



Because a Great
Relationship
Doesn't Happen
by Accident

9 Thoughts That Can Change Your Marriage

SHEILA WRAY GREGOIRE

Praise for
Nine Thoughts That Can Change Your Marriage

“In my research with happy marriages, I’ve found that happy wives have one thing in common: they know that happiness doesn’t just happen. Sheila gives great ideas that challenge our conventional thinking about what goes into a happy marriage—and she nails it! Here’s to a new generation of happy wives.”

—FAWN WEAVER, *New York Times* best-selling author of
Happy Wives Club

“What a wonderful book! The teaching points are inspiring, and the action steps truly can be marriage-transforming. Many readers will particularly appreciate Sheila’s delightful way of challenging conventional wisdom as she offers freshly applied biblical wisdom. One of the best things you could do for your spouse, your children, and your own happiness and contentment in the coming year is to read and apply *Nine Thoughts That Can Change Your Marriage*.”

—GARY THOMAS, author of *Sacred Marriage*

“The truths in *Nine Thoughts That Can Change Your Marriage* hold the power to revolutionize relationships. Sheila Wray Gregoire gives it to us straight: we *can* be happy, we *can* have the good marriage that God designed. But first we need to change our thought life. As Sheila challenges pat answers and common misconceptions about what makes a marriage work, she offers an alternate, hope-filled path. Her real-life examples and biblical insights will free you to approach your marriage with a transformed attitude and renewed energy.”

—SHANNON ETHRIDGE, relationship coach, speaker, and
author of the bestseller *Every Woman’s Battle*

“In this lively and engaging book, Sheila doesn’t just explode cultural myths about marriage and replace them with biblical truth; she also provides ultrapractical tasks for wives to apply their new knowledge. I

love the emphasis on working on yourself *first*, rather than trying to change your spouse.”

—SHAUNTI FELDHAWN, social researcher and best-selling author of *For Women Only*

“We’ve all heard the adage, ‘It takes two to make a marriage work.’ And it’s true. But with *Nine Thoughts That Can Change Your Marriage*, Sheila Wray Gregoire gives women powerful tools to make a huge difference in their marriages all on their own. Instead of focusing on what our husbands should do, Sheila helps us focus on what we as wives actually can do. Actionable, empowering, and freeing.”

—KATHI LIPP, author of *The Husband Project*

“Sheila takes us on a journey of discovering how our personal thoughts may be interfering with our marriage and gives us practical steps on how to make the lasting change we long for and desperately need!”

—RUTH SCHWENK, speaker, author, and creator of TheBetterMom.com

“Sheila wisely helps women think healthy thoughts so they can create a healthier marriage. Think honest, loving, practical, biblical, relevant—those are the kind of wise thoughts Sheila will help you think so you can discover the power to build a love to look forward to living.”

—PAM FARREL, best-selling author of *Red Hot Monogamy*

“In *Nine Thoughts That Can Change Your Marriage*, Sheila Wray Gregoire challenges spouses to take the focus off of what their marriage partner is doing ‘wrong’ and, instead, change their own thought patterns to see their spouse in a whole new light. She is transparent about how her own faulty thinking created struggles early in her marriage, and she celebrates how God redeemed her situation to create the beautiful relationship she now enjoys with her husband.”

—ERIN ODOM, creator of TheHumbledHomemaker.com

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*To Rebecca and Connor:
With prayers for a long and blessed life together.
July 18, 2015*

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We Do What We Think!

My husband, Keith, and I have been married twenty-three years and happily married for eighteen. Those first five years were awful. Sex was awful. School was awful. Our social life was awful. We talked past each other rather than with each other.

Yet we managed to leave marital misery behind and emerge, only slightly scathed, to marital bliss. I'm firmly convinced it's because we are both extremely stubborn. Neither of us was willing to allow our marriage to fail. But perhaps even more important, both of us are extremely loud. When we were mad, we talked about it. We cried about it. At times, I'm ashamed to admit, we even yelled about it. And slowly but surely we experienced some breakthroughs—and the house grew a lot quieter.

I'm not sure, though, that I did any of these things the “right” way, at least if you measure “right” by how a Nice Christian Girl is supposed to act. You likely know that girl. She's demure, yet she's strong as a tiger. She submits enthusiastically, yet she has a mind of her own. She never speaks up or criticizes her husband, yet she is insightful and cunning enough to “win him without words.”¹ Her house is organized, her children make crafts, and her husband is proud as a peacock.

I am not that girl. If I have an opinion, I'm incapable of keeping it to myself. I am only industrious in bursts, when I finally lose it and become the very model of a modern wifely drill sergeant. I have fed my children chocolate cake for breakfast, although I did so only because they saw me eating it first and it seemed fair. I don't always dust. I go to McDonald's too often. And I don't order the salads.

I may be a miserable failure as far as the Perfect Christian Wife is concerned, yet I have a good, solid marriage. My husband and I feel as if we are one.

That feeling, however, was not automatic. And for me, the problem started in the bedroom.

Keith and I had both waited for marriage to have sex, and we both assumed that it would be wonderful, mind-blowing, and perfectly natural. But it wasn't. It was awkward, it was messy, and worst of all, it hurt. Whenever Keith wanted to make love, I felt rejected, because he wanted something that made me miserable. My frustration finally grew to the point where I wondered, *Why can't he just love me for me and not for what I can do for him?* I accused him of selfishness. Of not loving me. Of being a Neanderthal who couldn't control his passions. The more we fought over sex, the more certain I became that he didn't value me. I felt so lonely, and yet instead of being sympathetic and wrapping me in a bear hug, Keith lobbed accusations right back: "Why don't you care about my feelings? Why don't you want me?"

After I had prayed for two exhausting years that he would start caring about me, a thought entered my head: *Do you believe*

the only one who can fix this relationship is Keith? Don't you have something to do with it? I didn't particularly like that thought, and so I vehemently argued with myself about why changing was impossible. Even if we only considered sex, how was I supposed to enjoy something so gross and uncomfortable?

Then another thought hit me even harder: *If God says that sex is good, and the whole world says that sex is good, maybe you should start figuring out how to make sex good.*

I was stunned. If that thought was right, then the responsibility fell on me to do something about my struggle. I had to stop thinking sex was awful and start thinking, *Sex is great—I just don't have it all figured out yet.* The problem may have started in the bedroom, but it wasn't a problem with sex. It was a problem with how I was thinking.

The next few years in our marriage became my big research project into this thing called *Us*. I decided to conquer this sex issue once and for all, because if God created something this great, no way was I going to miss it! I read books and talked to friends about how to make sex work. I talked to wise mentors about how to deal with past issues that held people back. I studied Keith to glean what made him feel loved. Slowly but surely, I fell madly in love with Keith again. And thankfully, he with me too.

FAULTY THINKING LEAVES US STUCK

My marriage was stuck when I believed that Keith's libido was the cause of all our fights. After all, if his sex drive was the

problem, then the only solution I could see was to make Keith want sex less. I threw my energy into that dead-end goal: I bought a wardrobe of long flannel nightgowns; I complained constantly about headaches; and I stopped kissing in all its forms.

I was fruitlessly expending all this energy, making myself and my husband frustrated, because I suffered from faulty thinking. It was only when I realized that I had a different option—instead of investing so much energy into getting Keith to want sex less, I could figure out how to make me want it more—did things begin to change.

When our options are limited, it's easy to become hopeless. I believed that my marriage couldn't get better until Keith changed, but I had no control over that. So I was stuck. And when you're stuck, you stop trying—or you do counterproductive things, such as emptying out the local Salvation Army of all their granny nightgowns. You're not fixing your marriage; you're digging a deeper hole.

But what if that initial thought was wrong? What if peace and joy are not dependent on someone else changing, but they instead flow from God giving us the ability to choose how to think, how to feel, and how to respond? We can choose to make our life fulfilling by aligning our thoughts more with God's. Jesus, after all, isn't just our way to salvation. He is Truth itself (John 14:6). When we grow close to Jesus, he reveals Truth. That lets us see all the options before us. Then we won't feel stuck—we'll know that there is always a way forward.

CHRISTIANS GET STUCK TOO

That sounds a bit like a clichéd bumper sticker, though, doesn't it? "Are you stuck? You just need Jesus!" While this pat statement has a foundation of truth, if it were really that easy, wouldn't all Christians have great marriages?

Yes, we would, and I think it's to our shame that we don't. But I've seen lots of faulty thinking in Christian circles that goes something like this:

If you have a problem in your marriage, then the answer is always to pray more, submit more, or love more. If you just pray more, your husband will stop the porn. If you just submit more, your husband will become a leader and stop playing all those video games. If you just love him more, he'll stop being a workaholic and start remembering your birthday. Do these things, and your husband will change and you will be happy.

Now prayer, of course, is one of the best weapons we have in bringing peace to our lives, and I certainly don't mean to discount its importance. But the reason *behind* the prayer matters. If you pray only to get God to do something, then you treat God like Santa Claus or a rabbit's foot, not a Savior with a claim on your life. Prayer should always be about submission to God's will; it should not be about convincing God to do yours. Similarly, submission and love are among the noblest pursuits, but if your pur-

pose in doing them is to cajole your husband into changing to make you happy, then that's manipulation too. And your faulty thinking—that you need your husband to change in order for you to be happy—limits your options for improving your marriage. You're stuck.

These ideas that enter our consciousness—that by praying and loving enough we will have a happy marriage—are what I will call “pat answers.” They promise the moon and make marriage look so easy. But despite the initial seduction of the “promise,” ultimately these pat answers don't work, because they put the responsibility for change in someone else's hands. It's not you, fully submitted to God, who acts to bring about change; it's God all by himself, or your husband, or a friend. You become a bystander.

In this book we'll look at nine thoughts that will change the way you look at your marriage and show you the options you have for making it awesome.

But the very first choice we need to make is the most basic. It's one I figured out twenty years ago, and one that I pray we'll all realize: God made us responsible for our own actions, our own thoughts, and our own feelings. No one else can do that work for us.

Does that sound heavy, as though God will blame you if things go wrong? It does a little, doesn't it? But I actually think having responsibility is freeing.

God is an active God. He created the universe with a word (Genesis 1). He intervenes in human affairs to bring glory to his name, to bring justice to the earth, and to care for those he loves.

And he created us to act as well—that’s what it means when people say we have “free will.” We have the ability to choose. We don’t have to be bystanders.

Living a godly life means acting and doing in God’s power; it doesn’t mean sitting back and waiting for someone else to act. Too often this is what women have been counseled to do. It has meant that women have put up with too much. But it has also meant that we haven’t been “strong in the Lord”²; we haven’t fought using God’s power to bring about God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. We’ve been stuck, waiting for someone else to change. And our marriages, and by extension our families and communities, have suffered for it.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In the rest of the book, I share with you nine thoughts, all with their own action steps, that will lead to real change in our marriages. The first four thoughts have to do with confronting our own hearts and attitudes and are probably the most difficult to read. It’s so much easier to point to other people as the cause of our unhappiness, but I encourage you to look first at what is in your control—and then do something about it.

Thoughts five through seven have to do with our roles in marriage, especially when it comes to dealing with conflicts. When we need to resolve big issues, how do we do it biblically, as husband and wife?

Finally, we’ll turn from big-picture issues about attitude and

conflict and look at the day-to-day tensions in married life. We'll see how failure to give our sexual life and our emotional life the right energy can end up stealing our joy with our husbands.

It's that joy that I want for you. I know what it is to have a happy marriage, and I know what it is to have a lonely marriage. The difference between the two, for me, was largely about attitude. I just needed to change perspective. I hope that in this book I can help you see your husband, and your marriage too, through a different lens.

I don't know what kind of marriage you have. Maybe you're usually happy but sometimes your husband drives you completely batty. Maybe you feel alone most of the time. Maybe you and your husband have become comfortable roommates, and you wonder where the passion has gone.

Most of us go through periods in marriage when we're closer and periods when we're more distant. I think that's why marriage is a decades-long relationship—it gives us a chance to weather those storms and find each other again!

Wherever you are in your marriage, whether you're in the middle of a close period or trudging through a rough patch, I pray this book will give you some new perspectives on your relationship that can jump-start the change you yearn for.



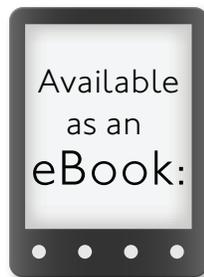
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