

CRAIG  
GROESCHEL



Love, Sex, and  
Happily Ever After

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PREPARING FOR A MARRIAGE  
THAT GOES THE DISTANCE

PREVIOUSLY RELEASED AS GOING ALL THE WAY

C R A I G  
G R O E S C H E L

Love, Sex, and  
Happily Ever After

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P R E P A R I N G F O R A M A R R I A G E  
T H A T G O E S T H E D I S T A N C E

PREVIOUSLY RELEASED AS GOING ALL THE WAY



MULTNOMAH  
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## Habits of the Heart

Did you ever play with a Magic 8 Ball? You know, the black grapefruit-sized ball with the floating triangle inside that supposedly could answer life's toughest questions? I must have asked every version of the question:

"Magic 8 Ball, Magic 8 Ball, will I meet my dream girl?"

It seems like 8 Ball always answered either, "Not Likely" or "Ask Again."

(I hated that stupid ball.)

Like so many people, I wondered, *Who can I find that will make me happy?* It's not a bad question...unless it's the only question you ask as you dream about your future spouse. Here's a more important question, and I'll admit, a more challenging

one: *What person do I need to become so I'll be ready for a healthy, fulfilling marriage...and bless my spouse-to-be?*

What kind of person are you looking for? If you had to make a list, what would you write? Surprisingly, most of us would come up with similar lists. Someone who listens, who's kind, who won't hold grudges, whom we can get along with, who won't spend all our money and put us in debt.

Do you think you can be that kind of person for someone else? Are you willing to let God work in your life to grow you in that direction?

Waiting in patient anticipation for the person God has for you isn't the same thing as doing nothing. All through this book, we've talked about the importance of character. Your character is *who you are*. But now I want to focus more on practical life skills—on *what you do*. I call them habits of the heart, and I've stated each of them as first-person commitments because if you make them your own now, you'll realize a huge payoff later in the marriage of your dreams.

## HABIT 1. "I WILL DEAL WITH MY PAST."

Far too many people carry baggage from their families or from previous relationships into new ones. (Ya got some junk in your trunk—and it's not the good kind.)

Stefan is a great example. After seeing his mom betray his dad with an affair, Stefan lost hope for marriage. Throughout

his twenties, skeptical of all women, Stefan hopped in and out of relationships, always stopping short of real commitment. His small group finally talked him into getting Christian counseling. After months of digging into his broken dreams and shattered expectations, his counselors (both the Holy Spirit and the one who charged \$150 an hour) helped him heal. Now thirty-six, Stefan has unpacked his baggage and emptied his trunk, and he's enjoying his seventh year of marriage.

No matter how you've been hurt, God can bring healing. Don't wait to inflict the spouse of your dreams with your unfinished business. As much as possible, deal with it now.

What baggage are you carrying? Maybe your parents fought nonstop. Deep down you don't believe a good marriage is possible. You might've been dumped, and now you feel like you're worthless. You may have terminated a pregnancy, or helped someone to do so, and you fear that God will never bless you again. You may feel as if part of you died a long time ago.

Identify your baggage. Seek help, realizing that it may come from a variety of sources. God's Word will renew your mind. Or you might seek advice from your pastor, counselor, or friend. Look for good resources online or at a bookstore. And pray to the Great Physician, Jesus, for healing.

## **HABIT 2. "I WILL GROW WITH GOOD PEOPLE."**

Many people run headlong into marriage without ever having experienced or sustained any significant long-term, healthy,

God-centered relationships. Maybe you've spent your single years hanging with (partying with, identifying with, sleeping with) people you *know* would make disastrous marriage partners. And yet I can't tell you how many young couples stand at the altar with exactly those scenarios on their marriage-candidate résumés.

Your single years are an irreplaceable opportunity to prepare yourself relationally for a fulfilling and enduring marriage. Make the most of them.

Develop the second habit of love with the commitment: "I will grow with good people."

When I say "good people," by the way, I'm *not* saying you should only spend time with anemic greenhouse saints who spend every weekend fasting and praying in the church basement. What I mean instead is that you should surround yourself—and especially take as your mentors—those people who are obviously of sound character, who encourage you to be honest about your struggles, who love God and put Him first, and who will help you get where you need to go.

A few relationship filters can help you think clearly on this issue. In my book *Chazown*, I suggested four questions that Christ followers should ask regularly to make sure their relationships are contributing to, not preventing, the future they want.

1. **What relationship needs to be initiated?** Is someone mentoring you in important areas—like your spiritual life, your business, your thinking about marriage?



(Even if you're single, find a couple with a strong marriage and hang out with them.) Do you have an accountability or prayer partner? A group of strong Christian friends to do life with? Who's missing from your circle of support? Find them.

2. **What relationship needs to be nurtured?** Have any of your important friendships or family relationships drifted? Are you neglecting someone significant in your life? Learning to nurture existing relationships will prepare you to nurture your marriage.
3. **What relationship needs to be restored?** Is one of your important relationships broken? Maybe you aren't talking to your dad. Perhaps you had a misunderstanding with a best friend. Maybe someone offended you, and you're holding a grudge. Make things right. Do whatever you can, even if it's hard, to make peace (see Romans 12:18).
4. **What relationship needs to be severed?** Is there a relationship that's hurting your connection with God or leading you into danger? Maybe you need to distance yourself. In particular, if you're dating someone you know is not God's best for you, break free. (See chapter 7 for more on breaking up.)

When couples ask, "Craig, do you think we should marry?" I always check into their other relationships. I want to see if both have close, same-sex friends. Have they learned to work through family conflict? I'm excited when they have mentors



and accountability relationships. Your working patterns today will make your marriage work tomorrow.

### HABIT 3. “I WILL LEARN TO BE A LISTENER.”

Without a doubt, one of the most talked about and least practiced habits of love is the art of *listening*.

Does learning how to listen sound meek and mild to you—like learning not to yawn at tea parties, or remembering to sit up straight at Grandma’s house? Don’t kid yourself. It’s huge. Listening well invites love and makes it grow. Listening poorly or not at all kills it slowly.

Next time you’re out, do some couple-watching. Some couples barely talk. Instead they stare around the room or pick at their food in near silence. Does each person suddenly have no thoughts or feelings? Has nothing happened worth mentioning to the one person the other cares most about? Certainly not. They haven’t run out of things to say. Either one or both have forgotten how to listen.

You might think you’re a good listener. Trust me, you’d be the exception. Virtually everyone hears, but few listen. There’s a big difference.

I’ve been incredibly guilty of not listening. When my wife talks, I’m often thinking of something else or busy formulating my answer. Neither action is listening. Sometimes she’ll ask, “Did you hear what I just said?” Subconsciously I’ll have heard her last four words, and I’ll spit them back out. But she knows

I wasn't paying attention, and you can guess how that makes her feel.

Several years ago, I had a consultant analyze my leadership skills. She told me bluntly, "You stink at listening." When I realized she'd just said something important, I asked her to repeat it.

For some, listening comes naturally. If it doesn't for you (like it doesn't for me), practice listening. For example:

- When someone is speaking, stop everything and focus intently on the other person. Don't think about something else. Don't formulate your response (trust me, this one doesn't go over well). You're listening, and your goal is to comprehend not just the person's words, but their heart.
- Don't just listen with your ears, but also with your eyes. Pay attention to facial expressions and to body language. You'll be surprised how much information comes through gestures and stance, even through how the other person breathes while they're talking.
- Repeat back to the person what you're hearing so the other person knows what you heard. By telling Amy what I think she meant, I can confirm that I've understood her. It also affirms to her the value of what she said. As a guy, sometimes it feels like overkill. Not to Amy. It shows Amy not just that I heard her, but that I was listening. Which demonstrates to her that I care.

## HABIT 4. “I WILL GUARD MY HEART.”

Because you want your marriage to be passionate, intimate, and emotionally rewarding, it only makes sense that you shouldn't wait to get your “heart muscle” in shape for the experience. We all bring different levels of emotional development into a marriage. Some of us grow up in healthy emotional environments and have a head start on heart issues; some of us do not. Those who don't must start from scratch to learn to identify and process feelings (good and bad), to learn a healthy sensitivity to the feelings of others, and so on.

That's why the fourth personal skill I recommend you work on is to guard your heart. Two valuable habits come to mind: developing both a *thick skin* and a *soft heart*. Kind of like M&M's—crunchy on the outside and soft on the inside.

Here's what I mean:

If little things bother you, ask God to thicken your skin. Why? Little offenses and unintended hurts, improperly managed, can accumulate into major woes in marriage. Remember, it's not all about you (hard to believe, I know). When people are rude, it's often more their problem than yours. Are you going to let their bad attitude drown you? Or will you choose to “duck it”...and let their rain roll off your back? Your response will largely determine your outlook.

For years I was easily offended. If someone didn't say hi to me, I'd think, *Well, who do you think you are? You're nothing but*

*a lowdown, no-good, prideful, cocky punk. I hope you get hemorrhoids before you're thirty.*

Not good.

I have a friend who used to be prone to angry outbursts. He and his wife discussed it, and they agreed that when he did it around her, she would let him know immediately with a key phrase: “Who does your anger affect most?” Of course, his answer always had to be: “Me.” So he was able to break the bad habit and the cycle.

I can tell you from years of experience (sorry, Amy) that your future spouse, as wonderful as he or she may be, will drive you crazy at times. Learn today to let the small things go. Your identity is found in Christ; no one’s opinion changes that. If you respond with the good kind of thick skin, you’ll avoid the temptation to personalize and internalize other people’s actions.

But don’t let yourself become hard through-and-through. (What kind of M&M’s candy would you be then? Like some kind of chocolaty jawbreaker.) While your skin sensitivity is toughening up, allow your heart to soften. Learn compassion for others. Develop the ability to see things from other people’s perspectives, to feel for them and with them—a valuable part of intimacy in marriage. The Bible says many times that Jesus was moved with compassion for hurting people (see Matthew 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34). Learn to care so deeply that, like Jesus, you’re moved to action.

Through conscious effort, I’m learning to ask, *How might*

*this person be feeling? What wounds has he experienced? What would it be like to walk in her shoes?* This has dramatically increased my intimacy and rapport in many relationships.

And increased empathy has been one of the greatest blessings in my marriage. At night, Amy and I talk and try to understand what the other has gone through that day. As she talks, I imagine the challenges of homeschooling six kids, making meal after meal, resolving conflicts, answering calls, caring for sick children. (Just typing those words makes me sweat.) She does the same for me. As we try to feel each other's struggles, our love and compassion grow. Our prayers for each other deepen. And our marriage is always better.

There must be a hundred ways you can make a difference in the lives of the people around you right now. An ounce of compassion provides a lot of refreshment in this world's thirsty relational desert.

Thick skin. Soft heart.

The single years are also the time all of us need to begin cultivating the habit of *forgiveness*. A soft heart definitely makes you more merciful. And believe me, in marriage you'll need it. When you've been wronged—a friend says something behind your back, your parent breaks a promise—don't continue to harbor resentment.

Letting it go is difficult because emotional wounds—like physical wounds—take time to heal. But if you hang on to the grudge, it'll weigh you down and corrode your heart. You need

to forgive, if for no other reason than to relieve yourself of a burden. And you need to forgive whether or not the other person apologizes or repents.

Take Matt, for example. He dated a girl who cheated on him. Recognizing her sin, she repented to God and to Matt. But Matt admitted that he hadn't forgiven her. And his grudge kept him from fully trusting people in general. Every time he met a nice girl, he suspected that she, too, might one day betray him. He became a prisoner of his own distrust.

*But how can I forgive someone for a massive betrayal? The kind that cuts deep and leaves the most lasting scars?*

As impossible as it might seem, we're called to forgive in the same way Christ forgave us (see Colossians 3:13). I've struggled desperately to forgive a few people who betrayed me. Eventually I look at their one offense stacked beside my virtually infinite number of offenses against God. Since He's continued to love and forgive me, surely I can do the same. Christ always changes my heart. But often it takes some time. He'll do the same for you.

## HABIT 5. "I WILL PRACTICE FACING AND RESOLVING CONFLICT."

Before marriage, I thought healthy couples never fought. But I learned the opposite is true. Marriages are healthy *because* the couple learns to face and work through problems. They fight, but they fight fair. (One time during a fight, Amy came crawl-

ing to me on her hands and knees. She told me to come out from under the bed and fight like a man.)

To be prepared for your Two, you need to learn to *resolve conflict*. The first step to resolution is *not* to avoid it, which is what most of us try to do. Why? Because arguments are awkward and make us feel bad. Or we think good Christians shouldn't experience them. But like unresolved hurts and poor listening habits, letting avoided and unresolved conflicts pile up in a relationship will eventually snuff out the love.

If someone on my staff is underperforming, correcting the person will be awkward but could lead to improvement. If I'm always late, it might be awkward to confront me, but at least I'll have to deal with what my tardiness inflicts on others, and in the future I'm more likely to be on time. Similarly, in your future marriage, awkwardness is not something to run from but something to embrace. Conflict is unavoidable in marriage. (But you won't need to go looking for it. It will come to you.)

Here are a few simple conflict guidelines to practice before you say "I do":

- **Don't yell, scream, or throw plates.** Determine that you'll never fight when you're angry. Count to ten (or a hundred) before you respond. When you're angry, you'll say things you regret. Train yourself not to respond in anger. Respond with love. Or at least with calm.
- **Never go to bed angry.** The Bible teaches us to not let the sun go down on our anger (see Ephesians 4:26–27).



I thought this verse applied only to married couples, but it's for all relationships. If your friend, co-worker, or parent angers you, make it right before ending the day. Don't give the devil a foothold in your relationship.

- **Never get historical.** Did you wonder if I intended to write “hysterical”? Actually, I didn't. I meant *historical*. Don't bring up the past. A sure way to damage the future is to dig up ancient ammo. Leave old hurts buried.
- **Never say *never* and *always*.** When you're fighting, it's tempting to exaggerate for emphasis. “You *never* compliment me.” “I *always* build you up.” Those statements simply aren't true. Avoid extreme words, unless you want extreme fights.

Think of these as the Geneva Convention rules for enduring relationships. Develop them as habits of your heart now with friends and family, and you'll be in much better shape to contend for a healthy marriage.

## HABIT 6. “I WILL BE FINANCIALLY RESPONSIBLE.”

You've probably heard people say that money problems are one of the most common reasons for conflict in marriage and for divorce. But what you don't hear is how easy it is to trace those money problems to irresponsibility, laziness, and just plain ignorance about money management in the single years.

Do we really think that after years of being careless about

personal finances or alienating friends because we're not responsible housemates, we'll suddenly turn wise when we have two people to think about? Wisely managing God's resources is one of the most important habits you can learn for marriage.

Let's start with the basics. If you're in debt, you're in bondage. Proverbs 22:7 says, "The borrower is servant to the lender." The Hebrew word translated as "servant" can also be translated "slave." If you're in debt, you have an unfeeling master, and you're certainly not free. No matter how frugally you have to live now, make these years count by learning to save and tithe (that's 10 percent), and by managing your bills sensibly.

And don't wait until some time in the future to stay out of—or get out of—debt. If you're married and in debt, you're vulnerable to money fights. On the other hand, if you're a servant to no one but Christ—that is, among other things, you have no debt—it's impossible to describe the freedom this brings to marriage.

Thankfully, when Amy and I married, our only debt was our mortgage. We decided to live a radically simple lifestyle. We never bought new clothes, didn't exchange birthday or Christmas gifts, drove ancient cars, and ate out only with buy-one-get-one-free coupons. As a result of our very countercultural lifestyle, we paid off our inexpensive home in five years. In our late twenties, we were 100 percent debt free. Now, as a team, we're unhindered by debt pressures, and we're free to use God's resources for great good.

You can experience this, too, if you start now. If you have

debt, get crazy about paying it off. If you're debt free, make a promise to stay that way, living only on what you make.

While you're decreasing your debt, increase your generosity. Long before marriage, give with open hands. The Bible teaches we should give the first 10 percent to God. (Everything we have is His, anyway.) Then we learn to give beyond the tithe, offering sacrificially to those in need and to worthwhile ministries.

If you develop a lifestyle of stewardship and generosity now, you'll carry God's blessings into your future marriage.

## **HABIT 7. "I WILL INVEST IN MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD."**

In chapter 4, I told you about the season in my life when I determined to date only Jesus. Instead of pursuing the next hot number every weekend, as had been my habit before God changed my heart, I set apart time to study the person and teachings of Jesus and let His Spirit change my desires and emotions.

For my seventh habit of the heart, I recommend that you make a priority of a similar commitment. That's because I've found that dating Jesus is a habit that goes right to the heart of preparing spiritually for marriage.

Does dating Jesus mean that every Friday night, you put on one of your favorite outfits, slap on some lip gloss, and meet Jesus at the theater for the new Steve Carell flick? I hope not.

What do you do when you're dating an ordinary person? You make that person a priority. You think about her. You desire

to please him. You enjoy getting to know her. You spend time with him.

How about doing those things with Jesus? The time you have as an unmarried person—whether it's weeks or years—is a gift. Without the responsibility of a spouse, you can devote yourself without distraction to Jesus. As Paul wrote:

An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman...is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. (1 Corinthians 7:32–34)

Remember, the more you're like Jesus, the better your future marriage will be. Jesus was a humble, obedient, submitted, self-sacrificing servant. He lived with integrity, boldly defending the truth and the people under His care. If you're growing in those qualities, you're well on your way to giving God's best to someone else!

In practical terms, how can you cultivate that intimate relationship with Jesus? How can you make Him more and more your life priority as you prepare for your life partner?

Spiritual habits differ from person to person. Ask yourself,

*What draws me close to God?* Is it worship? How about when you pray? Or fast? Does God speak to you when you're serving people? When you're listening to the Bible on your iPod? Make those things an important part of your daily life.

Imagine how boring it would become if you did the same thing on every date. Every Friday at seven you meet at the same restaurant, order the same food, have the same conversation, then go home. *Blah!* If you approach God the same way every time, you'll get the same results. Seek Him creatively. Make Him a part of everything you do. Talk to Him on the commute to work or school. Imagine Him sitting beside you. Ask Him questions. Tell Him stories. Be quiet and listen. When it rains, think about His creation. When someone is aching, pause and ask Him to give you words of comfort. When you're aching and feel all alone, cry with Him.

Since you're sharing your life with Jesus, why not pray daily for your future spouse? You may not have met the person, but God knows whom you'll marry. Pray for him to grow closer to Christ, for God to prepare him, protect her, and reveal Himself to her.

On my many dates with Jesus, I wrote thoughts about what He was teaching me, letters to my future wife, and prayers for her. By the time I met Amy, I had a shoe box full of notes. One day, after we knew we were heading for marriage, I gave her the box. When she realized what it signified, she cried.

God had laid the foundation for our marriage during those divine dates.

## BECOMING THE TWO OF SOMEONE ELSE'S DREAMS

Having officiated well over three hundred weddings, I've seen a lot of great relationships start. And unfortunately, I've seen some that never had a chance.

From the perspective of a person in the pew, most weddings appear very similar. The bride's and groom's families typically make the occasion as nice as their budgets allow. All the special people are present, including college friends, childhood friends, co-workers, extended family, even Uncle Odvaar from Oslo. (He's the uncle with the really bad breath and the creepy comb-over.)

At the right moment, the wedding song starts; the bride walks in; the groom shifts his weight, simultaneously nervous and excited; and the mother of the bride grins from ear to ear clutching a small paper-mill's worth of wadded tissue in one hand. In the reception area, there'll be a cake, some punch, and plenty of towels, toasters, and table settings nicely wrapped in white.

From the outside, it all looks pretty much the same from one wedding to the next.

It's what's inside of the couple that makes—or breaks—a marriage.

As I prepare to lead a couple in their vows, I always pray. Sometimes it's a prayer of desperation: *God, please help them. Give me some words to say that might point them in the right direction.* Deep down, I wonder if they know what they're about to do. Truthfully, they often don't.



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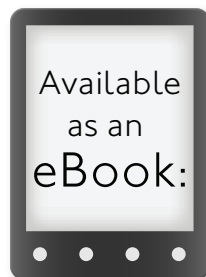
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