

Building a Joyful Marriage Despite Life's Devastating Skirmishes

What images are evoked in your mind when you think of a joyful marriage? Two smiley faces perhaps? A couple who is always looking on the bright side and is never discouraged? Measuring by this matrix alone, we will come up short more often than not. Let us consider a broader description of what joy is comprised of. Equivalent meanings include: fruition, maturation, gratification and fulfillment. This widens the road for us, providing a more objective grid by which to evaluate whether or not we have an enjoyable life.

If you've been married for any length of time, you know that daily skirmishes are not uncommon in a marriage—speed bumps, I call them. They slow you down for just a moment, but are not too difficult to overcome. Then there are times when there is out-and-out warfare at hand. The battle is raging, and the need to find a united marital front is imperative. Allow me to use an illustration drawn from one of my favorite periods of history.

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill were two leaders of nations allied together against the Axis powers in World War II. The book *No Ordinary Time* by Doris Kearns Goodwin describes what life was like on the home front in the United States during the war. She recalls one occasion when Roosevelt and Churchill had just spent three weeks together at the White House in strategic war planning and personal friendship building. These great leaders stood in front of war maps, played card games, solemnly reviewed the casualties of the war and enjoyed good food and conversations. They battled with Congress over appropriation measures, and Churchill found time for his daily afternoon nap (a man after my own heart).

Upon his return to England, Churchill received a note that Roosevelt had wired ahead. It read: "It is fun to be in the same decade with you." Here are two commanders-in-chief, their kingdoms allied against a daunting foe, who took time to develop—and found delight in—a deep friendship.

Reading the president's message inspired me to reflect upon the last three-and a-half decades of my life, the highlight being the pleasure of partnering with one beautiful woman. Together, we have walked through our history, keenly aware of the plotting of the "god of this world." Like those great leaders, we see it expressed through evil nations, yes, but also in the attacks upon the marriage and family—our own as well as those whom we've pastored over the years.

It's been our experience to grieve over the casualties of this war—men, women, and children left broken in the wake of conflict. We have also rejoiced in the battles fought and won, restoration being God's specialty, and knowing that in Him all things are possible.

The book of Philippians is known for its theme of joy.

I thank my God for every reminder of you. In every prayer of mine for you all, I have always made requests with joy, due to your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now (Phil. 1:3-5, emphasis mine).

Consider your spouse in the context of this passage, and you will see components of a joyful marriage.

I am my wife's chief intercessor, and she is mine, making requests on one another's behalf. We are journey-mates in the fellowship of the gospel, all about seeing the "good work" in one another being advanced. Anne and I have garnered authentic, tangible joy over the course of our marriage, while also being aware that a fuller measure of joy awaits us on that future day.

We have found the path of true, lasting joy in a marriage to be from the inside out. Naturally, external benefits are appreciated and welcomed into the mix. We thank God for secure and abundant finances, good health, unity in family relationships, fun vacations and the abatement of spiritual warfare where seasons of peace reign. When all is running smoothly, almost anyone can maintain a level of joy.

In contrast, our need for joy is acutely felt in times of trial. We are exhorted to “count it all joy” when we are tested (James 1:2). The deeper meaning here is that we are to rule, have authority over, literally, to command our souls in the battle. Herein is the formation and ongoing development of the inside-out dimension.

Strong marriages, contending for joy, build their muscle here in the times of trial.

Jesus was anointed by God with the “oil of gladness” (Heb. 1:9) and yet was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Is. 53:3). He commanded His soul in the apex of His suffering, as He did throughout His life, choosing instead to see “the joy that was set before Him (Heb. 12:2).

Husbands and wives, fix your eyes on this Man, the greatest leader of all time. He is the author, the finisher and all you need in between, the one who will empower your faith and open your eyes to see the joy. {eoa}

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