A Happy Marriage

Covenant Joy in a Fallen World



Rebecca VanDoodewaard

"This is a 'how to' book in the deepest sense. In *A Happy Marriage*, Rebecca winsomely deals with the foundational principles of this most basic of human institutions and their practical implications. The breadth of her historical and cultural context is unique. Her observations are profound."

—Barbara Challies
Widow and mother
Dalton, Ga.

"*A Happy Marriage: Covenant Joy in a Fallen World* is a unique book on marriage. Through the honest reflections of a number of couples, younger and older, and her own biblical/pastoral reflections on God's good gift of marriage to His creatures, Rebecca VanDoodewaard explores, often with an unsettling honesty, the joys, privileges, sorrows, and strains experienced by Christians in marriage. Just as the Bible never allows us to imagine that life in a fallen world will ever be without tears, Rebecca acknowledges this, but shows us that for Christians, marriage is a gracious gift from a God who longs to see His children experience 'covenant joy in a fallen world.' I recommend this book without any hesitation."

—Dr. Ian Hamilton
Professor and cofounder
Westminster Seminary UK

"A happy and holy marriage serves as one of the greatest blessings this life has to offer the Christian pilgrim. Yet few Christian books present these twin gifts of happiness and holiness as ready blessings to be found within the confines of marriage. Rebecca VanDoodewaard has written a book which casts this right vision. Whether couples

are just embarking upon this journey, muddling their way through the middle years, or looking at the finish line, here is a book that will encourage, challenge, and comfort. *A Happy Marriage* is a happily realistic book offering a biblical lens with personal and practical applications that any and all marriages will benefit from."

—Rev. Jason and Leah Heloploulos
East Lansing, Mich.

"The marketplace for Christian books on marriage is bulging, so one might wonder if there is room for another one. Yet there is. Such is the breakdown and the watering down of the idea of marriage, not only in the secular world, but sadly also among Christians—we, too, need to be reminded afresh of the richness of this God-ordained gift and blessing. In a way that leans heavily on the rich portrayal of marriage from many angles in the Bible, Rebecca VanDoodewaard walks us through its relevant passages to explore the rich depths of this relationship. Most notably, she points to the intimate connection between marriage as the bond between a man and a woman on earth and the sacred saving union between believers and Christ, their heavenly Bridegroom, and the rich benefits that we find in Him. Here is a volume that will benefit not only those who are preparing for marriage and seeking to understand all that it entails but also those who are already married and need to rediscover afresh the joys and blessings of this unique gift from God."

—Rev. Mark and Fiona Johnston
Bangor, Northern Ireland

"I was once one of Rebecca's pastors, and she would often ask me, 'What books have you read lately?' Now I'm pleased to say, '*A Happy Marriage*, and I loved it!' Such timely but often neglected topics. Such theologically rich reflections confirmed by personal testimonies. Such biblically wise counsel made simple and accessible. The more I read, the more I thought of the couples I counsel. This is gold, and I can't wait to recommend it."

—Dr. Greg Norfleet
Pastor of Counseling
Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Ala.

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REBECCA
VANDOODEWAARD

Ligonier Ministries

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For Bill, with whom I have been very happy.

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"Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve, who kept their honeymoon in Eden, but had their first little one among the thorns and thistles of the wilderness. It is still the beginning of the home epic—the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in communion."
—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 1872

"Almighty God, who at the beginning did create our first parents Adam and Eve, and did sanctify and join them together in marriage: Pour out upon you the riches of his grace, sanctify, and bless you, that ye may please him both in body and soul; and live together in holy love until your lives' end."
—The Book of Common Prayer, 1521

Introduction

Christian marriage is important because it is a declaration of true, ultimate love in a world that is hungry for true and ultimate love. It points sinners to salvation through Jesus' substitutionary, loving sacrifice and leadership. It points to eternity, where marriage itself will no longer be needed because communion will be fulfilled. History's metanarrative is a love story, and it has a heavenly ending.

We know this on a gut level. This is why happy endings in books and films are satisfying. This is why, in a broken world, we still look for true love and get married. But it seems that the longer you look around, the more complex marriage looks. The fairy tales of childhood all end "happily ever after"; it is easy to believe them until your castle in the air is blown away by adultery or violence or abandonment in a marriage that you have seen or experienced. Since the garden of Eden, Satan has been attacking God's plan for marriage. As the initiation of the world's fundamental social structure as well as a picture of redemption, God's best earthly gift is a target. The devil has used different tactics through history, but he has never let up in his assaults, from Eden on, often capitalizing on our own sin. Our world is full of unhappy and broken marriages. It is loaded with misrepresentations of Christ's relationship to His church. And so it is easy to be jaded, resigning ourselves to the fact that "happily ever after" is only for a storybook princess.

But though the fall into sin damages every marriage—some irreparably—God's good design for marriage is still here. He has given this beautiful, created ordinance, and "best are all things as the will / Of God ordained them; his creating hand / Nothing imperfect or deficient left / Of all that he created."[1] We still have God's original good pattern, design, and promise to bless His people. Regardless of our personal experience, there is an intended experience of marriage. The ideal still exists because Christ is still committed to His church, His bride, His people. God has designed marriage for great blessing, and so we can expect that. When two Christians make a lifelong commitment to each other, they are effectively and demonstrably declaring that they trust God's plan for marriage and trust that He will use it for His designed purpose. Marriage is bigger than our happiness, but God designed happiness to go with marriage. When, by grace, we live in a relationship that accords with God's design for His glory, we can expect the joy that He designed to accompany it.

This expectation cannot be rooted in other people, though. If we look to other sinners to fulfill us and be the basis for happiness, we will be unfulfilled. Jane Austen commented that marriage is the relationship "in which people expect most from others and are least honest themselves."[2] Other people will disappoint us; we will disappoint other people. The closer we are to someone, the more often this is true. But God never disappoints, and because His design is "very good" and for the Christian's good, because He is working all things together for our good and promises to bless Christian marriage, we can expect happiness from Him as we follow His plan.

Notice that this is biblical, not "traditional," marriage. Traditions change from era to era, from culture to culture. People start new

traditions and update old ones. There is nothing wrong with that, because traditions are often expressions of human creativity and—like stockings above a fireplace, red envelopes at Lunar New Year, or bonfires on November 5—they add legitimate fun to life. We can change traditions, add to them, or even leave them out of our lives with no real consequence.

Marriage is not a tradition. Marriage, as given by God in His Word, just *is*, whether we like it or not, whether it is part of our cultural background or not. Biblical marriage is part of the Lord's creation, like Everest or the moon. A shift in tradition does nothing to change it. Noncompliance, though it will change our experience, has no effect on it. Emotions will not affect its existence. And because God created it to bless us, we can enjoy it instead of fight, deny, or reshape it.

But why is happiness in marriage even important? If we are being faithful to each other and doing our work, is happiness just icing on the cake? No. If marriage is supposed to be a picture of Christ and the church, then a relationship that is generally unhappy or bland is a misrepresentation. Having a happy marriage is not first about our avoiding misery, though that is one inevitable result. Just as God does not exist for our happiness, neither does His design of marriage. But just as we find greatest happiness and greatest blessing in knowing God, so we find great happiness and blessing in following His design for our closest human relationship. All true happiness—all blessing—is a byproduct of something more magnificent: knowing God and being remade in the image of His Son. Obedience to Him as part of our reasonable worship will bring blessing, just as certainly as sin and rebellion will bring misery. Through Scripture, salvation is communicated in terms of joy: God has promised that His people

will ultimately be eternally happy in Him even as He rejoices over them (e.g., 1 Sam. 2:1; Pss. 119:162; 126; 132:16; Isa. 35:10; 65:14, 18–19; Rev. 19:7).

Happiness in marriage is also about accurately showing—to each other, to children, to church, and to community—the church's joy in her union with Christ. The church's destiny is happiness: "Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song" (Isa. 51:3). A faithful marriage that is happy is a clearer, truer picture than a marriage that is simply faithful. That does not diminish faithfulness: it elevates happiness. And rightly so: God Himself repeatedly uses the joy of a happy marriage to picture His own love for His people. Isaiah 62 is a well-known illustration: "For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (v. 5).

Contemporary Western culture says that our happiness is essential—absolutely primary. It treats faithfulness as optional or even opposed to happiness. Happiness is to be pursued at nearly any cost by any means. Sadly, confessionally faithful churches often behave the opposite way, as though faithfulness were primary, with marital joy as a bonus. One wedding liturgy still in use actually begins: "Whereas married persons are generally, by reason of sin, subject to many troubles and afflictions, to the end that you . . . may also be assured in your hearts of the certain assistance of God in your affliction."[3] The expectation is fidelity despite misery, not fidelity fed by joy.

Emphasizing either faithfulness or happiness to the detriment of the other is a distorted picture of the relationship between Christ and His church (Eph. 5). They are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are intimately connected. Faithfulness is essential: so is happiness.

Both will take work. Happiness, as more abstract, might take deeper thought and conversation. It might take more emotional effort and understanding. But these are the warp and woof of a healthy gospel union, byproducts of loving and following our Creator. An unhappy marriage can be functional at one level. It can be faithful. A happy marriage, though, is the most accurate picture of healthy Christian faith in Jesus. It will also be a marriage in which faithfulness flourishes.

But this happiness is not without context. Feeling "happy" with no context or boundaries for the happiness can lead to distortion and spiritual death. Some marriages are happy that should not be. Look at Ahab and Jezebel: they helped each other reach goals and fulfill dreams. They supported each other and shared ambitions, working together toward perceived success (1 Kings 21:1–16). Things were probably pretty harmonious in the palace in Samaria. Partnering together for an evil goal can bring union and fleeting happiness. Ananias and Sapphira had no discord when they decided to lie about their donation to the church (Acts 5:1–11). Both of these couples had a unity that showed its distortion in the death and misery that it spawned. When happiness in marriage is an end in itself or is a means to sin, then it is not a worthy goal. Happiness should be part of Christian marriage not only for our blessing, but as the most accurate advertisement of the love and joy demonstrated in God's work of salvation. It is a reflection of our happy submission to Jesus' lordship. If happiness is not there within this context, then we have a problem.

Neither is happiness without definition. It is sometimes difficult to touch on what it is, though, or to identify happiness. Personality and culture will affect the expression of relational happiness. Circumstances will change our experience of it. Time will change its

tempo. Robert Browning wrote about the happiness in his marriage as being like a spider's web: something that can't always be seen and that breaks when touched. "Help me to hold it!" he tells his wife, Elizabeth: "Silence and passion, joy and peace."[4] Silence and passion might be a personal experience, but joy and peace are biblical ideas that all happy Christian marriages share. Different marriages will experience it in different ways and to different degrees at times, but for a Christian marriage, blessing—including happiness—should be present to some extent. It develops and deepens over time, often in fits and starts. But when, by faith, we walk in God's design for marriage with another believer to God's glory, can we expect Him to withhold His promised blessing?

We can expect this when we understand that we do not define *happy*. We do not have the knowledge or the power to do so. God is the One who does, and we see His definition in Scripture as it links happiness with holiness—with God's blessing. The word sometimes translated "happy" in the English Standard Version can also be translated as "blessed" (Gen. 30:13; Eccl. 10:17; Isa. 32:20, KJV). It is tied primarily with the blessing of relationship with God, but also with the covenant community. Yet this happiness is not a stoic, positive knowledge: there is deep emotion here. The blessing of relationship with God and another saved human should bring emotional life to us. In other translations, the word translated "happy" in the ESV is substituted with "cheer up" (Deut. 24:5, KJV) and even "making merry" (1 Kings 4:20, KJV).

The Old Testament speaks many times of happiness, and regularly associates covenantal union with joy. In one place, it commands it: "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. . . . Be intoxicated always in her love." (Prov. 5:18–19).

Biblically, happiness is living under God's covenant favor and not His displeasure. It is enjoying His blessing, having been redeemed from the curse of the fall and sin. It is living according to His Word.

Scripture assumes that there should be happiness in marriage. Adam and Eve, especially before the fall (Gen. 2:23), Isaac and Rebekah (24:67; 26:8), Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 4), and many other couples through the Bible show their enjoyment of God's great gift of marriage as they find happiness, comfort, and fun in each other's love. Anonymous couples also play a role, particularly in Psalm 45 and the Song of Solomon. Individual anonymity allows the focus to be on the happiness of union—the joy of two becoming one in covenantal bonds.

God uses the familiar joy of marriage as a picture that we know and experience to help us understand His joy in His people. This is not limited to Ephesians chapter 5, which contains the most explicit connections between marriage and salvation. God also uses this analogy from the Old Testament right through to Revelation (e.g., Isa. 62:4–5; Jer. 2:2; Matt. 9:15; Rev. 21:2). The places where Scripture speaks of a lack of wedded joy and faithfulness are places of darkness and judgment (e.g., Ezek. 16; Hos. 4:14). God Himself connects marriage with happiness and blessing and uses that familiar blessing to help us understand the joy of salvation. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote that "the picture is of our Lord rejoicing in the relationship, happy in it, triumphant in it, glorying in it."[5] This salvation is the root of all lasting marital happiness. It is the source.

But real happiness does not exclude sadness, hardship, or suffering in a marriage. Our own sin and sheer fallenness are the biggest obstacle to relational joy. Sin in ourselves and our spouses conspires against happiness. So do the fallen world and the devil. Just as the

church walks through this pilgrim journey often feeling the thorns and thistles, so most (if not all) marriages go through valleys and dark places. A relationship can still be happy without being all roses and sunshine. Blessedness can coexist with grief, past or present. "In happiness," Augustine wrote, "I remember past sadness, and in sadness I remember past happiness."[6] Life is complex. Circumstances can change and influence, but they do not dictate. A couple can grow closer together while walking through situations that threaten and press in. A happy marriage is not the fruit of pleasant circumstances: a couple can have a miserable relationship in comfortable, easy surroundings, as Hollywood gives us daily proof. Happiness might not look like bliss or ease, and it can experience growth even in a hostile environment.

This book attempts to examine happiness and marriage with this in mind. Many marriage books warn, diagnose issues, and troubleshoot. Many prescribe advice without nuance for temperament and situation. Too often, authors write about their own marriages, with understanding or advice coming out of individual experience: what works for them becomes a principle that will benefit any marriage, instead of a practice that has been useful in their own circumstances. Even Christian authors often normalize mediocrity and struggle in marriage, arguing that because we are broken, we cannot expect too much from the relationship, placing a burden of unbiblical categories on couples, instead of recognizing and embracing the Lord's good gift. Few marriage books try to think through the joy inherent in God's design, darkness notwithstanding. But this is what Christian marriages and the surrounding culture need—to see the beauty and glory intrinsic to the closest of human relationships. Because behavior flows from thought and belief, a Christian marriage will be

healthiest when the spouses are thinking biblically.

We have a Creator who loves not only creation but especially His children. The whole system that He gives us is meant for our gladness. Marriage is part of the original design that is "very good." When we fail to consider the design, we fail to truly understand and utilize the thing itself. The more complex something is, the more true this is: you might not read the instructions on the blender box, but you will likely find out all about your sports car so that you can better enjoy and care for it. We fail to consider God's design of marriage to our own hurt and mediocrity. Marriage has not evolved over the span of human existence to make societies functional. It is not random. It is not something that we can safely play around with, taking out design elements that we don't like or understand, and plugging in our own parts. Instead, marriage is something to cherish as a gift from a loving, omniscient Creator. It is something—like a great work of engineering or art—to ponder and admire and gratefully use as well as enjoy. This book tries to help in that direction.

To try to show the beauty of God's design, I have asked several couples about their happy marriages. These people represent multiple countries and many cultures. They are doctors and students and factory workers and retired folks. They are multilingual and monolingual, childless and quiverfull, urban and rural, settled and sojourning, joyful and grieving. All of them profess faith in the Lord Jesus and are living out that faith in marriages that seek to accurately reflect Christ's love where they are, serving their families and local congregations. These couples have kindly shared their stories as a means of thinking through happiness in different relational contexts and challenges. The last story is not an interview, but a widow's thoughts from the perspective of two completed marriages. With one

exception I have arranged the interviews by length of marriage, in order to give a picture of the sorts of progression that a Christian marriage can make over time. They also show that God does and will bless His children, even through darkness. A blessed marriage comes not from chasing happiness, but by seeing the happiness of glorifying and enjoying God together, embracing the gift of marriage that God has put in front of us in His design for our blessing. The couples represented here are living examples of this.

In between their stories, I have sought to identify built-in aspects of marriage that facilitate happiness. It is not a comprehensive list—no doubt others could add facets. But these seemed fundamental, though often overlooked or overshadowed. Other aspects, such as communication, I allude to, but they are so regularly discussed elsewhere that it seemed redundant to include them here.

Our culture not only treats marriage lightly but is also dismissive of biblical marriage as narrow and repressive. Like all fallen cultures, it has exchanged God's truth about marriage for a lie. I hope the stories in this book show the truth about fulfillment and peace and happiness that obedience brings. Sin and grief touch every aspect of our relationships—some more, some less. But there is nowhere that sin and grief go that grace cannot. No corner of a Christian marriage is out of reach. Happiness thrives when we understand the sufficiency of Christ. God has designed marriage for great blessing: we can actually enjoy it throughout this life.

There is something important to note, though: this book is written to Christians. Anyone may read it, but unless you are trusting in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, unless your life is centered on worship of the God who made, saved, sanctifies, and has promised to glorify you, you will find much here puzzling. Because marriage is a

picture of Christ and the church, you cannot fully or properly understand it until you come to know the God who created it—and you. When that happens, it will become clear that while marriage is for us, it is not about us. It will also mean that the atmosphere of a marriage will flow out of our identity in Christ. It will come from who we are, not what we do. It will come from strong roots and not be borrowed fruit. If what we do is not coming out of who we are in Christ, it will be unsustainable at best, deceptive at worst. Sanctification by the Spirit makes holiness—and real happiness—possible. Christians are made increasingly holy by the Spirit, and this is why we have hope, not only for happiness in a marriage, but ultimately in God Himself. If you are not a believer, my hope is that you find the living water that can sustain you through this life and give you the happiness of fellowship with God Himself.

This book is not written only for married people. That is simply because God did not create marriage only for married people. It affects all of us, as children, siblings, friends, and members of society. The happiness of the marriages around us will certainly affect our own lives and joy. The stability of a community partly depends on the stability of publicly committed relationships, and if marriages begin to crumble or spread lies and unhappiness, it changes things for everyone. The reverse is also true, which is why all of us—single, married, divorced, or widowed—need to be thinking biblically and carefully about marriage. When we do, we can appreciate, protect, and encourage the relationships around us, regardless of our own marital status. We can value this gift of God to humanity.

Abuse, abandonment, infidelity, and divorce are topics beyond the scope of this book. But please know that if you are in an unhappy

marriage, there is hope and there is help. If you are in an unsafe marriage, the same is true. God values His children even more than He values His temporal institution of marriage: marriages that misrepresent Christ's sacrificial love must be dealt with. The stakes are too high for silence. Marriage was made for people, not people for marriage. Call your family, go to a friend, talk with a safe pastor, involve the police. Do whatever you need to do in order to protect yourself, any children, and the community from a marriage that spreads lies and misery.

My thanks go to the many couples and widow who opened their lives so that we could learn from their stories. They responded with grace and generosity to a request that asked something very personal of them. I am truly grateful for their kindness, time, and wisdom. Their lives are evidence of things not seen.

The staff at Ligonier were kindly professional throughout the writing and publishing process. Barry York patiently answered Greek queries. Matt Kingswood read through the manuscript with the eyes of a theologian, the heart of a pastor, and the kindness of an uncle. Although she finished educating me decades ago, my mother continues to teach me through her wisdom, which she gave to various drafts when I asked. My children were patient about another book project, and my husband never flagged in his encouragement and support.

1

Exclusivity

I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me.
—Song of Solomon 7:10

Deciding to get married can be daunting not only because we do not fully know the other person, but also because marriage is for life. This one person will shape our future, children, financial condition, health, and reputation more than any other human. It can be an intimidating thought! We understand Jane Austen's Elinor Dashwood as she works through that feeling: "It is bewitching in the idea of a single and constant attachment, . . . one's happiness depending entirely on any particular person."[1] One person for life does not always seem reasonable.

Perhaps this is partly why our culture does not believe that lifelong monogamy is possible, let alone happy. It pushes exclusive offers, exclusive vacations, exclusive experiences. These things are not only welcomed but also eagerly pursued. Exclusive relationships are not. They are seen as quaint or repressive, and certainly not morally mandatory. Without a Christian worldview, this would be reasonable.

Voluntary commitment to another human through things that you cannot see or anticipate is foolish, unless this is part of the way that marriage was designed. And it is. Because marriage is a picture of Christ and the church, exclusivity is actually an aspect that both the type and the archetype share. The exclusivity of marriage reflects the exclusivity of the gospel.

This design aspect is clear from the garden of Eden on, as Scripture shows in precept and story the blessing of covenantal monogamy and the misery that comes when we toy with God's design. Because the design is so clear, the exclusivity of marriage is dissolvable only in the face of stark covenantal violation (Jer. 3:8; Matt. 5:32).

But there are exclusive marriages that are unhappy. Such relationships are an aberration from the created norm. The misery does not come from the exclusivity, as our culture so often argues, but is—like all other unhappiness—ultimately a result of sin. It is the unhappiness of exclusivity without God's blessing.

Emotional and sexual exclusivity in marriage is not only the ideal; it should be the expectation, certainly for believers. When couples stick with each other "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health," they create structure for society. They create stability, predictability, and coherence for each other and those around them. Children can grow up with the conviction that their parents will always be together. Faithfully married couples tend to be stronger financially, not only in terms of accumulated wealth but also in terms of financial stability, literally enriching society.[2] Married people tend to be healthier—this is especially true for men—with lower rates of chronic disease, and serious illness diagnosed more quickly.[3]

But of course, God is not only concerned with practicalities; He designed the exclusivity of lifelong, monogamous marriage for our

happiness as well, even apart from lower blood pressure and stronger retirement funds. A marriage covenant and marital contentment join to facilitate exclusivity and the happiness designed to flow from it. "A covenant relation," J.I. Packer explains, "is one in which two parties are permanently pledged to each other in mutual service and dependence."[4] The assurance of one other human being always willing to help, comfort, and support you, as you are ready to do the same for that person, brings blessing.

In the summer of 1922, Lord Louis Mountbatten married Edwina Ashley.[5] He had education, military experience, and blood connections to most of Europe's royal families. She had inherited an incredible fortune from her grandfather, making her one of the wealthiest women in Britain. Both were young, good-looking, and apparently in love. Their wedding was the social event of the decade. Not long into their marriage, however, Edwina began a long-term affair with a man who would be by her side for years. But she did not limit herself to him: it was publicly known that she was promiscuous, and for many years, public sympathy was with her husband as he simply bore with it. The strange thing is, when Louis eventually committed adultery himself, Edwina was devastated. Their younger daughter wrote: "My mother found it impossible not to be jealous. The fact that she had been taking lovers for ten years was apparently of no account."[6] Blind or hardened to her own sin, Lady Mountbatten could still see the wrongness of her husband's unfaithfulness to her. Even in a marriage that was already broken, new unfaithfulness brought new grief.

The broken Mountbatten marriage clearly pictures what we see in the marriages around us that have been damaged or destroyed by infidelity. It shows the unhappiness that discontentment and broken

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