day a country artist will choose to cut it, but for now I'm happy to share it with my audiences.

Leilani: What does your wife think of the song, and how are men reacting to the song in your concerts?

Jonny: My wife loves the song! She agrees that one day it needs to be a country hit. Men have been really enthusiastic about the song also. When I play it onstage, it's funny to look out and see men nudging their wives because a lyric rings

true. Women think I wrote the song for them, but men think I wrote the song for *them*. It's a fun balance.

Leilani: What's the funniest pickup line you've ever heard or said?

Jonny: "How much does a Polar Bear weigh? Enough to break the ice! Hi, I'm Jonny."

Leilani: Mother's Day is around the corner. Do you have a Mother's Day tradition for your mom?

Jonny: When I was younger and lived at home, my brothers and I used to make her breakfast in bed. With four boys running the kitchen those mornings, I'm afraid we would make more of a mess than anything.

✖ Leilani: You've come out with a new project, *Let It Fly*. What's the message behind the project?

Jonny: The message is that you and I are completely inadequate ... and that's PERFECT. I've learned that God has a habit of using inadequate but willing people, just like David and Goliath. On his own, David was completely ill-equipped for the task. But he took what God gave him and "let it fly." That's what I'm doing with these songs!

Click here for exclusive download of *Thank God I Got Her!*

Leilani Haywood is editor of *SpiritLed Woman* and a frequent contributor to *Charisma*. She is a Kansas City, award-winning writer and columnist. She has been published in the *Kansas City Star*, *Metro Voice* and other publications. Follow her on Twitter @leilanihaywood.

The Mothers of The Bible

She speaks wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her children arise and call her women do noble things, but you surpass them all. Proverbs 31:26-29 selected

My earliest memories of Mother's Day include the white or red roses that ladies wore to church, pinned to their lapels on Sunday morning. A red rose was worn to honor a mother who was living, a white rose was worn to honor a mother who had stepped into eternity. So one of our annual rituals was for me to go out early Sunday morning, and find five red roses on a scrubby little bush that I kept for just that purpose.

We don't keep that tradition any more. But I have reflected on what my grandmother passed along to my mother, and my mother passed to me, and I have passed along to my two daughters, and now my daughter is passing along to my three granddaughters. What has been passed along from generation to generation among the women of my family is a strong, personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Coupled with a strong faith has been an unflinching commitment to live out what we believe on the anvil of our everyday experience. We smile as we refer to ourselves as "Old Testament Women," or, as has been described by some of the secularists of our day, we are "Evangelical Feminists." We are women who are strong, bold, free-spirited leaders inside and outside of our homes, unashamed of our faith in God, His Word, His Son, and His Gospel.

Old Testament Women are rooted in the Bible, beginning with *Eve*, who was given equal dominion over the earth with

Adam; *Sarah*, whose faith, along with that of her husband, Abraham, was extraordinary, enabling her to bear a son at 90 years of age-a son who became one of the Patriarchs of the Jewish people; *Hagar*, a single mother who had a personal relationship with God and raised her son, Ishmael, to become the father of many nations; *Rahab*, whose bold, courageous act of faith saved her entire household from God's judgment; *Ruth*, who committed herself to support her mother-in-law, leaving everything behind to begin a new life and became the great-great grandmother of King David; *Deborah*, who was so bold in battle, the generals would not face the enemy without her; *Jael*, who single-handedly defeated an enemy none of the generals had been able to overcome; and on it goes until we come to the *Virgin Mary*, singled out by God for her purity, integrity, piety, and humility to be the mother of our Lord Jesus *Mary Magdalene*, a woman with a sinful past, who was commissioned by the risen Lord Jesus Christ Himself to be the first evangelist to the world.

This Mother's Day, choose to be an *Old Testament Woman*. Sink the roots of your faith down deep in God's Word. Be someone who knows what you believe. Then live it out. Set the example for your children of a mother who is strong in your convictions, bold in your actions, courageous enough to stand up and speak out for Jesus Christ, while reflecting Him in your character. Your children will rise up and call you blessed!

Anne Graham Lotz, founder of AnGeL ministries, has proclaimed God's Word worldwide for more than 30 years. Her newest book, Wounded by God's People, is available at .

10 Questions to Ask Mom

“I want an off-white wedding dress, no veil and orange roses in my bouquet,” I explained to my mother. It was the fifth time we had had this discussion in the less than two days I had been home. How does a daughter talk to their mom?

Communication Problems

I had always had a difficult time navigating the motherly communication waters. My wedding was an example of that. I felt I was right and I wanted my way. She wanted it her way. It was clear communication was at a standstill.

“You will look back on this time and regret that you didn’t have all white,” she said. “I so regret not having a big wedding ...”

“I know, Mom, but this is not your wedding. It’s mine.”

Then she had to ask about the songs I would use.

“I don’t know for sure, but I know I don’t want the here-comes-the-bride-big-fat-and-wide song,” I said.

“Those aren’t the words to the song, and you *have* to have the wedding march!”

“I am not ... I’m so not talking to you about this. We never agree on anything. Why would we start now?”

Making Peace With Mom

It should have been one of those wonderful mother-daughter bonding times, but it was certainly lacking the storybook charm.

I understood my mother wanting to be involved in planning my wedding. I wanted her to be involved, but my nontraditional '70s style clashed with her vision of the elegant '50s-style

wedding she never had.

How could I tell her I heard what she was saying and allow her to be involved but still have the type of wedding I envisioned?

In that moment of despair, a God-inspired idea dawned on me. She could plan the wedding reception!

With hat in hand, I came back home ready to make peace.

"Mom, can we talk?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know it's your wedding. I just want to be involved."

"I want you to. So how about you plan the reception?"

"You mean everything?" Her eyes brightened.

"Yes, Mom, you can do it all. You are in charge."

She threw herself into her part of the wedding.

The day went off without a hitch. It could have ended terribly had I not tried to understand my mother's heart.

Would You Rather Be Right or Happy?

I admit I am highly opinionated, but I felt my wedding was one thing I should have an opinion about.

Looking at it from her point of view, though, I saw she wanted to be involved and I was not letting her. The compromise let us both have our way.

Arguing a position you feel is "right" doesn't really prove profitable especially if the other person thinks they are right. It is a push-pull that only ends in an uncomfortable draw.

Most people, though, just want to be heard. They want you to

see their side—not necessarily embrace it, but know it exists.

My mother didn't want to feel left out of her daughter's wedding process.

Giving her a part was like saying, "I hear you. I want you involved. I care about you."

A Gift for Mom

Obviously, I'm thinking about this because Mother's Day is just around the corner. This will be the 22nd year I haven't had my mom to give a Mother's Day present to.

If you do, I'd like to make a suggestion for a really great gift. Take her out to dinner. If you can't do that then call or Skype with her. Ask her questions, and for the first time, really listen to what she says.

Don't know what to talk about? Past the normal "What did you do today?" here are 10 questions that dig deeper. Choose a few that work for your mom, and have a real conversation.

10 Questions for Mom

1. What's one thing you wished you had done when you were my age?
2. What's the best gift anyone ever gave you, and why?
3. If you could spend time with any person from history, who would you choose, and why?
4. What's one thing you wish you would have done differently?
5. How are you and I alike? How are we different?
6. What is one thing you have always wanted to tell me but never have?
7. What's the best thing I could do for you now?
8. When did it hit you that you were a grown-up?
9. What would you like your great-great-great-grandchildren to know about you?

10. Is there anything about our relationship you would like to change?

Don't forget to share your heart with her, as well. Mothers love that. Mine would if she were here.

Teresa Shields Parker is a wife, mother, business owner, life group leader, speaker and author of *Sweet Grace: How I Lost 250 Pounds and Stopped Trying to Earn God's Favor* and *Sweet Grace Study Guide: Practical Steps to Lose Weight and Overcome Sugar Addiction*. Get a free chapter of her memoir on her blog at [Teresa Shields](#) . Connect with her there or on her Facebook page.