

shaunti feldhahn

with Tally Whitehead

foreword by Andy Stanley

the good news about marriage

debunking discouraging myths
about marriage and divorce

*"This book is packed with game-changing revelations.
Bravo to Shaunti for her outstanding research."*

—Emerson Eggerichs, best-selling author of *Love and Respect*

Praise for
The Good News About Marriage

“In the thirty-two years I have been deeply immersed in the world of marriage ministry, I have been demoralized at times by the negative statistics quoted. And now I am ecstatic as I read the truth in this incredible book. Thank you, Shaunti, for doing the hard work necessary to expose the myths and lies and for finally revealing the facts about marriage. This book and the undeniable research in it is a game changer!”

—JIMMY EVANS, founder and CEO of MarriageToday,
senior pastor of Trinity Fellowship

“This is an important book. Shaunti and Tally do an impressive job of showing that there is room for different viewpoints on divorce statistics and room for optimism about marriage. I believe that people make higher-risk choices partly because they have lost hope in marriage, and this book presents a basis for real hope.”

—DR. SCOTT STANLEY, coauthor of *A Lasting Promise*,
research professor at the University of Denver

“Lamenting the demise of the family has almost become a cottage industry. There’s a lot of legitimate bad news out there, but Shaunti reminds readers that the situation might not be nearly as dire as we think—in fact, there are encouraging signs of hope. That’s a welcome message!”

—JIM DALY, president of Focus on the Family

“There are many bad stats out there about marriage, but Shaunti debunks those myths and provides clarity about marriage in general and how to strengthen your own marriage. *The Good News About Marriage* is well worth your time.”

—ED STETZER, PhD, president of LifeWay Research

“Every Christian leader in America needs to read the groundbreaking, hope-filled research in this book. Then they need to recommend that everyone in their sphere of influence read it as well! This is one of the most important marriage books I’ve ever read, and it will change how all of us think and talk about marriage and divorce.”

—LYSA TERKEURST, *New York Times* best-selling
author, president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“This book is *great* news about marriage! Every pastor, coach, or counselor will find a new zeal for working with marriages after learning the truth about the state of marriage today. I cannot wait to have Shaunti share these truths with the Catalyst audience.”

—TYLER REAGIN, executive director of Catalyst

“*The Good News About Marriage* offers an important word of encouragement to believers who wonder if faith makes a difference in modern married life. Believers who put their faith into practice—who worship together and pray together—are much more likely to enjoy stable and happy marriages. This is good news indeed.”

—W. BRADFORD WILCOX, director of the National
Marriage Project, associate professor of sociology
at the University of Virginia

“Academically rigorous, honest, and refreshingly bold, this book will make you question what you’ve always heard about the bad news of marriage. A seminal work, this book could change the social narrative about marriage for generations. This is a must-read for academics, marriage educators, and couples alike.”

—RON L. DEAL, director of FamilyLife Blended,
best-selling author of *The Smart Stepfamily*

“This groundbreaking research gives us a whole different framework to think about marriage, divorce, and relationships. This is fantastic material that provides powerful tools to help us improve our personal relationships and those in our communities.”

—JUD WILHITE, author of *The God of Yes*, pastor
of Central Christian Church

“Shaunti’s thoroughly researched book will inject life and hope, not only into our national consciousness about marriage, but also into every individual marriage in the country.”

—DR. TIM CLINTON, president of American
Association of Christian Counselors, executive
director of Center for Counseling and Family
Studies at Liberty University

“Shaunti takes aim at marriage myths that have spread like cancer through our culture—myths that have become self-fulfilling prophecies. This book is packed with game-changing revelations! Bravo to Shaunti for her outstanding research.”

—EMERSON EGGERICHS, best-selling author
of *Love and Respect*

“This is some of the most important information on marriage for this generation, and Shaunti brings practical inspiration on every page. This is the new go-to book for facts on marriages in America—and it’s much better news than we often hear.”

—DR. JIM BURNS, president of HomeWord, author
of *Creating an Intimate Marriage* and *Closer*

“You’ve read the bad news about marriage—the cohabiting couples, extramarital affairs, and soaring divorce rates. But this book shows there’s a lot of good news about marriage today, and it’s about time someone said so!”

—BOB LEPINE, co-host of *FamilyLife Today*

“It’s impossible to overstate the importance of these findings. Our beliefs directly influence our actions, and our beliefs about marriage have been wrong. Shaunti and Tally provide genuine hope that is based on truth. This book changes everything.”

—CHRISTOPHER MCCLUSKEY, best-selling author,
president of Professional Christian Coaching Institute

“Shaunti Feldhahn presents profound truth in the most relatable way. We have consistently used her books to help lay foundations for strong marriages in our church and to gain tremendous perspective about our own relationship. Now, in *The Good News About Marriage*, Shaunti gives us the gifts of a positive perspective and a practical strategy to make the most of our marriages.”

—STEVEN AND HOLLY FURTICK, lead pastor of Elevation
Church, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Greater*

shaunti feldhahn
with tally whitehead

Foreword by Andy Stanley

the
good news
about **marriage**

Debunking Discouraging Myths
About Marriage and Divorce

- the fallacy of the 50% divorce rate
- the surprising truth about divorce among churchgoers
- how most marriages are happier and healthier than we've been told



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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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From Shaunti

For Jeff:

*The fact that I get to live with you over the
course of my lifetime is definitely the biggest
scam I've pulled off.*

• • •

From Tally

For Eric:

You had me at hello.

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Foreword

When Shaunti first briefed me on what she was finding, I was staggered. As a pastor of a large church and someone who is passionate about strong marriages and families, I feel a responsibility to stay informed. Many of us do. And we think we are. We think our discouragement about the state of marriage in our culture is based on years of solid evidence.

If half of marriages today end in divorce, if most couples feel the fire go out after a few years, if the rate of divorce is the same in the church as it is out, then the institution of marriage is in trouble. We subconsciously revert to crisis mode. We talk widely about the need to work harder, to always be on the lookout for potential problems, to stick to our promises, and to endure hard marriages for the long haul—even when we want to quit.

And all those actions are important—*absolutely*. But when we act and speak in crisis mode, we become a small part of a very large problem: discouraging people about marriage instead of encouraging them.

In order for people to work harder, to want to prevent potential problems, and to stick to their promises, they need to believe they can make it. They need to believe they cannot just survive

their marriages but they can enjoy them. They need to believe that their marriages can thrive.

And it turns out that hope is out there. We just didn't realize it. It turns out that we have been accepting the discouraging beliefs about the state of marriage without questioning. In these pages, Shaunti makes a good case that at least some of our conventional wisdom is based on false beliefs. She makes a good case that there are actually many good, solid, evidence-based reasons to be *encouraged* about the state of marriage and reasons to encourage others as well.

That being the case, we shouldn't talk about marriage and divorce as we have in the past. It is good news that there is good news out there! And I look forward to telling people that good news about marriage.

—Andy Stanley
Senior Pastor
North Point Ministries

Surprising News About Marriage

What Most People Don't
Know...but Need To

In 2006 I was writing one of my newspaper opinion columns and referencing the high prevalence of divorce. I wanted to correctly cite the most recent divorce rate but was confused by conflicting sources and articles. After trying to figure it out for two or three hours (a lifetime in the newspaper business), I tossed it to my then research assistant (now senior researcher) Tally Whitehead, so I could keep working on the column. But after several more hours, Tally came back even more perplexed than when we started.

It can't be this difficult, I thought. We quickly called a respected expert on marriage and divorce and asked, "What's the exact divorce rate?"

Her unexpected answer: "No one knows."

Huh? Before I could say anything, she continued, "And it depends on what you mean by the 'divorce rate.' There are many

different types of divorce rates. There are also many different surveys, of different groups of people; there are different ways of tracking the rate of divorce today and projecting it in the future. They all say different things. There's no way to know one 'exact' rate."

"Well..." I tried to gather my flustered thoughts. "Just an estimate, then. Roughly what percentage of marriages will end in divorce? Like, what does the Census Bureau say?"

"The Census Bureau stopped projecting divorce rates in 1996. And even those projections were based on divorce increasing, and it's decreased instead. That won't help you."

"The divorce rate has decreased? Really? But it is still around 50 percent, right?" After all, I'd heard for years that half of all marriages end in divorce.

"Actually, the divorce rate has never hit 50 percent. It has never even gotten close. Again, it depends on what you mean by the divorce rate, but no matter what definition you use, we're significantly below 50 percent right now. It is maybe closer to 30 to 40 percent, but again, no one knows."

My first thought was *Nuts! I'm going to have to edit my column.*

My second thought was *But wait a minute. What? The divorce rate has never gotten close to 50 percent? Why haven't we heard this before? That's a really big deal!*

That was eight years ago. And only gradually over the next few years did I begin to realize what a big deal the truth actually was—not only about that, but about several other marriage

and divorce myths. Myths that are very discouraging...and very common.

Why It Matters That We Get to the Truth

As part of the relationship research that my husband, Jeff, and I have done over the past twelve years, we have interviewed and surveyed thousands of people about their innermost thoughts, needs, and fears. Early on, we began to get a clear window not only into their needs as men and women, which was what we were primarily trying to study, but also into how their relationships worked, what inspired and discouraged them, what they believed about marriage, parenting, the workplace, and culture.

Eventually it was clear that there was one common denominator among marriages that survived versus those that failed: hope. There were many different factors that led to either outcome, of course. But underneath it all was this bottom line: Did the couple have a sense of hope...or a sense of futility?

A couple could go through a terrible period, but if they felt certain they would make it, they usually did. Even if a couple lacked that certainty, the hope that things *could* get better was often enough to keep them going. With a feeling of *We can get through this*, they would do what was needed to right the ship, patch the holes, and keep sailing.

But if a couple instead thought *This is never going to get better* or *We're not going to make it*, they usually seemed to have a different outcome. A sneaking feeling of futility took over and with it a

sense of inevitability. They assumed things would never change, even if they wanted them to. Instead of motivating the couple to fight harder for their marriage, their belief in approaching doom had the opposite effect. After all, if the ship is going to sink anyway, why bother working so hard to bail it out? Far better, they think, to work on escaping the wreck intact.

In other words, a couple's futile feeling *We aren't going to make it* ends up being one of the main reasons they don't make it.

A couple's futile feeling that *We aren't going to make it* ends up being one of the main reasons they don't make it.

Those who work directly with troubled couples—counselors, therapists, clergy, and marriage mentors—told me they generally agree. If even one spouse has a sense of hope that things can change, or simply a vision to keep going no matter what, it is amazing how often that one-sided commitment keeps the marriage afloat long enough to get it sailing again. But it is tough to overcome both spouses having a sense of futility.

The Big Cultural Problem

The problem is that we have a culture-wide sense of futility when it comes to marriage, a feeling that, as you will see in the following chapters, is based on conventional wisdom that simply isn't true!

I hear it everywhere. A sense of discouragement about mar-

riage, and the evidence that seems to justify it, saturates our culture. The idea that half of all marriages end in divorce, for example, is accepted as fact.

For years, and with all good intentions, we have been thinking and talking about marriage as being in trouble. We comment on the “unhealthy” state of our unions and the “skyrocketing rate of divorce.” I cannot count the number of times I myself have referenced the 50 percent divorce rate from the stage in my marriage conferences! Many books, TV shows, radio programs, speeches, and sermons also discuss just how often happiness fades in marriage. Married couples talk about beating the odds, while live-in couples ponder, *Why should we bother getting married?* And in the process we are absorbing a vastly inflated sense of futility. Because although there are indeed plenty of legitimate concerns about marriage, there are others—a lot of others!—that are closer to myth than reality.

I am guilty of spreading every one of those myths myself. But not anymore. After an eight-year investigative study, I now know that although there *are* plenty of challenges, most marriages are still far stronger, happier, and longer lasting than most of us realize. It is so important for us to get that truth out there because, as mentioned earlier, the belief otherwise can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Another consequence of our cultural discouragement is that many couples avoid marriage altogether for the same reason. I recently read an excerpt of a popular book, *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, in which the author explained why she avoided

marrying her boyfriend for eleven years: “By not marrying Karl, we could never get divorced. By not marrying him, he would never be lost to me.”¹

After years of interviews and surveys, I have heard this type of fatalistic reasoning more times than I can count, and it is undoubtedly one reason for some of the cultural concerns that *are* accurate and that worry those who care about marriage. For example, more people today *are* living together as their first step, instead of or before marrying.² More than four in ten children *are* being born to unmarried women.³ And one reason for these trends is the sheer number of people who think getting married is futile.

Those who work directly with couples are just as concerned as the couples themselves. I know I sure used to be, as I would speak at a marriage conference, look out over the audience, and wonder how many of them would be divorced in a few years.

And in the church community where I often do those marriage conferences, I find that pastors, priests, and counselors are even more discouraged. They, after all, are often the ones most likely to be contacted when a marriage goes wrong. I can no longer count the number of pastors who have expressed, “It is so discouraging to marry a young couple and know that they have only a one in two chance of making it.”

And it’s not just in the Judeo-Christian world that clerics are troubled. After seeing in a church conference advertisement that I would be sharing my research about the small things that make a big difference in marriages, a local Muslim imam came for the

day to take notes. Afterward, we spent some time talking, and he explained his concerns for those he ministers to:

In my community, we have a lower divorce rate, I think. But that doesn't mean we have a better feeling about marriage. It doesn't mean we have figured out how to do marriage well. We have many couples from other countries; some are in arranged marriages. Traditionally, a couple gets married expecting to be together for life, whether or not they are happy. But now, here [in America], that isn't enough. Usually a family is here because they want the American pursuit of happiness. They see it on TV and they want that great life, that good marriage, but don't always know *how*. And they don't always have the structure around them to help—the grandparents or the friends. And when one person in our community gets divorced, they worry that they will be next. They need this encouragement that they can make it.

Bad News Isn't Motivating

Thinking that there is so much turmoil in marriage, those who work with marriages—therapists, clergy, writers, or speakers like me—are caught between a rock and a hard place. We feel we have to get across just how seriously the couple has to take the situation and how hard they may have to work, but we know that doing so could potentially discourage the couple before they start.

One pastor told me, “I do premarital counseling and require a couple to have three sessions with me before they get married. When I begin premarital counseling, I start off with the fact of reality. ‘Do you know how many people get divorced? It’s about 50 percent. That’s discouraging, but you need to face the facts that marriage is not easy. So you need to get this education.’”

But instead of seeing the couple being motivated to work hard, he sometimes sees a damaging fear set in instead. Here’s how he put it: “The thought that the divorce rate is 50 percent can be very, very discouraging and frightening. Especially when someone actually starts struggling, they are so wrapped up in their emotional experience that they aren’t thinking right then, and it’s easy to just say, ‘It’s a slippery slope, so why fight it?’”

Essentially, the subconscious bad-news beliefs about marriage and divorce are like a slow-acting poison. It is not that a couple starts out halfway expecting to fail (although that might be the case for some). Most start out believing—truly believing—that they will beat the statistics. *We’re going to be in the 50 percent that make it*, they think on their glorious wedding day. But the first time they have a major string of arguments, some start worrying. Somewhere down deep they start thinking that they might be in the wrong half, after all.

If things get worse and they don’t know how to make it better, all they see is pain ahead. Eventually many believe they’ve passed the point of no return and will be one of the statistics, and they give up. They think, *Well, 50 percent of other marriages couldn’t make it either*. And they don’t realize that those particular

statistics are erroneous and that there is no inexorable downward pull to the ending of a marriage, as if gravity were pulling water down a bathtub drain. They don't realize that most marriages *are* doing well and that it is very likely that theirs can survive this hard time and thrive again. All they can see is the pain.

Here's how one woman put it when she was sharing with me the situation surrounding her divorce four years before:

It's a season of crisis when making the decision to split—you just want the pain to end. You will grasp at anything to justify it. It is only later that the consequences to you and your family—your kids—become clear.

If I thought divorce was much more rare, especially in the church, I would have worked harder. I think the 50 percent statistic makes it easier to just give up and divorce. People like me view our divorce as a painful failure, but when supposedly 50 percent fail anyway... well...failing doesn't seem so bad because you have a lot of company.

Think how different it would be if a friend could honestly tell a struggling couple, "I know it is hard right now, but statistically you're going to be just fine." Or how different it would be if the struggling couple felt *This isn't the end of the world. We'll get through this because most couples do.* Or how different it would be if an unmarried couple who was unsure about the benefit of marriage knew that most marriages not only survive but thrive.

The Good News

By the end of this book, I hope you'll agree that despite some real concerns, there is also a great deal more good news out there than many of us have believed before—and that knowing it changes everything. In the chapters that follow, I will confront five demoralizing myths about marriage and show you these five good-news truths instead:

1. The actual divorce rate has never been close to 50 percent.⁴ It's significantly lower and has been declining over the last thirty years.
2. Most marriages aren't just so-so. The vast majority are happy.
3. The rate of divorce in the church is not the same as among the non-churchgoing population. It too is significantly lower.
4. Remarriages aren't doomed. A significant majority survive and thrive.
5. Most marriage problems aren't caused by big-ticket issues, so being in a marriage, or fixing a troubled one, doesn't have to be as complicated as people think. Little things can often make a big difference.

Will there be exceptions to the truths above? Yes, sadly, millions of them. And among the roughly sixty million marriages that currently exist in our country,⁵ there are still too many that struggle. Some of the big-picture troubling issues surrounding the state of marriage are very real.

But we have spent years hearing about all the bad news. Everyone is all too aware that those problems are out there. What we often don't know is the very real good news or that some of the bad news isn't accurate. So that is what we will be focusing on in this book. This is not a measured, equal treatment of both sides. This is a rigorous, fair, and accurate attempt to reclaim a whole other side of the truth about marriage!

This is a rigorous, fair, and accurate attempt to reclaim a whole other side of the truth about marriage!

Important Points to Keep in Mind

Before we dive into what we found, let me emphasize a few key goals and caveats.

First, Tally and I are analysts, not statistical demographers. But we have made a good-faith effort in eight years and thousands of hours of research to investigate, understand, and bring to you what we view as the most representative, most important information in each of the five areas mentioned above. We also try to give you a quick primer for evaluating this type of data yourself as you go forward. But it is imperative to emphasize that this was an extremely complicated area of study, an inexact science, and a moving target.

Second, our ultimate goal wasn't just to uncover the precisely correct answer within a bunch of complex data (although we

certainly tried to do so), but to reclaim one whole side of the story and, as a result, start a much bigger-picture conversation: Should we change how we think and talk about marriage and divorce? If people are discouraged by the mythical bad news, should we vocally celebrate the very real good news? But if we do so, what amount of sober realism is needed for people to take marriage seriously? And so on. Although Tally and I will inevitably hear from those who might disagree with this number or that percentage calculation, the reality is that *many* of the numbers in the pages ahead could be adjusted without changing the ultimate conclusion that there is a great deal of unrecognized good news about marriage out there, and we need a paradigm shift in how we focus on it.

Third, despite the challenges posed by the complexity of the research, we were extremely rigorous about the process. Because this book needed to counter the pull of contemporary myths, we went straight to the data, studies, and, wherever possible, to the researchers themselves and tried to stay clear of articles, reports, or comments drawn from the studies. This approach was necessary because we found that when we tried to track secondary articles or news stories back to the actual data source, there were dozens of cases where a well-intentioned journalist, analyst, or even marriage expert quoted key information incorrectly or even quoted studies that, it turned out, didn't exist. (I chuckled when one marriage leader said, "You're like Snopes for marriage!") We also found countless cases where a news story emphasized the small negative details and ignored the large positive ones. So we

have made it our goal to always eyeball the actual research and examine the raw data in hundreds of studies. We have also had dozens of interviews, phone calls, and e-mail exchanges with the researchers behind many of these studies, the preeminent researchers in the area of marriage and divorce. I have personally met with the authors of several key studies you'll read about in these pages.

Yet, fourth, despite our best efforts, I am quite sure there will be legitimate questions about certain facts, our reasoning, or conflicting statistics that Tally and I might have missed. Again, we are making our best judgment, and even the experts who have been studying this for decades do not always agree with one another. And frankly, as that first expert told me in 2006, we have seen for ourselves that this is indeed an arena in which there often isn't one right answer. There can even be many different ways of looking at things within the same data set. New information will also inevitably arise after this book goes to print; in fact we actively hope it does, as researchers start investigating the positive data sets and not just the negative ones!

Ultimately, we simply think it is important for you to hear the truth we found in the numbers and see the very real, overwhelming evidence for some heartening conclusions about marriage, not just the discouraging ones you have heard up until now.

Yes, some very real bad news is out there. But the good news is out there too. And it can give some much-needed encouragement to marriages today. Remember the pastor quoted earlier, who was talking about the scariness of the current notions about

a 50 percent divorce rate? After I shared with him the truths I was learning, here is what he concluded:

This good news about marriage being stronger than we think—especially in the church—will be so helpful. It will be helpful for me as I work with couples who are thinking of getting married. It will be helpful for my counselors who work with couples in trouble. And it will be helpful also for the public. It will be such an encouraging thing to know that, despite everything we hear, we still can believe in marriage today.

We still can believe in marriage today. Yes we can. Get ready to dig in.

Summary

- Much of the key divorce information in news articles and other common references is inaccurate or interpreted incorrectly, downplays the positive findings, or, in some cases, quotes studies that don't exist.
- People believe a lot of bad news about marriage—much of which isn't true—and there is a need for a paradigm shift, to reclaim the very real good news as well.

- Because there really is good, encouraging news, we need to seriously consider changing how we think and talk about marriage and divorce—not just discussing problems, but emphasizing the very real hope.
- The sense that *We probably won't make it* is itself one reason why some marriages *don't* make it. The couple thinks, *Well, at least we have a lot of company* instead of *Most marriages make it and we can too*. But if even one spouse believes there is hope, the marriage has a much better chance of surviving.
- Many people also avoid marriage altogether, thinking, *Why bother?*
- Although we know there is much more good news about marriage and divorce than we realized, getting to the truth is inexact and extremely complicated.



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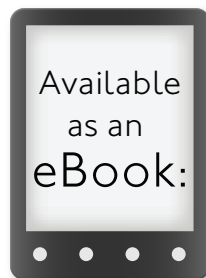
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