



— MEMOIR —

# BEYOND ORDINARY

when a good marriage just isn't good enough

— JUSTIN & TRISHA DAVIS —

## PRAISE FOR *BEYOND ORDINARY*

What a moving and inspiring testimony! Justin and Trisha Davis are powerful examples of God's ability to breathe new life into a marriage that seems to have reached the end. With scriptural insights gained through the Davises' own fight to save their marriage, *Beyond Ordinary* encourages every couple to believe that their relationship can become truly extraordinary.

**JIM DALY**

President, Focus on the Family

Justin and Trisha have lived through extreme difficulty and brokenness in their marriage, but the Jesus we follow loves to take broken things and put them back together. That kind of deep healing has been part of my story, and it's the story of so many of the children Compassion is blessed to serve every day. I hope that as you read these pages, you'll find a deeper understanding of how complete dependence on God is the only way to fully live.

**DR. WESS STAFFORD**

President and CEO of Compassion International

Ordinary marriages are only one or two steps away from destruction, which is so unfortunate because the God of the universe designed marriage to be far from ordinary. In this book Justin and Trisha share a story of struggle and hope as they pull back the curtain on what was almost a tragic marriage, which turned into triumph because they were both willing to deal with the heart rather than simply trying to repair external issues. I am

so thankful that they wrote this book and believe it will help people to stop fighting *in* their marriages and begin fighting *for* them.

**PERRY NOBLE**

Senior pastor of NewSpring Church

Justin and Trisha share their story with transparency and courage. But this book goes beyond just storytelling. They provide practical and powerful teaching that is applicable to every couple—newlywed or veteran. This resource will greatly strengthen your marriage. I can say that honestly, because it's done it for mine.

**NATALIE GRANT**

Five-time GMA Female Vocalist of the Year

Everyone likes a good love story. But many of us spend our lives slightly disappointed in the love story we're trying to live. *Beyond Ordinary* is what you've been looking for if you want to ignite your relationship to become what God intended for you to have. The practical advice and engaging writing will make you turn to this book's wisdom time and again.

**LYSA TERKEURST**

*New York Times* bestselling author and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

My favorite thing about this book is that it's not a book on how to have a perfect marriage. It's a book about having a real marriage. And the difference between those two things is monumental. Honest, insightful, and helpful, this is an awesome resource.

**JON ACUFF**

*Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of *Quitter* and *Stuff Christians Like*

Justin and Trisha Davis have given every married couple a gift on the pages of this book. Their refreshing honesty peels back the layers of marriage to reveal the real challenges we all face. Their story will help you examine your marriage and learn what it takes to move it from ordinary to extraordinary!

**JILL SAVAGE**

CEO of Hearts at Home and author of *No More Perfect Moms*

*Beyond Ordinary* is raw, painfully honest, and wildly hopeful. Its rawness will cut to the depths of your heart. Its honesty will shock and shake you to your core. And its hopefulness will give you the gospel-empowered resources to have an extraordinary marriage and life. This book should be required reading for every Christian college student and church staff. It's that's good.

**DERWIN L. GRAY**

Lead pastor of Transformation Church

*Beyond Ordinary* is a great resource for any married couple. Justin and Trisha are courageously transparent as they expose the intimate details of their marriage in an effort to help others face their own marital struggles without being burdened by the overwhelming thought that they are all alone. There is a perfect balance of storytelling and biblical application that is sure to encourage every couple to strive for an extraordinary marriage!

**JENNIFER SMITH**

Author of the Unveiled Wife blog

In this book of searing honesty, Justin and Trisha remind us that marriage, like any other good and beautiful thing, is worth fighting for and cannot be won or kept without the desire

to fight for it. In their story you will find your story, or you will find hope for a story that needs healing in its own way.

**JOHN ORTBERG**

Author of *The Me I Want to Be* and senior pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church

Justin and Trisha Davis have given us a profound gift of transparency and practical hope in *Beyond Ordinary*. Through their own journey they point the way to better relationships and healing for all of us, whether we are struggling or striving. This is a great, realistic book filled with life lessons we all need to apply.

**JUD WILHITE**

Author of *Torn* and senior pastor of Central Christian Church, Las Vegas

Justin and Trisha Davis' story is more than just inspiring, it's evidence of truth. *Beyond Ordinary* gave us hope for something bigger than "ordinary" in our marriage and gave us the tools to see that hope turn into a reality.

**TIFFANY LEE**

Lead singer of Plumb

*Beyond Ordinary* is an inspiring marriage story that gives hope to those who want an extraordinary marriage. Justin and Trisha Davis fought for their marriage and won, and you can too.

**KEN COLEMAN**

Host of *The Ken Coleman Show*

As a pastor, I'm often asked what is the most important issue facing the church today. There are many, but in my opinion, it comes down to marriage. When marriages fail or stagnate, there is a ripple effect for years to come. Sadly, this is the usual,

ordinary story being told today. That's why *Beyond Ordinary* is so important. Justin and Trisha are real people with a real story of extraordinary hope and healing. It's why this is no ordinary book.

**JEFF HENDERSON**

Lead pastor of Gwinnett Church

What an honor it is for me to be able to endorse a book I know will change so many marriages. As a friend of Justin and Trish, I have had the opportunity to see the way their teaching has spoken wisdom to so many others. I have also witnessed what a beautiful, strong relationship they share with each other. It is clear from my time with them that they love the Lord and seek to glorify Him even through their own brokenness, and I just know how many men and women will be blessed through their soul searching and solid, biblical teaching. I hope many people buy this book and move one step closer to that which the Lord desires of us: true restoration.

**ANGIE SMITH**

Author of *What Women Fear* and speaker for Women of Faith

We all want a life that's more than ordinary, especially when it comes to our relationships. But few of us are willing to pay the price, to do the work and go through the pain. Justin and Trisha show you what it takes—through their painful but beautiful tale of love and loss—to have an incredible marriage, life, and faith. Reading this book just might save you a few scars, but be prepared: it will also call you out of complacency and into something extraordinary.

**JEFF GOINS**

Author of *Wrecked: When a Broken World Slams into Your Comfortable Life*

*Beyond Ordinary* is the best marriage book I've ever read! Justin and Trisha not only share their heartbreaking yet redemptive story, but they explain how they landed in an ordinary marriage full of devastation. They share godly wisdom and practical advice that will benefit *all* marriages. Today, their marriage résumé has *betrayal* listed on it, but you'd never know it. They have leaned into their heavenly Father and allowed, even begged Him to take their once mediocre, deficient marriage and not only give them a new, improved, extraordinary marriage, but help you have one too. And you will, if you read this book.

**CINDY BEALL**

Author of *Healing Your Marriage When Trust Is Broken*

With touching transparency, practical wisdom, and biblically based advice, Justin and Trisha Davis provide a compelling look at the ways a couple can see their marriage renewed and transformed. *Beyond Ordinary* offers proof positive that even the most struggling marriage can be resurrected into a thriving relationship that glorifies God.

**ESTHER FLEECE**

Assistant to the president for millennial relations,  
Focus on the Family

This is a game-changing book on marriage by Justin and Trisha Davis. Finally, a Christian resource for couples that preaches personal responsibility, facing conflict, and living with a sense of purpose and intentionality. This is a book that I will continue to draw on not only for my own marriage, but for the hundreds of couples I work with in my therapy practice.

Thank you for writing this book and sharing so authentically your story of how God refined your marriage.

**RHETT SMITH**

Licensed marriage and family therapist and author of *The Anxious Christian: Can God Use Your Anxiety for Good?*

Justin and Trisha demonstrate how to achieve the dynamic marriage God intends for us—whether we're experiencing catastrophe or just caught in the grind of the ordinary life. Every married couple should read this!

**SHAWN AND TRICIA LOVEJOY**

Author of *The Measure of Our Success* and senior pastor of Mountain Lake Church

Justin and Trisha Davis have an honest and heart-wrenching story about what happens all too often in today's marriages. However, their commitment to faith and forgiveness is so incredibly rare and *beyond ordinary* that it's an inspiring testimony of hope to any marriage in any condition. Learn from their painful mistakes, heed their practical advice, and inherit God's powerful grace through their story. This book will absolutely transform your faith in God and the future of your marriage!

**RORY VADEN**

*New York Times* bestselling author of *Take the Stairs*



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JUSTIN & TRISHA DAVIS



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*This book is dedicated to our three amazing boys,  
Micah, Elijah, and Isaiah. Your willingness  
to pursue God allows our family to live beyond  
ordinary. We love doing life with you.*



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## FOREWORD

**SOME TEN YEARS** into my marriage, I found myself asking a question I never imagined I would ask. With haunting regularity, my wife, Brandi, and I were asking, “Why are we married?”

Several events had occurred that forced this question to the forefront of our marriage. We had several close Christians friends who were divorcing. Someone we really looked up to was caught in an affair. In our own relationship we realized that marriage hadn’t taken away all of our problems; it had even added a few along the way.

Beyond that, I had bought into a damaging illusion that was eroding the very foundation of our marriage and causing immense damage. I knew you had to study hard to make it through college. I knew that if you were going to climb the ladder in any professional arena, it would require hard work and dedication. But somehow I thought that if you truly loved someone enough to marry that person, your marriage would just work without your effort and you’d live happily ever after.

So while I focused on trying to build a great church, I also unknowingly communicated to Brandi that I was perfectly okay settling for a mediocre marriage. And if I’m honest, that’s exactly what we had.

I'll never forget the humbling moment when I realized that while I had helped bring Brandi some of her greatest joys, I had also contributed to her deepest pain. I don't know why I didn't see it earlier. I mean, think about it. Can you name any area of your life you can neglect and then expect to see improvement?

Does this work with your body? Nope. Ignore it, and you'll get fat.

Does this work with your business? Nope. Ignore it, and it will crash.

Does this work with your yard? Nope. Ignore it and, it will be overrun by weeds.

So why in the world do we think we can put our marriages on autopilot and they will still be what God wants them to be?

Marriage is deeply satisfying. Marriage is incredibly fulfilling. Marriage is loads of fun. Marriage is full of joy and hope and laughter. But marriage is not easy. Not even close.

Maybe you have picked up this book as a preemptive move. You're not in crisis mode. In other words, nobody is threatening to call a divorce attorney . . . but you know you're stuck. You realize that you and your spouse are losing ground. You're starting to neglect your marriage. There's distance setting in, a little hostility beginning to show, and you're not making any progress. You're tempted to resign yourself to the idea that this is the best your marriage can be.

But there's a little voice inside whispering, *You'd better do something*. I want to commend you for being obedient to that voice and picking up this book.

Maybe you are beyond "stuck" and feel like your marriage is on a respirator or maybe even flatlined. You feel out to sea with no shore in sight, and you have no idea which direction to head. As Justin and Trish are fond of saying, "There is a gap between the marriage you have and the marriage you thought you'd have," and the gap seems insurmountable.

But you don't want to give up. You haven't given up. It's why you've picked up this book. And I'm so glad you did.

Let me give you one word of warning: this is not a safe book. I know Justin and Trish. I know their heart. I know their mission. And with no apologies they're about to disrupt and challenge everything you've ever thought about improving in your marriage. At times this book can be painfully honest in its authentic portrayal of what can happen to the best of marriages when left to drift.

As soon as I started reading the manuscript that led to this book, I realized just what an amazing resource Justin and Trish are sharing with us. Tears welled in my eyes as I read, knowing this is not just a book that will help you discover an "extraordinary marriage"; it will actually tell you how to achieve it.

Much of the genius of this book undoubtedly lies in the reality that Justin and Trish have lived these principles themselves. I've had the unbelievable privilege of doing life with Justin and Trish over the past twelve years, and I am better for it. I can tell you firsthand that if you'll listen to the God-given wisdom they share in this book, your life and marriage will never be the same.

I am deeply grateful for the transformation that has happened in my own marriage as a result of the wisdom in this book, and I hope most earnestly it will be so for you as well. May the God of grace lead and guide you through each chapter.

*Pete Wilson*

Senior pastor, Cross Point Church



## INTRODUCTION

A FEW MONTHS AGO my wife, Trisha, and I (Justin) found ourselves at the starting line of the Indianapolis mini-marathon. If we could finish the 13.1 miles, it would fulfill our three-year goal to run the race together. Trish had been training about three times per week, working her way up to longer runs. I had been training sporadically at best. I was counting on the adrenaline of being with thirty-one thousand running mates to carry me farther than my training could.

As we approached the four-mile marker, I got a huge smile on my face. We were running at a ten-minute-mile pace, and I felt really good. I said to Trish, “This is amazing. I’ve never run beyond four miles at one time before!”

“What!” she said. I could tell she was more concerned than impressed.

“I ran three times a week for the last month, but I only ran three miles each time. Every step we take past four miles is a personal best for me.”

“You’re crazy!” she said.

I preferred to think I was brilliant. “Think of all the time I saved not doing those long runs on Saturdays,” I said.

Famous last words.

As we approached mile ten, I could feel my legs tighten with

every step. I kept waiting for what everyone calls “the runner’s high” to find me, but it never arrived. When we crossed mile ten, I went down. My quadriceps were balls of tightness, and I couldn’t bend my legs or take a step without piercing pain.

My in-shape wife was just hitting her second wind but was gracious enough to stop and help me stretch. As I lay on the ground in pain, I said to her, “I don’t understand why my legs are cramping up so bad. I drank water all along the way. I stretched out. I felt great just ten minutes ago.”

“Justin,” she said, “you don’t train for the first ten miles. You train for the last three.”

For the next three miles, we walked, kind of ran, and stopped to stretch when I needed to. Trisha could have gone ahead of me and finished in good standing, but she sacrificed her half-marathon time to stay with my ill-trained, broken-down body. We finished in just under three hours.

When most of us get married, we think we are ready for the race before us. We are optimistic. We are in love. We have a plan and a dream. We’ve dated for a year; we went to premarital counseling for a month; we read at least half of a “preparing for your marriage” book. We’ve trained. We’ve prepared. We’re ready.

What most couples don’t realize is that we don’t train for the first ten miles of marriage; we train for the last three. Seemingly without warning, many marriages fall down in the middle of the race. Marriages that seemed fine a few months or years earlier fall victim to the grueling difficulty of the marathon. Couples who had every intention of finishing their race together either run at different paces or quit altogether.

*Beyond Ordinary* is written by two fellow runners. We’ve tripped and fallen along the way, but by God’s grace, we’ve found the “runner’s high” in the marriage marathon. This book is a reminder of just how amazing the journey together can be.

*Beyond Ordinary* is designed to help you along the way. It will stretch you. It will challenge you. It will inspire you to keep run-

ning. It will ask you to help each other up and to run with grace and purpose. To leave ordinary behind as you race toward extraordinary.

Ordinary is the biggest enemy of a great marriage. Ordinary is characterized by dissatisfaction, misunderstanding, and stale love. Ordinary is the birthplace of adultery. Ordinary is a place where divorce looks better than staying together. Ordinary is the subtle trap that convinces you that your marriage is as good as it will ever get. Ordinary marriages lose hope. Ordinary marriages lose vision. Ordinary marriages give in to compromise.

The way to an ordinary marriage is the path of least resistance. If you want an extraordinary marriage, you will have to choose it.

This book is a weapon designed to wage war against ordinary. It isn't about communicating better or learning what planet your spouse is from or what love language he or she speaks. Instead, this book is a transparent look into the lives of two people who have journeyed from extraordinary to ordinary to nightmarish—and back again, by God's grace. This is a book about the heart: our hearts, your heart, and the heart of every marriage.

If you're looking for a book that lists five easy steps to a great marriage, go back to the bookstore. But if you remember what extraordinary felt like and are determined to do whatever it takes to get back there, keep reading.

There will be times when it will feel like it's over, but it's not over. There will be times when you will be tempted to throw this book across the room. Go ahead—it can handle it! This book will challenge you to ask questions about yourself and your marriage that will be uncomfortable to consider. Embrace those questions and be honest. It is as we face our fears and learn to tell the truth that we begin to leave ordinary behind in our relationships with God and in our marriages.

Ordinary will be defeated with each turn of the page and with the belief that God is fighting for you more than you are fighting for yourself.

Welcome to the movement beyond marriage as usual.



1.

## NO ORDINARY BEGINNING

**FOR MANY OF US** there is a gap between the marriage we have and the marriage we thought we would have. Sometimes that gap is created by unrealistic dreams and expectations. But more often that gap is created by a subtle equation that defines many marriages:

Time + unintentionality = ordinary marriage.

It isn't that we intend to drift away from our spouses, but over time it just happens.

Do you remember the hope you had the day you got married? Do you remember the vows you made—"in sickness and in health," "for better or worse," "till death do us part"? Your marriage was going to be different. Your marriage was going to be special. Your marriage was going to be anything but ordinary.

Is your marriage extraordinary today? Or are you miles away

from those early feelings, hopes, and dreams? Even the healthiest marriages have the potential to drift.

You may not be sure how it happened, but over the course of time, your marriage may have become ordinary. You are not the spouse you imagined. You don't have the marriage you dreamed of when you said, "I do." Words that once defined your relationship—intimate, fun, exciting, romantic, growing, loving, patient, forgiving—now seem to describe another time and a different couple.

It isn't that you wanted a marriage of mediocrity; it's that you've drifted into it.

Do you remember what it felt like the first time you met your spouse? How about the late-night conversations and the crazy things you did to impress him or her? What was your first kiss like? Can you picture the backflips your stomach was doing before you asked her to marry you, or while you were waiting to be asked? No matter how long you've been married, there is something special about remembering the extraordinary beginning of your relationship. It takes you to a place of hope, allows you to remember your dreams, and reminds you why you chose to commit the rest of your life to your spouse in the first place.

## **JUSTIN:**

When I started college in 1991, I had my life and my future planned out. I had played basketball in high school, and Lincoln Christian College in Lincoln, Illinois, was only a temporary stop on my way to greatness. My plan was to go to Lincoln, play basketball for a year, take some core classes, and then transfer to a bigger, better school and play basketball on scholarship. I wanted to be a teacher and a basketball coach, and Lincoln wasn't where I wanted to be for the next four years. I was a late bloomer in high school and didn't get really good until my senior year, so my freshman year at Lincoln would serve as a nice prep year for bigger and better things.

A few days after I arrived on campus, the local paper did a story

on Lincoln's 1991 freshman recruits. The article described each new player, calling me "the Cadillac of the recruiting class." That statement summed up how I felt about myself. I was the Cadillac of this little campus. My playing for them was a gift.

My attitude toward God was similar to my attitude toward the school. I was a Christian and went to church, but my life was pretty compartmentalized. Basketball had its place, dating had its place, and God had his place in my heart. I knew what I wanted to do with my life, and God could come along for the ride, but *I* was in the driver's seat. I had a plan.

Basketball season started, and I performed as expected. Lincoln had won eight games the year before I arrived. My freshman year we won eighteen games. At the end of my first season, I expected offers from bigger schools to come flooding in. I led the team in scoring and rebounding as a freshman; I thought that should be impressive enough. No offers. My plan wasn't working out.

I went home for the summer feeling defeated. It seemed that I had failed and didn't have a backup plan. I would have to go back to Lincoln in the fall. I started work a few days later as a cashier at Walmart in my hometown, Crawfordsville, Indiana.

As I was working one afternoon, a familiar face came through my checkout line. Kurt was a few years older than me, and his dad ran the church camp I'd attended as a kid. We recognized each other, and I asked him what he was doing in town. He was a pastor at a small church about ten miles south of Crawfordsville.

Then he said something that changed the entire trajectory of my life: "Why are you working here at Walmart when you could do something great with your life?"

My first thought was, *Dude, step off, this is only a summer gig.* I looked around to see where my boss was before I answered. "I don't know. I've never really thought about it."

"You should come be my youth pastor," he said. "I'll pay you a hundred dollars a weekend to teach Sunday school and children's church and to start a youth group."

Was this guy crazy? How did he get in my line at Walmart? I had no idea what a youth pastor was supposed to do, but a hundred dollars a week for a few hours of work sounded like easy money.

I went through the formality of meeting with the leaders at the church, and a few weeks later I started as their weekend youth pastor. My first Sunday I had eight kids show up for youth group. They ranged from fifth to tenth grade. I had prepared a message (my first), and it covered Genesis all the way through Revelation. The message lasted almost an hour. I didn't want to leave anything out!

At the end of the talk, I closed by saying, "Okay, if you don't want to go to hell and you want to invite Jesus into your heart, raise your hand." Kyle, one of the younger teens, raised his hand. I didn't know what to do at this point. I never thought anyone would raise their hand, so I hadn't thought through what to do next. Awkwardly, I said a prayer with Kyle, dismissed the kids, and then went to Kurt's house to make sure that Kyle was saved, because I didn't know what I was doing.

God used that moment to open my heart to his plan for me. I suddenly realized that I could partner with God to change eternity. I had never thought about that before. Over the next year, I would come back to that church each weekend the basketball team wasn't traveling, and God would use the church youth to mold me more than he used me to mold them.

My sophomore year, I didn't fall out of love with myself, but I fell more in love with Jesus and his church. I came to terms with being at Lincoln and changed my major to Christian education. Reluctantly, I was opening myself to God's plan for my life and surrendering parts of my plan to him. God was preparing me for the plan he had in mind.

That plan began to unfold in the fall of 1993, when Trisha and I met. I was a junior and she was a freshman at Lincoln. After one of our first chapels of the year, my friend Kenny asked, "Have you seen the hot girl with the bright red lipstick?"

I hadn't . . . yet.

I have to admit something: I am not proud of the story I am about to share. I wish that the details weren't true, but unfortunately, they are.

Kenny and I walked from the chapel over to the cafeteria, and there Trisha stood—big 1993 hair coupled with bright red lipstick. She was indeed hot. I wanted to make a big impression, so I approached her with confidence.

“Hey there, beautiful. I don't think we've ever met.” She smirked with what was either charm or disgust. So I continued to wow her. “My name is God, and—” pointing to Kenny—“this is my son, Jesus Christ.”

I don't really know what I was thinking with that introduction. Maybe because we were at Bible college, I thought it would be both spiritual and endearing. Trisha thought it was neither.

I thought it was money.

Trisha reluctantly shook my hand. “I'm just kidding,” I said. “I'm JD, and this is my buddy Kenny. You should really get to know us.”

Honestly, I don't remember what Trisha said at that point because I was so impressed with my introduction.

I knew I had made an impression. Kenny begged me to set him up with her, and the next morning, I saw Trisha walking out of the cafeteria. I approached her believing I could convince her to go out with Kenny. After all, I was a well-known junior all-American basketball player, while she was a freshman who, by now, had probably heard all about how great I was.

“Hey, Trisha,” I said. “I'm sure you remember me from yesterday. I wanted to talk to you about something.” She looked annoyed, but I wasn't fazed. “It's really early in the semester. Having been here a couple of years now, I wanted to let you know how dating works here at LCC. This is prime time because there are a lot of dating options right now. Those options tend to get less attractive as the semester goes on.”

She looked at me as if I had a third eye.

“My friend Kenny that you met yesterday—”

“Jesus Christ?” she interrupted.

“Yeah, Jesus Christ. He may not be the best-looking guy, but he is really nice. You should consider going out with him.”

Obviously this wasn't the best way to set someone up, but I was expecting that she wouldn't be interested in Kenny. I wanted to ask her out, but I couldn't do that to my good friend . . . until he was denied, that is.

“Sorry,” she said. “I'm not interested in going out with Kenny. I have a boyfriend back home.” “Boyfriend back home” was often code for “not interested.” She wasn't interested in Kenny, but I walked away with an assurance that given some time, she would be interested in me.

I called her the next day to ask her out. Her roommate answered the phone.

“Hey, this is Justin Davis. Is Trisha there?”

I could hear her roommate whisper, “It's Justin Davis. He wants to talk to you.” I was expecting Trisha to be excited to talk to me, but she sounded more confused than excited. Maybe she was just intimidated.

“Hey, Trisha. It's Justin Davis. I wanted to see if you'd like to grab some dinner, maybe go to a movie this weekend.”

“Do you remember yesterday when I told you I had a boyfriend back home?” she asked.

“Yeah, I vaguely remember,” I admitted.

“Well, I have a boyfriend back home.”

“Oh, you were serious? That wasn't just because you weren't interested in Kenny?”

“I was serious.”

“So me asking you out doesn't change your ‘boyfriend back home’ status?” I pressed.

“No,” she said, and that ended the conversation.

*She said no? I thought. What just happened? Maybe she hasn't heard about how great I am.*

What she didn't know was that I had three guys from the basketball team in my room when I asked her out, since I was going to show them how to capture the heart of a lady.

I'm competitive, I don't like to lose, and my pride was hurt a little by this rejection, so I made a bet with one of the guys in the room that I could get Trisha to go out with me by the end of the semester. But even after my friend gladly pocketed my fifty dollars—way too many rejections later—I continued (unsuccessfully) to ask Trisha out.

But Trisha had made a fatal mistake in her strategy: she became a cheerleader. And since the cheerleaders traveled with the basketball team to away games, naturally, we began to spend a lot of time together.

### **TRISHA:**

In 1993 I found myself, as if beamed from another planet, in the middle of a cornfield attending Lincoln Christian College in Lincoln, Illinois. It was a far cry from the hustle and bustle of living in the inner city of Joliet, just south of Chicago. It makes me chuckle when people talk about the “inner city” as this dark place in need of rescue. From my point of view, this poor little town in the middle of nowhere was in desperate need of some rescuing. For example, how can a respectable town have only two fast-food restaurants and one gas station?

I came from a high school with rich culture in which fashion trends were an eclectic mix of Salt-N-Pepa meets Nirvana. When I came to LCC, I definitely represented a fashion style the campus had never seen before. Cross Colours clothes and bright red lips were the norm back home, but it was apparent that Wrangler jeans and clear lip gloss ruled here. What else could these people wear when the only place to shop for clothes was the farm goods store?

I was the first in my family to go to college. I had no idea what

I was doing, and the fact that I stood out like a sore thumb didn't help. As I sat in my dorm room terrified, I thought, *I'm so out of place. I don't belong here. But I'm from Joliet! I'm strong and street smart. I. Can. Do. This!* So I stood up and went to the dorm room next to mine.

My introduction to a group of girls huddled together on the floor talking—who I assumed had all just met—didn't go so well. I was greeted with a look of “What in the world is this girl doing?” Apparently they *did* all know each other, and I had just interrupted their conversation.

“Hi, I'm Trisha Lopez!” I said. Why I felt the need to share my full name is still a mystery, but I continued, “Are you guys freshmen too?”

Crickets.

In my desperate need to fill the awkward air, I kept going with the questions. “Where are you guys from?”

Giggles. One of them blurted out, “Effingham, Illinois!” Now I'd lived in Illinois my whole life and had never heard of Effingham, which sounded to me like they were trying to say a bad word in code. I stood there speechless.

Eventually Jodi (who had more energy than all of us combined) spoke up and introduced me to the rest of the group. Angie, Jodi, Brooke, and Beth became not only my best friends but Justin's, too. Without my knowledge this crew became “Team Justin,” his partners in crime to convince me to date him.

It started with plans of attack like Justin's driving to my hometown to a party that he wasn't invited to. Then there was the day he talked Team Justin into breaking into my dorm room to get my dirty laundry so he could wash and dry it for me, underwear and all. I was mortified!

Justin was the big man on campus. *Everyone* called him JD. Girls would rub his bald head and say, “Hi, JD!” So I called him Justin. I thought he was an arrogant country boy who considered himself the Michael Jordan of our campus. He definitely wasn't the guy you wanted washing your dirty underwear.

But something was changing in our relationship. The more time we spent together, his need to be “JD” melted away, and I was given a view into his heart that he’d never shown to another girl before. What he didn’t know was the grander the view he gave me, the more my heart was falling in love with his. Team Justin was starting to win.

We started to share about our families. Justin was the oldest; I was the middle child, yet we both played the role of the peacemaker in our families. Our dads were both the blue-collar, jack-of-all-trades types. Our moms had both worked hard to advance in their careers. Justin’s mom was a teacher’s aide but earned her college degree to become a special education teacher. My mom was a paralegal who landed a job in downtown Chicago at one of the largest law firms in the world. There was so much we had in common.

Yet Justin was bold; I was timid. He could sell a used doughnut; you might buy one from me out of pity just because I lovingly offered it. He was book smart; I was street smart. My very first test at LCC was writing the books of the Bible in the correct order and *spelling* them correctly. It might as well have been the bar exam! Justin, by contrast, could glance at a textbook’s table of contents on his way to a test and ace it.

The once-arrogant jock who relentlessly got on my nerves was now a friend I started to miss when we were apart. Rather than dreading his calls, I anticipated them. After turning him down fifty-one times, I was praying for the fifty-second!

I will never forget coming back to the dorm after my first official date with Justin. Team Justin was waiting for me in my dorm room. As I entered, we all giggled, and Angie, who was never shy with words, spoke up. “So . . . *what happened?*”

“We kissed!” I said as I slid to the floor with my back against the door, my eyes closed as if I were back in that moment. “When he kissed me it was like fireworks!”

Team Justin had won, and I’m so glad they did!

**JUSTIN:**

When Trisha and I were away on basketball trips, we would sit together on the bus and talk, hang out in the lobbies of hotels and talk, and sit on the bleachers and talk. We talked about everything: our families, relationships, God, ministry, our hopes and dreams, and everything under the sun. There was a natural flow to our conversation. Perhaps because dating initially was not an option, I felt a freedom to relax and be myself, and soon we became best friends.

The semester ended, and we both went home for Christmas break. We missed each other. When we returned to school in January, there was a sense of romance and attraction in our relationship that hadn't been there before. (It had always been there for me, but Trisha was now open to reciprocating.) Approximately the fifty-second time I asked Trish out, she finally said yes.

We went to Bennigan's on our first date. I felt like a kid on Christmas morning. I had a 1988 Ford Taurus, but I didn't want to drive that on our first date. I borrowed a friend's beat-up, run-down Chevy Cavalier convertible instead. It was January in Illinois, so we wouldn't be riding with the top down anyway, but for some reason, the convertible made the date more romantic. Trisha ordered a grilled chicken salad and didn't eat more than two bites. She was nervous; I was nervous. But despite our nerves, it was easy to be with each other. I had never gone out with someone who already knew me so well. When we got back to campus, I asked if I could kiss her. She said yes, and I'm not going to lie, it was amazing!

We couldn't talk enough. We'd stay up late at night talking on the phone. I was never much of a breakfast person, but I started getting up so I could see Trish in the cafeteria before her classes. We spent most nights studying together. We just loved being together.

A few months after we started dating, Trisha came home with me for the weekend. She was excited about meeting Kyle and some of the other kids at the church where I was a youth pastor. I could

feel myself falling in love with Trisha before, but seeing her interact with the kids and share the love of God with them made me fall head over heels. We started to serve together. She sang and led worship for our little youth group, and I taught. God had created us to complement each other in an amazing way.

Not only did we fall in love with each other, we fell in love with the vision of what God could do through us as a couple. We fell in love with the thought of serving God—together. We fell in love with the idea of changing the world—together. God had brought us together and given us the same desire to serve him, the same desire to serve students, the same desire to help people find the way back to God through a personal relationship with Jesus. It was amazing. I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with this woman, and I wanted to serve God for the rest of my life with her.

I proposed to Trish on July 5, 1994. We had been dating only a little over six months, but we had been looking at engagement rings and dreaming about life and ministry together. Trisha was living at home for the summer, and I came up with a plan to surprise her. I drove about three hours to her house. I rented a limo and was going to pick her up from work.

Trisha worked at a Christian day camp for third- and fourth-grade kids. I got dressed in the only suit I owned; the limo came to Trisha's house to pick me up. I had purchased two dozen roses and had them in a vase ready to greet her in the car. As the limo drove me from her house to the camp, I cued up an audiocassette of our song: "I Swear" by All-4-One. This was going to be an *incredible* proposal.

I had called the camp director and asked that he keep Trish in his office until I showed up. He was glad to help me pull off the proposal. I rolled up in the limo, stepped out of the door, and the camp director walked Trish out of his office and into the parking lot. As soon as I saw her, my nerves went into high gear. I had made reservations at Michael Jordan's restaurant in downtown Chicago. My plan was to propose to her with our song playing as we drove to the restaurant.

Trisha was caught totally off guard. She was muddy and dirty and wet. I had had no idea that on this particular day the camp had gone creek walking. I was undeterred. I asked her to get in the limo. I was shaking as I pushed the tape into the tape deck and we pulled out of the parking lot.

I had my speech planned out. I had envisioned this moment my entire three-hour drive to Trisha's house. As I began, the driver took a sharp turn, and the two dozen roses fell off the seat, spilling onto the floor. The water from the vase filled the floorboard and covered our feet.

I was flustered. I dropped the ring box into the water. By this time, our song had played all the way through and a different song that had nothing to do with swearing or "better or worse" or "death do us part" was playing. Now *I* was ready to swear, just in a different way. As I scrambled to pick up the ring and soak up the water, we came to a dead stop in Chicago rush-hour traffic.

There was no going back. Despite the soggy conditions, despite the wrong song playing, despite my nerves and my unmet expectations of how this proposal would play out, I got on my knee in the back of the limo and asked the most beautiful woman I'd ever known if she would marry me.

Given how many times I asked her out before she said yes, I was a little nervous. But before I could even finish, she was crying and screamed, "Yes!" By the time we arrived at Michael Jordan's restaurant, we were engaged. It wasn't exactly storybook, but it was our story and we loved writing it together.

We were married in July 1995. After all that God had done and the plans that we knew God had for us, how could our marriage be anything but extraordinary?

### **TRISHA:**

All girls dream of their wedding day from the time they know how to dream. One day they dream about the ceremony being inside at

night with candles ablaze, the bride wearing a simple gown. Maybe the next day, month, or year they decide that an afternoon garden wedding with an elaborate, over-the-top dress is more fitting. By the time they grow into young women, they pretty much have the wedding planned before they ever meet the groom.

As soon as Justin and I were engaged, I put my plan for our wedding into place. I knew exactly what I wanted. I had envisioned every detail, from the ceremony to the reception, and as far as I was concerned, I had an amazing vision for my—I mean *our*—wedding day.

I am Hispanic. My father is Mexican, and my mother is German and Irish. Even though my immediate family celebrated only a few Mexican traditions, friends whose families celebrated all of them surrounded me.

One of my favorite Mexican traditions is a Quinceañera, the celebration of a girl turning fifteen. Traditionally, it's a ceremony that has many of the same customs typically found in a wedding reception, including a big, pretty dress. I love big, pretty dresses, and although I never expected to have a Quinceañera, I knew I would get an opportunity to wear a big, pretty dress for my wedding!

I envisioned marrying a handsome, tall man, and I never really cared what color skin God gave him because Alex P. Keaton, Ponch, and Theo Huxtable were all cute. I just knew he needed to be *tall*. My mom was about the same height as my dad, and she rarely wore heels. My man needed to be tall because wearing heels on my wedding day was a must. My tall groom and I would get married at the church I grew up in with flowers cascading over every nook and cranny. My dad would have to take one for the team and wear some type of shoes to make him taller so I wouldn't look like bridezilla next to him as he walked me down the aisle. My husband and I would drive off into the sunset in a convertible or maybe on horseback—as long as the groom was tall, this detail didn't matter.

Without realizing it, I did get the tall man of my dreams and

the big, pretty dress to go with him. Imagine Cinderella meets '90s pop culture: the puffiest, most bedazzled dress ever created. Unfortunately, it wasn't just my dress that was over the top. My veil was so grand that at first glance, it looked like a bearded dragon. The man of my dreams could barely get close enough to kiss me without poking himself in the eye!

It was 1995, and that year the Chicagoland area experienced one of the worst heat waves on record. Still, despite the heat, Justin and I were set to get married on July 15 in Joliet, Illinois, at First Baptist Church, the church where I grew up. We were too broke for cascading flowers, so we cascaded cheap tulle instead. Our mentor, pastor, and friend Lynn Laughlin officiated for next to nothing, and my brother and two friends sang for free. Our wedding wouldn't be complete without Team Justin, who tearfully read Scripture and who ironically all wore black in protest that I was leaving them.

Even with the heat, I insisted on wearing my big, beautiful, and long-sleeved wedding dress and bearded-dragon veil. That would have been a very normal and appropriate desire for a bride had my church been air-conditioned. But it wasn't. A bride in a huge, long-sleeved dress in a non-air-conditioned church sanctuary with groomsmen wearing tuxedos and grandmothers on the verge of passing out didn't exactly live up to the vision I'd had as a little girl.

Thankfully, the reception venue had air-conditioning. During the reception, our moms spent most of the evening opening the cards we received, counting each check and ten-dollar bill in hopes that we'd have enough money to leave for our honeymoon. While they counted, I excitedly anticipated the very last detail I had dreamed of—the dance of the bride and groom and the father-daughter dance. Everything happened just as I'd imagined. Justin wasn't just tall; he was gorgeous inside and out. He took my hand, held me close, and danced me in a circle over and over and over again in the only way he knew how. It was endearing (and a little nauseating).

When it was time to dance with my dad, I realized I had never taken the time to think through what this dance would mean.

This would be the last time my dad would take me into his arms and dance with his baby girl. I had been so busy planning that I wasn't ready to say good-bye. I was barely twenty, and my heart ached for how I would miss not only him but my mom; my sister, Julie; my brother, Frankie; and my four-month-old niece, Kylie. Dad buried his head into my cheek and shoulder, and I cherished every second he danced with me—a moment in time that this girl had never thought to dream up.

As the dance ended, our moms were in a puddle of tears, not crying just at the scene before them but that we were given enough money to leave on our honeymoon. Justin and I were college students—broke ones—and we'd put every dime we made into our big wedding. Being told we had enough money to leave on our honeymoon allowed the sorrow of leaving my family to be replaced with gratitude that we were able to go.

We left the reception in a brand-new 1995 Astro minivan. Justin's parents graciously allowed us to borrow it. We had hoped for something a little sportier, but it was nice. As we drove onto the interstate, horns blared congratulations all around us. Exactly forty-five minutes later, we came to a standstill—one that lasted three hours.

Six hours after leaving our reception, we finally arrived at our hotel. We were simply exhausted. The carry-me-over-the-threshold tradition was abandoned, and all I wanted was to be carried to bed. As soon as we arrived at the hotel, "that time of the month" arrived too. This was definitely not what Justin expected! Instead of romance, he found himself making a trip to Walmart to purchase feminine products he had never purchased before. I was asleep when he returned, and being the gentleman that he is, he climbed into bed, kissed my forehead, and passed out.

We woke up the next morning believing that things would be better. Justin and I both grew up in lower- to middle-income families. Going on vacation seemed to us a once-in-a-lifetime experience. So getting to go to Holden Beach, North Carolina—

even though it took twenty-five hours to get there—was a dream come true. We'd finally arrived.

Although we needed a redo of our first night together, we thought we'd hit the beach first. The beauty of the ocean was overwhelming, and even more enjoyable was watching my newly married husband. Justin spent hours pretending he was dead in the water, allowing the waves to push him onto the shore like a beached whale. It was hilarious watching people freak out for a split second thinking that he was dead, only to have him pop up like a kid playing a trick.

We were so excited to be at the beach that neither one of us thought about sunscreen, nor did we, in the midst of having so much fun, think to keep track of the time. I was officially sunburned. Not just sunburned, *blistered*. We were on track to have the worst honeymoon ever.

Have I mentioned we still hadn't had sex? When your husband is calling his dad, asking what to do when you haven't had sex yet, you can be sure this is not the honeymoon he had in mind!

The last day of our honeymoon, I had healed enough to go outside and not feel as if the sun were going to melt my skin off. We decided to rent a Jet Ski. Yes, a Jet Ski—in the saltwater ocean. Justin was in the driver's position, and I held on for dear life in the back. To Justin's delight, we quickly approached a yacht that was creating some intense waves. He yelled over his shoulder, "Hold on!" I wanted to ask what for, but he immediately put the Jet Ski in full throttle and aimed to hit the wave dead on.

As I flew twenty feet *over* Justin, I heard the people on the yacht shouting, "Oh my . . ." I landed in full belly-flop position, and as I came up out of the water, the blisters on my face popped, skin was hanging everywhere, and I looked like a battered wife, not a newlywed on her honeymoon.

There is no question that our wedding and honeymoon were not as spectacular as either of us had imagined. But we were young and in love, and what brought us together was not only a love for

God and each other, but a shared vision to change the world for Christ. In the grand scheme, there was still so much life to live, and we were ready to start living it together.

**JUSTIN:**

When we returned from our honeymoon, I still had one year of college to complete, and Trisha was starting her sophomore year. She had taken a year off of school to save for our wedding. Trisha and I first moved into a cheap and roach-infested apartment, but we decided this was too much to bear despite its \$150 price tag, so we moved into a tiny house. It was actually an old garage that had been converted into a house. It wasn't that attractive, it wasn't that nice, but the rent was \$225 per month, which fit well into two college students' budget. And there were no roaches.

Shortly after the fall semester started, we found out that Trisha didn't have the flu as we'd thought. She was pregnant. The honeymoon was *definitely* over. We were four months into married life, learning to live together and to balance school, work, basketball, and college life. Our differences began to rise to the surface. Those little things that were so cute when we were dating all of a sudden weren't so cute: they caused conflict. I was a night owl; Trish was a morning person. I was a hit-the-snooze-button-multiple-times person; Trish was a get-out-of-bed-two-minutes-before-the-alarm-goes-off person. I spread things out on the desk so I could find them; Trish stacked things up so they looked organized.

One of the biggest fights our first year of marriage came the day we celebrated our first Christmas as a married couple. We were going to see our families for Christmas break, so we made plans to meet at home after class and open gifts before we left. Trisha had to be at work that day before I had class, so she got up first, got all of the gifts she had purchased for me out of the closet, and laid them beautifully under the tree. I woke up and saw the gifts under the tree, taking that as a cue to get ready for our gift exchange.

I went to the closet, grabbed the gifts I had purchased for Trisha, and put them in a pile on the couch. I made a nice little sign that said “Trisha’s Gifts” and placed it on top of her pile. I grabbed the gifts that she had purchased from under the tree, placed them in a pile on the recliner, and made a sign that said “Justin’s Gifts” for my pile. I felt a sense of pride in the accomplishment that I had organized our Christmas presents and they were now ready to be opened. I got ready for my last day of class and went to campus.

Trisha came home from work to find the presents she had meticulously placed under the tree stacked up in a pile on the recliner. She had no idea what happened. This was before cell phones and text messaging, so there was no convenient way to communicate to me, “What in the heck were you thinking, moving my beautifully placed gifts?” So she took both perfectly stacked piles of presents and repositioned them under the tree. She then left for campus to take her last exam.

You can see where this is going. I came home from class, saw the gifts back under the tree, and was totally confused.

Trisha came home from class, and I said, “Why are all the gifts under the tree? I took the time to stack our gifts in piles and to make signs labeling your gifts and my gifts. Why would you move them? That isn’t how we do Christmas!”

“I don’t understand why all the gifts are on the chairs,” Trisha shot back. “The presents stay under the tree until we’re ready to open them!”

“That’s not how we do it in my family.”

“What kind of family just stacks the gifts in piles? That’s silly.”

I then did what no man should ever do. “You’re just angry because your pregnancy hormones are out of whack.”

Trisha ran to our bedroom and slammed the door, crying. We were only a few months into our marriage, but we had quickly developed the skill to say things we knew would hurt the other person.

“You are being way too emotional!” Trisha called out to me.

“I can’t believe you would get so bent out of shape over Christmas gifts.”

“You’re acting so immature!” I yelled.

“I can’t believe you are so insensitive. How could you not even think about my feelings? You are so inconsiderate!”

“Inconsiderate! How am I inconsiderate? I bought you gifts that we don’t have the money for so you can insult me about how we open them! That’s *real* inconsiderate!”

“I hate you!” she screamed, and locked the door.

*Hate me?* I thought. *She hates me? How does she hate me? Don’t we have to work our way up to hate? We can’t start at hate! It should take years for her to hate me. Where do we go from here?*

The conversation was over. I didn’t know what to do, so I took the opportunity to restack the gifts into piles to prepare for opening. It would be a few hours and many apologies before we were in a place to open gifts, but they would be ready when we were.

In this ordinary moment, gifts that were bought with love and thoughtfulness were now a visible reminder of the vast differences between us. There was a huge gap between the relationship we’d thought we had just four months earlier and the relationship that rose to the surface in the face of conflict.

## **JUSTIN & TRISHA:**

### **GOD HAS A VISION FOR YOUR MARRIAGE**

When a man and woman first get married, they don’t yet know what they don’t know. In fact, it would seem that most of us who get married think we know it all, right at the beginning. Trisha and I (Justin) certainly held the belief that our marriage would be different. That we would overcome the issues that plagued other couples. That we loved each other more than most couples. After all, we talked about our family differences. We could talk about anything. We knew each other better than anyone else knew us. Our marriage would be different.

There is no doubt that we all want our marriages to be anything but ordinary. The great news is that God has a vision for our marriages as well. God longs for us to see and experience the vision he had when he created marriage. Look at his vision:

For Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called ‘woman,’  
for she was taken out of man.”

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

GENESIS 2:20-25, NIV

God's idea is completely wild: “They become one flesh.” We don't usually say “one flesh” in our world today, but God's vision for our marriage is *oneness*. What God calls *oneness*, we call *intimacy*. Often when we think of the word *intimacy* we think of it in purely sexual terms. Yet the word *intimacy* literally means “to be fully known.” Intimacy, as God envisions it, is to be fully known by our spouses—emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

This passage reminds me that our vision and dreams for our marriages aren't too big; they are actually too small. We can't out-

dream our Creator when it comes to our marriages. We often settle for ordinary when God longs for us to experience extraordinary. Genesis 2 shouts to us, “You’re not crazy!” The longing we have for a rich and fulfilling marriage has been given to us by God. Our desire to be fully known and loved comes from a God who knows us fully and loves us anyway. This passage is a mandate for us to not settle for anything less than extraordinary:

ex•traor•di•nary

*a: going beyond what is usual, regular, or customary*

*b: exceptional to a very marked extent*

Maybe you’re asking yourself, *What on earth does it mean to have an extraordinary marriage?* What sticks out to Trisha and me in this definition is the phrase *going beyond what is usual*. That most likely describes what your dating life was. A man might open the car door, think up unique places to eat, and always plan ahead to create time together that was even better than the time before. A woman might surprise her man by cooking his favorite meal, buying him tickets to his favorite game, or choosing to go to an action movie rather than a chick flick. Couples often wonder why it was so fun to date each other but why that same excitement feels so unrealistic for married life.

Where would you rate your marriage in the area of *extraordinary*? Can you think of a recent time you had an extraordinary experience with your spouse? If yes, what made it feel extraordinary? If your answer is no, what comes to mind as to why extraordinary experiences don’t happen for you?

**GREAT AT FALLING IN LOVE,  
ILL-EQUIPPED TO STAY IN LOVE**

We are really good at falling in love. But what we see reflected in the divorce rate is that we are really bad at staying in love. We know

how to get married happy; we aren't really good at staying happily married. There are a few reasons why over time we tend to drift into unintentionality.

The first is familiarity. Think about the car you drive today. Do you remember when you first bought that car? No one was going to eat in it. You were going to change the oil every twenty-five hundred miles. You washed it twice a week. You made the kids sit on plastic so they wouldn't mess up the pristine seats. But after a period of time, without even realizing it, you treated your new car as you did your old car. You stopped washing it twice a week and just waited for it to rain. The kids now eat snacks from yesterday's leftover McDonald's off the floor. Once the shine wears off, the glitter fades, and the familiarity sets in, you treat things differently. We do the same with our spouses.

The second reason it is hard to stay in love is that we live at a point of exhaustion. As we get older, our energy levels go down while our responsibilities go up. Marriage takes a lot of energy. It takes energy to listen. It takes energy to resolve conflict. It takes energy to put someone else's needs ahead of your own. It takes energy to raise kids. Because we are exhausted, we think we can neglect our marriages and stay in love.

But remember the equation we gave at the beginning of the chapter: time + unintentionality = ordinary.

### **NEW & NOT IMPROVED**

We mentioned before that one of the things that helped us develop in our dating relationship was traveling together. Not only did we travel for sports, but each weekend we would travel to a little church in Indiana and lead youth group together. We logged a lot of miles. The drive from central Illinois to central Indiana in the winter is flat and open. There isn't much to see while driving back and forth. There are just miles and miles of cornfields between cities.

One Sunday while we were driving back to school, I (Justin) was not paying close attention to the road, and we drove through a flock of birds taking flight. Birds surrounded the car, and I found myself ducking (as if one were going to hit me). As I ducked, a bird flew right into the windshield and splattered feathers, poop, and blood all over. Now Trisha cares deeply for animals. She cares even more deeply for animals that die a violent death right in front of us. She immediately started crying, and I panicked. In a moment of insanity, I simply turned on the windshield wipers. That only smeared what was on the windshield, and Trisha cried harder. I tried to use the windshield washer fluid to remove what residue I could, and we drove back to campus in silence.

I bring this story up because it illustrates some moments we all face in our marriages: those moments when things beyond our control hit the windshields of our lives, when circumstances crash into our marriages and we don't know what to do. In an effort to make our marriages better or to make our issues simply go away, we turn on the windshield wipers, which really only make matters worse. It is easy to offer simple solutions for marriages that attempt to merely wipe away what is visible.

People are so much better at medicating symptoms of their marriage issues than at diagnosing and treating the root causes of marriage problems. We work on communicating better. We read books on anger management. We try to understand love languages. We listen to sermons on marriage. We go to marriage conferences. We try to wipe away all that is visibly wrong and fail to go deeper into the heart of our relationships. Yet we experience only incremental, inconsistent improvements in our marriages.

And we do the same thing in our relationship with God. So often, we would rather have God medicate the pain in our hearts than do what it takes to bring complete healing to us. So we learn to live with spiritual illnesses while looking for ways to make ourselves feel better. We go to church. We sing the songs. We pray the prayers. We join small groups or Sunday school classes. We may

even give regularly. Yet we experience only incremental, inconsistent growth in our relationship with God. We do a lot; we just change very little.

The goal of this book is to move beyond the windshields of our marriages, to uncover the heart behind why the marriage you have maybe isn't the marriage you desire. Trisha and I want to help you see that the marriage you have is perfectly positioned to become the marriage God has in mind.

A lot of marriage resources focus on behavior modification. Communication. Anger management. Work/life balance. Money management. Improving your sex life. And we agree that these issues matter. It isn't that they aren't important issues to deal with, but most of the behaviors we struggle with are tied to broken parts of our hearts, and if we focus on the behaviors and not the root cause, we are not dealing with the issue, only smearing it around on the windshield. More information doesn't guarantee heart transformation.

We work really, really hard to improve our marriages by improving our behavior, and while these changes might last for a few weeks or a few months, we end up right back in the same rut. Even worse, we try really, really hard to improve our marriages by forcing our spouses to improve their behavior, and we end up frustrated and exhausted; and our spouses feel like they never do anything right.

Those in ordinary marriages believe behavior modification will solve their problems, that spouses can behave their way to an improved marriage. But you can't behave your way to an extraordinary marriage.

God doesn't want to improve your marriage; he wants to transform it. God doesn't want to modify your behavior; he wants to change your heart. Extraordinary comes when you, as a husband or wife, invite God to change *you*.

It is a dangerous prayer to pray—*God, change me*. You know why it's dangerous? Because this is a prayer God will always answer.

God longs to transform you. As much as you want to change your spouse, as much as you try to modify your behavior, God wants to change your heart. This prayer is where lasting change starts.

Will you pray this prayer? That is the question you will have to ask yourself before moving forward. Will you stop settling for ordinary and trust God for extraordinary? That is the journey Trisha and I want to go on with you. The great news for each of us is that God doesn't promise *improved*; God promises *new*.

## QUESTIONS

1. Describe the vision you had for your marriage when you got married. How close are you to that vision today?
2. What are your expectations for this book? What do you hope changes for your marriage after reading this book?
3. What comes to mind when you hear the word *oneness*?
4. Are you more likely to pray, "God, change my spouse," or "God, change me"? Why?



## 2.

# NO ORDINARY BATTLE

**OUR MISSION** to change the world began at a small church in Sandusky, Ohio. Not even a year of marriage had passed, and we were already expecting our first baby and beginning our first ministry. Barely in our twenties, we found ourselves serving a church in which most folks were somewhere between forty and ninety. It wasn't exactly the young, hip ministry we'd envisioned, but it was where we felt God wanted us, and we were eager to embrace it.

Our first youth event was a trip to Cedar Point amusement park. Only one student from our church showed up. Her name was Julie, and fortunately she brought two of her friends. That day marked the beginning of our relationship with three teenage girls who, along with us, embraced a vision that would transform the church. Within six months, the youth group grew to almost the size of our adult congregation. Students' lives were being changed, and we knew we were making a real difference.

From the outside, it looked like we had it all—from a young Christian perspective, anyway. We were broke, but being poor was just part of the package for fresh-out-of-college youth ministers. We were in love, expecting a healthy baby boy, and our ministry was thriving.

However, there was a darkness looming in the background that neither of us could see, a darkness that would turn us from partners into enemies.

**TRISHA:**

When we moved to Sandusky, I was only eight weeks from giving birth. Because we were both so young and naive, we decided it would be fine for Justin to leave for a youth trip five days after my expected due date. My mom was coming, and she had taken care of me for the first eighteen years of my life. I was sure she could take care of me for five more days.

As expected, our son Micah was born just five days after our one-year anniversary. *Thirteen* of our family members, from both sides of the family, came to stay with us in our two-bedroom apartment. Four days after I returned from the hospital, everyone except my mom went home, and Justin left for his trip.

I never expected the emotions I experienced while he was gone. Although I had given Justin permission to leave, anger boiled over in my heart every minute he wasn't there. As sleep deprivation and postpartum depression set in, Justin discovered a side of me he didn't know existed. Unknowingly, I allowed this frustrating and isolating experience to lay a foundation for my dysfunctional behavior for years to come.

**JUSTIN:**

Ordinary isn't a destination at which you suddenly arrive. Ordinary is subtle. Sometimes ordinary is a product of intentional choices.

But often ordinary occurs when a couple doesn't know what they don't know. That was the case with Trish and me.

We arrived in Sandusky in May, and I quickly developed a summer calendar for our student ministry. Trisha's due date was the middle of July, and I wanted to take the few students in our new ministry to a youth conference in order to build relationships and cast a vision for what I wanted our ministry to become.

We came home from Trisha's first doctor's appointment in Sandusky, and I got out the calendar. The doctor had told us that if Trish didn't go into labor, he would induce her. Knowing that gave us confidence to plan a youth trip for a week after Micah's birth. I would be gone five days, but Trisha's mom would be there, and Trisha assured me that she would be fine.

One of the things I've learned in over seventeen years of marriage is that the word *fine* is a four-letter word in marriage. When something or someone is fine, they are never really fine. I didn't know that then, and I took *fine* to mean, well, fine.

The week after Micah was born was so stressful. We were brand-new parents and had no idea what we were doing. We had thirteen people staying in our two-bedroom apartment. We were sleep deprived. We were getting advice from every member of our families on what we should do and how we should do it. My family was getting on Trisha's nerves. Her family was getting on mine. Tension was high, and everyone was walking on eggshells. Five days away couldn't come at a better time. My family left, Trisha's family—minus her mom—left, and then the next day, I left with ten students and two adults for a five-day trip to a Christian youth conference. I thought everything was fine.

After an eight-hour drive to the conference, we arrived and got checked in. I couldn't wait to call home to find out how Trisha and Micah were doing. I could tell when Trish answered the phone that things weren't fine. Trish was breast-feeding and had some discomfort the first week, but that day had been exceptionally bad. She was discouraged, Micah was cranky, and I was eight hours

away. I got the sense that she didn't miss me; she was just mad at me for being gone.

"I'm sorry that Micah is having trouble eating," I said.

"It's fine."

"Well, remember what we talked about. We don't have the money to buy formula, so you need to breast-feed as long as you can."

"I know! Why are you reminding me of something I already know? Do you think I'm trying to make feeding difficult? Do you think I'm intentionally causing it to hurt? Is that what you think?"

"No, I don't think that at all. I was just saying that we don't have the money for this not to work."

Silence.

"I'll let you go so you can get back to the students," she said, icily.

"The students are fine. I want to talk to you."

Silence.

I could hear sniffing that she tried to contain. I could picture the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I just can't believe you would leave us a week after Micah was born." She spoke quietly, almost as if she were talking to herself and allowing me to hear.

"You said it would be fine," I reminded her. "You said your mom would be there and it was only five days. I didn't leave you; I just went on a trip with students for *my job*. I'm sorry that I have a job and am trying to provide for our family."

Silence.

"I guess I'll let you go," one of us said.

"Okay," replied the other.

When we hung up the phone that night, a seed was planted in both of our hearts. We weren't in this together anymore. In Trisha's mind I was the enemy. I had left her. I had deserted her and our newborn baby. I wanted to be with the students more than I wanted to be with her.

To me, she wasn't supporting me as she should. She went back

on her word, and what she said would be fine wasn't fine anymore. She was mad at me for working. She was mad at me for providing. She was mad at me for doing something she told me I could do.

We had spent our entire dating life serving God together, and now, just a few months into our first full-time ministry and just a year into our marriage, I felt as if I and my ministry were on one side and she was on the other. The field had been set for us to move from teammates to enemies.

**TRISHA:**

When Justin and I got married, we had a vision that we would do life together and would change the world together through our ministry in the local church. But what slowly took place was a shift in our posture of doing life and ministry together, and we began to complain about how the other person needed to change. We went from "I love you so much; how can I serve you?" to "If you loved me, then you would do this for me."

We were now parents and were at a church where Micah was, seriously, the only baby in the entire church. Although I felt welcome at our new church, there wasn't one person I could connect with who was in my season of life or who was even my age, for that matter. I felt all alone.

I was struggling with how to be Justin's partner in ministry now that we had a baby. When Justin left for that youth conference just days after Micah was born, I felt like he didn't care that I wasn't with him. I couldn't just pop in and out of the office. I couldn't lead a small group or sing at church whenever I was needed because everything required a babysitter. We could barely pay the bills, let alone a sitter.

Neither Justin nor I knew this wave of change would bring about so much internal chaos for both of us. Instead of believing Justin was fighting for me, I slowly began to make him the enemy simply for not involving me in his life in the way I was used to.

I convinced myself that the only way he would value me as his wife and want to continue to be my husband was if I was doing ministry with him.

This was my insanity.

I was a twenty-one-year-old with an infant whose husband now worked full time, and I did not have one friend nearby to lean on. I missed Justin. I missed Team Justin, and I missed being young. I longed for friends—or at least *a* friend—I could enjoy this stage of life with, but Justin was the only person I knew. I was desperate for community. It made the ache to be closer to my family grow stronger by the day.

I'll never forget the day that Gary and Andrea Keener walked into our small church. They were our age, newly married, and had *BFF* written all over them! I ran up to them and introduced myself. They told me their names, and just like that, the college Trisha who had walked into a dorm room full of girls she didn't know barraged them with questions. It was friendship at first sight.

Gary and Dre (as I call her) were junior high sweethearts who grew up in the sticks of Ohio and loved everything about farm life. They moved to Sandusky for teaching positions: Dre taught home economics and Gary taught shop. She is bold, speaks her mind, and can cook Bobby Flay under the table, and she has a loyalty and trustworthy character to match. Gary is sweet, soft spoken, and can make or fix anything.

The four of us could not have been more different in personality or gifting, but what we did have in common was a passion to love others. God had heard Justin's and my cries and gave us the gift of community through the Keeners. We moved—for the fourth time—from our old apartment into an apartment right across the hall from theirs. It was as if we were back in the dorms with friends close by. It's a friendship we are still blessed by to this day.

Life was starting to feel balanced again. I wasn't putting as much pressure on Justin to come home every day for lunch. We

both had another outlet for community, and Gary and Andrea seemed to bring out the best in us. Although they didn't yet have children, it was a someday dream for them, and they loved living vicariously through us yet still getting to sleep through the night. Life was good—I thought.

**JUSTIN:**

A year after Micah was born, my parents invited us to go on vacation with them to Florida. I didn't think I should take vacation time so early into my new job, but this seemed like the break that Trisha needed. My family could help watch Micah, and Trish could have some relaxation time to herself. So Trisha and Micah flew from Ohio to Florida to spend the week on vacation with my parents.

About halfway through the week, I got a call from Trisha's mom. The way Trisha's mom said my name when I answered the phone, I knew something was wrong. She asked if Trisha was available, and I told her that Trish was with my parents in Florida on vacation. Trisha had called her mom earlier in the week to let her know of her plans, so this made the phone call even more bizarre. I asked what was wrong and if I could do anything to help. My mother-in-law shared with me the decision that she and Trisha's dad had made to get divorced after twenty-five years of marriage. She was crying, I was crying, and all I could think about was how devastated Trisha would be when she found out.

Trisha's mom was a wreck, and she didn't know whether she would be able to emotionally handle having this conversation with Trisha. She asked me if I would tell Trisha. I told my mother-in-law that I would do that. We both decided that my telling Trisha over the phone wouldn't be the best choice. I would tell her when she got back to Ohio.

Two days later I picked up Trish and Micah from the airport in Cleveland, knowing we had an hour's drive from the airport back to our house. I would use this time to explain to her what

her mom had shared with me, and then she could call her mom when we got home.

“I need to tell you something,” I said as we left the airport.

“Okay. What is it? What’s wrong? Just tell me,” she said, knowing something was off.

“Your mom called a couple of days ago and told me that she and your dad are getting divorced. I’m really sorry, but she didn’t want to tell you over the phone. She asked—”

“What! Are you kidding me? Divorced! You have to be kidding!” She began to cry. Micah began to cry. She was devastated. She was reacting just as I thought she would—until she started yelling at me.

“This is all your fault!” she said. “You moved me away from my family! You moved me six hours away. I wasn’t there for them when they needed me most, and it’s all your fault!”

*My fault? My fault!* I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “I didn’t move you away from your family. I *saved* you from your family! I rescued you. You should be grateful to me, not mad at me!”

Silence.

Instead of being there for her, I was resentful. Instead of looking to me for comfort, she looked at me with blame. We were no longer working with each other; we were blaming each other. This event began to shape our marriage in ways we didn’t realize at the time. We got really good not at fighting *for* each other but instead at fighting *with* each other. We were good at being enemies.

### **TRISHA:**

After being on vacation with Justin’s family, my young husband told me my parents, whom I’d only known as married and in love, were no longer either. I was shocked, heartbroken, and angry. The life, community, and ministry we had spent the past year building felt shattered in one conversation. If my parents’ marriage couldn’t last, then how would Justin and I last?

This thought process slowly ate away at my heart like a cancer, spreading into other areas of my life. In my effort to control Justin to protect myself, I was only pushing him away. We both started to believe that our marriage would be better if the other would change.

We became so accustomed to living like this that I had convinced myself that I was actually right all the time, and Justin was convinced I could never handle his true feelings and struggles. It was a cycle that crippled our marriage. We would make up and play nice for a while, but before long we would find ourselves fighting again over the same things we had always fought about. This dysfunction eventually became our normal way of married life.

## **JUSTIN & TRISHA:**

### **ONENESS BROKEN**

God designed and created us to be known by him and to be one with our spouses. That is his vision for marriage. That is his desire. But there has been a war against that oneness since the Garden of Eden. The initial battle in the Garden was lost, and oneness was broken:

The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the LORD God had made. One day he asked the woman, “Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?”

“Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,” the woman replied. “It’s only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, ‘You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.’”

“You won’t die!” the serpent replied to the woman. “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.”

The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too.

GENESIS 3:1-6

We know the story of Adam and Eve. For some of us, we've heard it so often that it has lost its punch. At a glance, it's a story that seems black and white. Adam and Eve eat the fruit, and there are consequences. But if we look closer, we see layers of dysfunction that provide a road map to the breaking of intimacy—not only in Adam and Eve's relationship, but also in our own marriage relationships.

In verse one, the first spiritual battle takes place. Satan moves in on the human relationship with a simple question: "Did God really say . . . ?" From the very beginning, Satan tapped into an unspoken fear that we as humans have: *God is holding out on us*. When we start questioning God's provision, God's goodness, and God's plan, it is easy to question God's Word. "Did God really say . . . ?" Eve's choice to believe God was holding out on her broke intimacy between her and God and between her and Adam.

Think about your own relationships. Can you remember a time when "Did God really say . . . ?" broke intimacy in your relationship with your spouse? It may not be a question that involves eating fruit, but Satan is shrewd and knows which questions to provoke you to ask yourself. Maybe your questions go something like this:

- "Did God really say I have to respect my husband even though he's disrespectful to me?"
- "Did God really say that I should love my wife as Christ loves the church even though she gives her best to everyone but me?"
- "Did God really say to not let the sun go down on my anger?"
- "Did God really say to be slow to speak and quick to listen?"

In Satan's attempt to trip up Eve, he simply posed a question and left Eve to answer it herself. Satan knew the effect the question would have on Eve. In that moment, Eve was focused on her own needs rather than taking the time to pose her own question, like, "Will my actions draw me closer to God or closer to my husband?" Often it's the small, simple, it's-just-a piece-of-fruit moments in our marriage relationships that can cause the most damage as we think only about what's best for ourselves.

### THE ENEMY OF ONENESS

Last October, our family was given free rein of a beach house in Florida during our kids' fall break. We had a blast playing on the beach and swimming in the clear ocean water. About halfway through our second day, I (Justin) started feeling numerous stings all over my legs and feet. I am somewhat of a hypochondriac, and my family tends to make fun of me at times for my tendency to believe I am dying from illnesses that don't even exist. So there was no way I was going to share the stinging sensation I felt in my legs. As the discomfort became more intense for me, my kids said that they were feeling something too. I was just pumped that I wasn't crazy.

Just then, this David Hasselhoff-looking guy came running down the beach toward us. He stopped by me and pulled his swim trunks up from his knee toward his upper thigh—honestly a little higher than I was comfortable seeing. On his thigh was a huge welt. Inside a bucket he was carrying a huge jellyfish. As we looked around, we noticed literally hundreds of tiny jellyfish in the water and washing up on the shore. The truth is that these jellyfish had been in the water the entire time; we only noticed them when they started stinging us.

That is how spiritual warfare works. There is a battle for your marriage all day, every day. Most of the time we only notice it after we get stung.

Marriage is physical and emotional, but more than anything

else, marriage is spiritual. We have an enemy who seeks to steal our hearts, kill our hope, and destroy our marriages. Our struggle against this enemy is what we know as spiritual warfare.

Spiritual warfare isn't something we talk about very much, especially as it relates to marriage. We see it most often as something TV preachers exploit, or something crazy guys talk about when they're claiming the end of the world is near. But just because I don't understand spiritual warfare and just because I don't always acknowledge spiritual warfare doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Maybe what you need to move past ordinary is to recognize the war being fought against you right now. God longs to shift the momentum of your marriage, and often that shift is found in recognizing the battle that your marriage is fighting every single day.

From the very beginning, there has been a war waged against oneness. Satan's mission was to destroy the intimacy Adam and Eve experienced with God and to destroy the oneness that God had created them to experience with one another. With one act, both were destroyed. The momentum of their marriage shifted. The result of their choice was hiding and blaming.

Look at Genesis 3:7-8: "At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the LORD God among the trees."

Adam and Eve's first response after succumbing to temptation was to hide. For the first time, they felt shame. For the first time, they felt as if who they were wasn't good enough and that they needed to cover up. They were exposed, vulnerable. They were naked, and they knew it. So they covered up and hid from each other. When they heard God, they knew they were caught, so they hid from him, as well.

One of the biggest enemies to extraordinary oneness is the desire to hide.

When we get married, we truly believe that the person we marry knows us better than anyone else. We have a desire to share our entire life with him or her. But as we go through life, we become tempted to hide. We feel ashamed, and we grab our fig leaves because we aren't comfortable being exposed—even to our spouses.

Somewhere along the way, we convince ourselves that we can hide from God, as well. If we attend church enough, if we pray enough, if we read our Bibles enough, then we think we can withhold parts of our hearts from God and this hiding won't affect us. But hiding withers away the oneness that God longs to experience with us.

In the Genesis passage, God finds Adam and Eve (as if they were ever really lost), and Adam does something that married couples tend to do when problems are exposed: he blames his spouse. "The man replied, 'It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it'" (Genesis 3:12).

Wait, who's the enemy again? Your spouse? No—we have one enemy, and when we blame each other, we become victims in our marriages rather than partners.

Maybe that describes your marriage today. Maybe it feels easier to hide from your spouse than to spend time with him or her. Everything that happens in your marriage is the other person's fault. Even though you know you have a share of the blame, you find it much easier to shift blame than to take responsibility. You are both victims, not partners. Trisha and I lived like this for years, and it almost destroyed our marriage.

But God created us to be one with our spouses. Anything short of that is merely ordinary.

#### **HOW WE TRY TO RESTORE ONENESS**

When our marriages drift toward ordinary, we often try to roll up our sleeves and fix them ourselves. We won't go down without a fight. We'll come up with a plan. We are going to make our

marriages better. We are going to try harder. We truly believe we can restore oneness. We try to better our marriages ourselves in three (misguided) ways.

### **I Can Change You**

If we are honest, probably all of us think we can change our spouses. Ladies, you truly believe that you can make your husband a better driver. You can make him more punctual. You can make him put his dirty underwear *in* the hamper instead of *next to* the hamper. If you complain enough, nag enough, and pout enough, you will be able to change your husband into the man you thought he was when you married him.

Guys, you believe you can change your wife. You truly think that you can make your wife want sex as often as you do. You think you can make her want to watch Chuck Norris movies. You really believe that if you are good enough or on time enough or clean enough, then she won't get sideways when you go golfing on Saturdays.

The truth is this: *we can't change our spouses.*

None of us has the capacity to change a human heart. We think that by trying to change our spouses' behavior we are changing their hearts, but that isn't true. By trying to change our spouses' behavior we are actually damaging their hearts. So many marriages exist full of bitterness and hurt. Why? Because we believe we can restore oneness by changing our spouses. One spouse is upset that he or she is never good enough; the other feels like all he or she does is nag and complain. Oneness slips further and further away.

### **Milestones & Achievements**

Another way we try to restore the oneness we were created to desire is through milestones and achievements. We have visions for our marriages, and we think that as we accomplish certain things, we will experience the intimacy that we know is missing. Couples think:

- When we make more money, then our marriage will be better.
- If we can just get out of debt, then we won't feel as much pressure, and our marriage will be better.
- When I get that promotion, it will be a game changer for us.
- When we buy that new house, it will make a lot of problems go away.
- If we could just have kids, that would bring us closer together.
- If we can just make it to our next anniversary, then I'll have hope for our marriage.

We create these if-then scenarios. If we could just have this or do that or accomplish this or build that or buy this or achieve that, *then* our marriages would finally be what we want them to be.

The problem is that none of these milestones or achievements brings the oneness we desire. There will always be another milestone. There will always be another achievement. When we look to an accomplishment or a stage of life to provide us with marital intimacy, we will always come back to ordinary.

### **New Expectations**

This last attempt at oneness is why so many marriages become ordinary. When we realize that we can't change our spouses and we grasp that our milestones and achievements haven't brought us the fulfillment we thought they would, we create new expectations for our marriages.

In other words, we *settle*.

We settle for a smaller vision. We resign ourselves to the idea that this is the best our marriage can be. We lower our expectations. We stop dreaming about the future. We give in to the reality that this is the best version of oneness that we can create. Our new expectations lead us to a more isolated marriage that is more about coexisting than thriving. Intimacy is reduced to how many

times a month we have sex rather than being fully known to our spouses. We come to believe that being fully known in our marriages isn't possible. Once upon a time we experienced intimacy and oneness in an extraordinary marriage; now we think of those days as a fairy tale.

### ACHIEVING ONENESS

Oneness in marriage is possible. It isn't easy, but it is possible. And it only comes as each spouse individually pursues God.

When you decide to stop trying to change your spouse and pursue God instead, and when your spouse decides to not measure the health of your marriage through milestones and achievements but rather pursues God, the distance in your marriage decreases. Pursuing God looks different for everyone, because all of us are in different places in our relationships with God, but there are two things that will be true for each of us who longs to pursue God. First, we will choose to think about God. This involves personal prayer, reading God's Word, and becoming aware of God's promptings and presence. Second, pursuing God involves a willingness to surrender our rights and our desires to God for his desires and his plan. It is an invitation to allow him to change us.

Individually, as you move closer to God, then you naturally move closer to each other. It's a pursuit in which the ordinary dies and the extraordinary begins to live.

If we would spend the same amount of time and energy asking God to change ourselves as we do asking him to change our spouses, our marriages would be anything but ordinary. It is so easy for us to apply truth to our spouses before we apply it to ourselves. It is easy for us to see the faults in them and to stay blind to the faults that live in us. Oneness in our marriages is restored as we ask—and *allow*—God to change us. Even if your spouse doesn't change, your marriage will be better because *you* will be changed.

A question we are often asked is, What if my spouse isn't pursuing God at the same pace as I am? What we have come to realize is that all of our journeys will look different. Your pursuit of God doesn't have to be at the same pace, just with the same commitment. Each of us will go through peaks and valleys in our relationship with God. It is our commitment to that journey that allows us to experience oneness the way God intended.

### **A BATTLE PLAN**

One of the things we have learned is that there is a huge difference between good intentions and being intentional. We said in the last chapter that most marriages don't intend to drift into ordinary. Ordinary is the by-product of the equation  $\text{time} + \text{unintentionality} = \text{ordinary}$ .

In order to move beyond ordinary, we have to be intentional. We have an enemy who is intentionally coming against our marriage relationships. We won't drift into extraordinary; we will have to fight for it.

$\text{Intentionality} + \text{time} = \text{extraordinary}$ . Here are two crucial ways you can fight the battle for an extraordinary marriage.

### **Pray for Your Spouse**

As a pastor, I (Justin) get paid to pray. Trisha and I have always believed in the power of prayer. We knew the importance of prayer. We prayed all the time. We would pray for small-group leaders. We would pray for people having marital problems. We would pray for people who came up after the Sunday service and wanted to rededicate their lives to Christ. We just never prayed for each other.

Looking back, I know how ridiculous this seems. How could we not pray for each other? I would pray for Trisha occasionally. It would go something like this: "Dear God, please prompt Trisha to not gripe at me when I get home tonight. In Jesus'

name, amen.” I didn’t consistently pray for Trisha and her needs, desires, and feelings. I never took time to lift her up to God as I should have.

If you want to change the climate of your marriage immediately, start praying for your spouse. Then you will realize that you are engaging the spiritual battle in your marriage rather than becoming a victim of it.

### **Pray with Your Spouse**

I read a statistic not long ago that shocked me: less than 8 percent of Christian couples say that they pray together on a regular basis. While that is shocking, it isn’t surprising. For some reason it is difficult to pray with your spouse.

Praying with your spouse is huge in fighting for his or her heart. This may feel weird at first and may not feel natural. There isn’t anything more intimate—including *sex*—than praying with your spouse and hearing your spouse pray for you. Our prayers to God are some of the most intimate conversations we have. We share our hopes, our dreams, our fears, our insecurities, our failures, and our successes with our heavenly Father.

When I pray with Trisha, I am allowed to hear her articulate the things in her life that are most precious to her. I am able to understand her more. I am invited into a part of her heart that is sacred. There is a bond and a connection that is formed through praying together that can’t be simulated or created in any other way. The Holy Spirit joins us and draws us closer together as we seek God with our spouses. This aspect alone has been a huge part of our journey, and we have heard so many stories from other couples who have chosen to share this part of their heart with their spouses and have experienced intimacy in ways they never thought possible.

Marriage is no ordinary battle. To overcome an ordinary marriage, you have to fight *for* your spouse, not *with* your spouse.

## QUESTIONS

1. Can you recall the very first argument in your marriage? If so, what was it about?
2. Can you remember a “Did God really say . . .” moment that altered the way you looked at your life and your marriage? Why was this moment so influential?
3. As a couple, do you live with an awareness that there is a spiritual battle for your marriage? How do you respond to that battle?
4. Do you feel comfortable praying with your spouse? Why or why not? Would you consider praying with your spouse for the next 30 days?