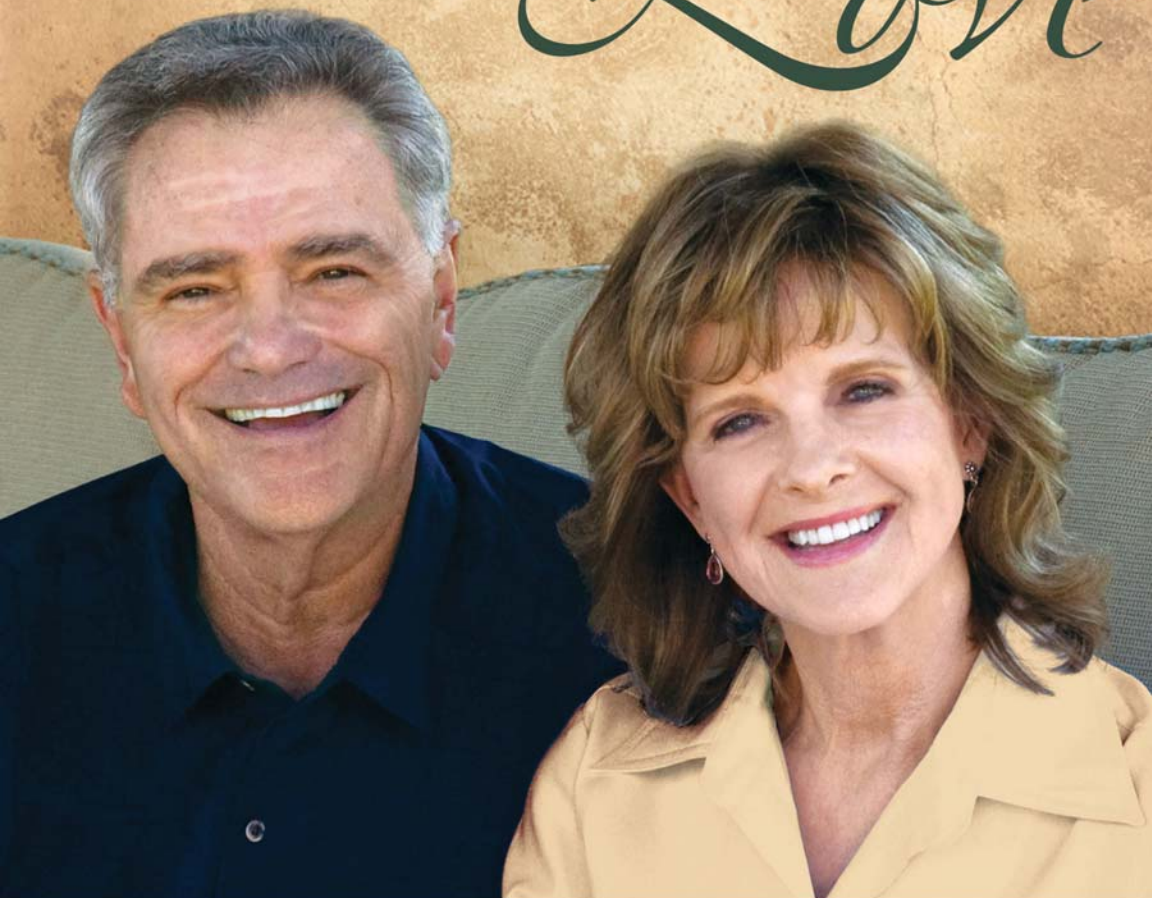


JAMES & BETTY ROBISON

CO-HOSTS OF TV'S *LIFE Today*

LIVING *in* Love



James & Betty Share Keys
to an Exciting and Fulfilling Marriage

Other Books by James Robison

True Prosperity

The Absolutes

The Soul of a Nation

A Dad's Blessing

Other Books by Betty Robison

Free to Be Me

JAMES & BETTY
ROBISON

LIVING *in*
Love

James & Betty Share Keys
to an Exciting and Fulfilling Marriage



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PRESS

LIVING IN LOVE

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*We dedicate this book to our three children,
Rhonda, Randy, and Robin,
and their spouses,
Terry, Debbie, and Kenny,
who are wonderful examples
of living in love.*

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Introduction

JAMES

Just in case you think Betty and I have a perfect relationship, let me share a story.

Before we started writing this book, we filmed a series on marriage for our *Life Today* television program. And of course, the night before we were going to tape a segment on how to communicate well with your spouse, we had what Betty calls a “heated discussion.” After we calmed down, I told her, “We’ll probably file for divorce while we’re teaching about love and marriage!” We laughed about it...kinda.

After nearly fifty years together, we still face frequent moments that test our communication and relationship. And it always seems to happen that we come under pressure anytime we try to help others.

As is often the case in marriage, our heated discussion started around a minor issue, something Betty had said to me about my performance on a plumbing repair at the house. I had worked all day to fix a toilet that wasn’t working right, because I thought doing this would really make her happy. But after hours of toiling, I still couldn’t get the blooming thing to work. I had even used duct tape, which every real repairperson knows fixes almost anything!

So while I was still in the middle of my plumbing challenge, Betty came by and said, “I’d just like to be able to go to the bathroom in *this bathroom*, since it’s the master bathroom!”

I found this statement offensive and shot back, not so sweetly, “Well, we’ve got another one in the house. Go use that one!” Betty gave me a less than complimentary look but didn’t respond.

After my feelings about her “insensitive” remark subsided, I got the brilliant idea to go to that other bathroom and see if it had the same make and model toilet. Sure enough it did, so I dismantled it and got the parts I needed to fix the first commode. After only a few minutes, I had the toilet put together and working like a charm. Feeling like a rocket scientist, I said excitedly, “Betty, I fixed it!”

“Well, you need to get that other toilet you took the parts from fixed too!” she answered.

That wasn’t the response I was looking for, and I got angry all over again. “I cannot believe I did all that work, and now you’re going to lecture me about a toilet that a month from now somebody might use.”

That started our discussion!

◆ BETTY

And it was a loud one! I knew it wasn’t a very nice thing to say to him. So I apologized. We do vent our feelings and air our laundry, but God’s Spirit enables us to have a sensitivity and respect for each other that allows us to stay committed and able to forgive and move on as a team.

But it took us a long time to get to this point. When we first married, I was a very good pouter. I didn’t want to confront James with anything, because I didn’t feel I had strong enough words to present my case. Over time I recognized the foolishness of not dealing with disagreements and misunderstandings and misstatements.

You may be thinking, Oh, you don’t have any idea what serious problems look like! All you argued about was a toilet that needed to be fixed?

I agree that arguing about a toilet may seem trite, but often it is the little things that mount up if you don’t communicate about them and confront each

other. Then they build up into a mountain, and the heart hardens, making it difficult to resolve more serious issues. And believe me, we've had more serious issues.

You need a sensitivity to each other that can come only from God. And when you approach a confrontation with a humble attitude, you just don't know what that might do for your relationship. It may open up the closed-off heart of the other person.

◆ JAMES

I know this was a silly thing—a broken toilet—but what Betty said hurt me because I felt disrespected. I felt like what I had accomplished wasn't appreciated.

◆ BETTY

I apologized because I realized I had not shown appreciation for James's hard work.

◆ JAMES

What was so meaningful about that heated discussion was that, because our confrontation was respectful and not accusatory, literally in only a few minutes, I was sitting in front of Betty, looking at her, and saying, "Is this not cool?"

What I meant is that over the years we have learned how to handle both serious and silly situations like this without Betty's going off to pout and my getting upset because we could not immediately settle the issue. We have learned how to communicate, vent, and openly share our heart. We know it's important to hear what the other person's heart is saying, not just the words coming from his or her mouth.

Betty and I have learned, and we are continuing to learn, to confront each other with the right attitude. We now know how to approach each other, not with a spirit of "I'm going to straighten you out," but rather, "Hey, I really may need to change because I don't understand this, and I need you to help me."

Ultimately, this is about placing our relationship, conflicts and all, before God and letting Him heal us.

◆ BETTY

The reason we've written this book is that many people say to us, "It seems that you two are really happy as a couple. What are the keys to your happiness?" The best answer we can give is found in the pages that follow. We invite you to join us for an extended discussion of what it takes to make a marriage that truly is sweeter every day.

◆ JAMES

After nearly fifty years we still have serious and, yes, heated discussions, but we enjoy an exhilarating, truly fulfilling marriage relationship. I believe with all my heart that the insights we share in this book can have a very positive impact on all your relationships and certainly on your marriage. Betty and I pray that you'll not be distracted or put this book aside but that you'll allow us to share what we have discovered, because it is possible to *live in love*.

PART I



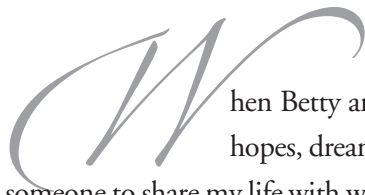
Beginnings



Expectations

They make or break a marriage.

JAMES



When Betty and I married, like every couple, we had certain hopes, dreams, and expectations. I was looking for love and someone to share my life with who really cared about me. Betty was looking for love, security, a family, and a home. Even more critically, in some ways she was looking for her identity.

I'm sure the same is true for you. When you decided to get married, you obviously felt it was worth dedicating your life to. You desired lifelong happiness, joy, and peace with your spouse, and you committed yourselves to each other with your actions, your emotions, and your words. And you both had certain expectations that your needs would be met by this other person with whom you were so deeply in love.

I like to illustrate this point by telling of a journey Betty and I took with our son, Randy, one autumn to see the beauty of the aspens as they changed colors in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. To get to a spot that offered a great view,

we had to drive on a steep, narrow mountain road that twisted and turned as it climbed through the Rockies. The traffic was extremely heavy. Randy was at the wheel, and without warning the car began to vibrate. He fought to keep the car on the road as it tried to veer right, toward a concrete barrier. There was no shoulder to the roadway, just a retaining wall, so Randy stopped the car safely in the middle of our lane. We realized then that we'd had a blowout on our right front tire, and now we were stuck. Traffic was flowing steadily to our left, and to the right a long line of cars was merging onto the highway just ahead of us. But an immediate danger came from our being stopped in the middle of the road. What if someone hit us from behind?

And then a miracle happened. Instead of an eighteen-wheeler bearing down on us with no chance of stopping, a police car pulled up behind us. The officer parked his car at an angle and turned on his flashing lights to alert drivers approaching from the rear that they had to go around us. The policeman stayed there the entire time we were stuck and protected us from harm.

Here's my point: Maybe you have a great marriage, or maybe your marriage is suffering. Maybe you're single and praying that God will send the right person your way. Maybe you're engaged and wondering what you're getting into. Regardless of whether you are in or out of a relationship, you have some ideas of what a marriage should look like.

When you get married, you expect it to be a wonderful journey. You expect to see the most beautiful things that life has to offer, like the stunning autumn leaves we were on our way to view in Colorado. But I can guarantee that somewhere along the way your relationship will stop running smoothly. Maybe you'll have a blowout or maybe just a slow leak. But eventually you'll have a flat tire on your marriage journey.

The challenge to your relationship might come on a winding mountain road, on an eight-lane superhighway, or on the neighborhood streets of daily life. But no matter where or when it happens, an unexpected test always comes.

Will you fall into worry about being hit by traffic and get so worked up

that you can't do anything to fix the problem? That's just going to get you run over.

Will you try to ignore the problem and keep going?

Will you get mad and blame the car for not moving you forward? That would be pointless anger.

Or will you trust the Protector, who's looking out for your marriage, and take the necessary action to get your relationship back on track?

Only you can decide.

When our tire blew out on that mountain road, we quickly realized that we had to get it fixed. And even though a policeman was protecting us, he couldn't fix the tire for us—we had to do it ourselves.

Because of the circumstances on that mountain road, we had trouble getting the spare tire out, so we wound up having our car hauled to a tire store. The police officer followed us all the way there.

As it turned out, it was a good thing we went to that tire store. When the manager looked at the other tires on our car, he noticed they were all worn and the sidewalls were weather cracked, conditions which were difficult to detect without putting the car on a lift. The tires could have blown out at any time. In order to stay safe and get our car back on the road to see those marvelous autumn leaves, we had to replace all the tires.

Many people marry with high expectations about experiencing the various colors of life, but a blowout can endanger the entire journey. When you have a blowout in your marriage, you may need to go to a professional counselor to get the other tires in your relationship checked. Sometimes those tiny undetected cracks create hazardous driving conditions.

Betty and I have always had a commitment to see things through, no matter what. You may be in a great relationship like that, or you may feel as if you've compromised. You may think that you've brought too much baggage along or that the past mistakes of your partner are too great to overcome. Or you may feel as if the wheels have come off your marriage.

I'm telling you that with God on your side and with a heart-determined effort on your part, all things are possible. You can get your marriage relationship back on the road to fulfillment—even if you have to replace all four tires. With a clear commitment to God and to each other, you can learn how to endure the difficulties and trials of your relationship. You can come to realize that those challenges are not the end of your love; they are simply a new mountain you can climb, if you desire to do so. Instead of looking at your difficulties as ruts or roadblocks, view them as opportunities to make your marriage even better.

In God you have a Protector who has your best interests at heart, and helpers are available along the way to assist you in repairing all the damages in your

*With God on
your side and with
a heart-determined
effort on your
part, all things
are possible.*

marriage. Don't give up! If possible, find help before your relationship blows up. As you read this book, you will discover that all things are possible with God.

If you're at the beginning of your marriage or looking forward to the day when you will be married, we trust you will find some ingredients here, some building blocks that are critically important for establishing a thriving marriage from the get-go.

If you've been married for several years, let me encourage you that real change is still possible and improvement is sheer joy. The essential components of a thriving marriage can be put in place *at any point* and *at any time* in a marriage relationship. If you're willing to do what it takes, it's never too late to start doing the right thing...and enjoy living in love.



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

What were your expectations for your marriage?

What challenges or potential blowouts do you see in your relationship?

How do you want to apply the promise “All things are possible with God” in your marriage?



Boy Meets Girl: How James Met Betty

Opposites really do attract!

JAMES

From all outward appearances, Betty and I never should have gotten together. We came from two different worlds with two very different life experiences. Hers was more typical and stable; mine was the complete opposite.

Growing up, I had no father and no family. Born to an impoverished, forty-one-year-old woman as the result of a forced sexual relationship, I came into this world in a charity ward. Because my mother did not have the means to care for a child, she sought foster care for me by placing an ad in a Houston newspaper.

A Southern Baptist pastor and his wife, Rev. Doyle and Katie Hale of Pasadena, Texas, took me in and gave me a secure home for the first five years of my life, but then my mother came back to reclaim me. She was so destitute she didn't have the money for bus fare when she picked me up. But not wanting

the Hales to know her true condition and not wanting to ask them for help, she took me on a city bus across town, and then we hitchhiked to Austin, where I lived for the next ten very difficult years.

I believe my mother loved me and wanted the best for me, but her own life was so unstable and uncertain that she simply didn't have the resources to give me proper care. We moved so often during those years that the concept of home had no meaning for me. My mother would often leave me with other people—many of whom I didn't know. Even now I clearly remember spending hours staring out a window and wondering if she would come back for me. It certainly wasn't the best way to learn about commitment, trust, and love. Everything I knew about relationships was programmed into me the wrong way.

Betty, on the other hand, was reared in a fairly stable middle-class home with a quiet, nonexpressive father and a strong mother who both tried to give a sense of security to Betty and her brother and sisters. Betty grew up going to church twice every Sunday and on Wednesday and Thursday nights for prayer, evangelism, and visitation. She sang in the choir, taught a junior girls' Sunday school class, and often sang duets with her sister Helen. When I first met Betty, I thought she was the sweetest—and certainly the purest—girl I had ever seen.

The two of us seemed a very unlikely match, but God had other ideas. Before we explain how we learned to live in love, Betty and I want to share some background on how we met.

HOW WE MET: JAMES'S STORY

The summer when I was fourteen, I went to Pasadena to spend a couple of weeks with the Hales, the family who had taken me in as an infant. By being with the Hales, I was able to compare their lives and relationships to the dysfunction I saw in my own family and in the dilapidated neighborhoods of Austin where I lived. I noticed the difference in commitment—in their commitment to each other and to God—and it impressed me.

During those two weeks with my foster family, I realized that in order to experience real meaning in life, I needed to commit myself to God and to a life of purpose. During a Sunday night service, after hearing the moving testimonies of several teenagers and through the tearful witness of Mrs. Hale, I publicly committed my life to Christ. About a week later I went back to Austin and did my best over the next year to live as a Christian.

Around that same time, for reasons I never quite understood, my mother married my biological father, Joe Robison, the man who had forced himself on her fifteen years earlier while, as a practical nurse, she was caring for his elderly father. Suddenly this alcoholic man was in our lives, which only made things more difficult than they already had been. I didn't know my father at all, and when he was around, he was usually drunk. He had a temper, and I learned to avoid him.

The spring after my visit to the Hales, my father got drunk and worked himself into a rage. He wrapped his hands around my mother's throat and choked her. Only when she passed out did he finally release his grip, thinking she was dead. Passing out saved her life.

A few days later my father, drunk again, verbally threatened my life. In fear I ran to get my .30-caliber rifle, which I had purchased with the hope of someday going deer hunting. I pointed the barrel at my father's chest and said, "If you so much as move a finger, I'll blow a hole in you big enough for somebody to crawl through." I know I would have done it. I believe the only reason he stayed perfectly still, cursing me all the while, was because the Hales and many of their church members were praying for me. Never underestimate the power of prayer! If he had moved, I would have pulled the trigger, and my life would have changed forever. Only a supernatural power could have kept my father still.

The tense standoff ended when the sheriff responded to my call for help and took my father to jail. Soon after this horrific experience, I went back to

The two of us seemed a very unlikely match, but God had other ideas.

Pasadena to spend the summer with the Hales. And that's when everything began to change for the better.

My first Sunday back in Pasadena I went to Memorial Baptist Church, where Reverend Hale was the pastor. Walking into the building through a side entrance, I was introduced to a brunette girl, about my age, wearing a yellow chiffon dress. My first impression was that she was cute and sweet, but I didn't dwell on this first encounter.

That evening, as I sat toward the back of the room during the Sunday night Bible study, I glanced several rows in front of me and saw the same girl, this time wearing a modest but flattering white dress and looking back at me with a transforming smile. I was spellbound by the dimples in her cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes, and her completely disarming innocence. But what I said to the boy next to me was, "She's got a great figure."

Her name was Betty Freeman. And I was captivated.

I saw Betty the following day at the church's Vacation Bible School, where both of us were helping the younger children as volunteers, and I gave her a ride home at lunchtime. Our first real date didn't occur until Wednesday, when I asked her out after the midweek prayer meeting. We went to the Grove, a popular drive-in similar to Sonic, to get a frosty mug of root beer. Later we spent some time talking in Reverend Hale's car, which he had loaned me for the occasion.

Having never been on a real date before, I didn't know that being alone in a car with a girl in an isolated location maybe wasn't the best idea. But since professing my faith in Christ the previous summer, I understood I had a new Father who said He was "well pleased" with me for accepting Jesus, and I was committed and determined to follow through with biblical purity and respect for this sweet girl I'd just met.

I hadn't grown up knowing God, but in the best way I knew how, I wanted His best for my life, including my relationships. Even as a boy I had determined that I wanted to marry a strong, uncompromising girl who had an obvious com-

mitment to moral purity. I also wanted a girl who had a sweet spirit, and the more I talked to Betty, the sweeter I realized she was.

As we began to date, I showed respect for Betty and told her I wanted to guard her purity. But like any teenage boy, I wasn't above testing the limits, and I knew myself well enough to realize there probably would come a time when I would say anything to get Betty to give in. But I was honest with her about that, and I cautioned her not to compromise. I told her that I never wanted to lose the respect I had for her and that we would really have to help each other remain pure. This level of respect helped reveal to Betty how real Jesus was to me, and her heart's desire to remain pure told me a lot about her as well.

When I returned home after our first date, I knew I'd gone out with a girl who was special in every way. I went to the bedroom the Hales had prepared for me, closed the door, and knelt by my bed as tears welled up in my eyes. *Thank You, God, for letting me meet such a pure girl, I prayed. She's so special.*

HOW WE MET: BETTY'S STORY

◆ BETTY

I grew up the third of four children, and sometimes I felt as if I got lost in the shuffle. I wanted to be noticed and made to feel special, but I didn't want to rock the boat. I was very bashful, insecure, and fearful, and I didn't have a lot of self-esteem. I felt insignificant. I tried to be as good as I could be so I would never cause a problem or get in the way. I thought if I did everything right and obeyed all the rules, I would earn favor.

I knew my parents loved me, although my dad wasn't very affectionate or very expressive. I think I hungered for more affection from him, but I didn't get it. When I was older and knew more about his background, I understood why he wasn't more demonstrative: he had never received affection from his parents.

My mom was a more dominating person because, I think, my dad wouldn't

lead in the home. She was forceful, and she intimidated me. I never felt very smart and was already pretty hard on myself. I struggled in school. Often I felt like hiding in a corner so no one would notice me and I wouldn't get criticized if I did something wrong. Mostly, I didn't want to disappoint anyone.

My older sister was a good student, and my mom gave her money whenever she earned straight A's, which she did quite often. Mother told me that if I made straight A's, then I would get some money too, but I never did. I worked at it and always did the best I could, but I would panic during tests and forget everything. So I felt I never met my mom's expectations. When I graduated from high school, I was just thankful I'd made it through.

When I was at church, though, I felt more accepted. I thought I could do good things there, and I liked being in that atmosphere and enjoyed the activities. My perspective on church was that if I did everything right and everything good, then God would love me; He'd accept me because of my good deeds. Even though I was a member of the church, I really didn't know Jesus.

When I met James, I was impressed. He was a good-looking guy and was so cool with his blue jeans, white T-shirt, and suntan. We hit it off right away and soon were spending most of our time together. He made me feel important and pretty, and I enjoyed being with him. My mom used to ask me if James didn't have someplace else he needed to be, because he was always at our house. We'd talk while I was doing my chores, and we got to know each other quite well that first summer, although James didn't talk much about his background. I think he wanted to put it behind him.

When the time came for James to return to Austin for the school year, he told the Hales he didn't want to go back. They assured him he was welcome to stay if he could get his mother's permission, but that seemed unlikely. She had cut off communication with the Hales after taking James back when he was five, and it was only after the incident with his father and the hunting rifle that she had allowed James to reconnect with them.

As I watched James and a friend of his board a Greyhound bus to return to

Austin, I began to pray—and prayed constantly—until I heard that he would be able to return. Two days later I rode with Reverend Hale to pick up James in Austin and bring him back to Pasadena for good.

James found it more difficult to leave Austin than he had imagined. His mother had left him a tear-stained note, saying she had cried all night. Her face was so puffy and blotchy from crying that she didn't want me to see her when Reverend Hale and I came to pick up James.

At the end of the summer, he enrolled at Pasadena High School as a junior, one year ahead of me.

Because I was very involved in church, I wanted James to love church as much as I did. He went to the activities to be with me, but because he was uncomfortable in crowds and group settings, he never became regularly involved in our church. He and I broke up once because I chose to go on a hayride with the youth group rather than on a date alone with him. But we were soon back together again.

The summer after James graduated from high school, I involved him in a weeklong series of revival meetings at the church, organized entirely by the youth group and featuring a dynamic sixteen-year-old evangelist, Daniel Vestal. At first James wasn't happy with me, because I had worked it out that he would accompany Daniel and introduce him from the platform each night. (Like me, James was shy and terrified of public speaking.) But the more time he spent with Daniel Vestal, hearing him quote Scripture and talk about the Bible and watching him preach powerful messages each night, the more James became inspired. By Friday night he had reached the point of making a life-changing decision about his future. I'll never forget sitting with the youth choir and hearing Reverend Hale announce to the assembly, "James feels that God has called him to be an evangelist."

Until then James had been extremely quiet and shy. But when God called him to preach, the transformation was so remarkable that we knew it was a miracle. His hunger for God's Word was kindled instantaneously, even more so

than when he had become a Christian, and his confidence in speaking publicly was simply amazing. It was as if he couldn't hold it back.

Even though James hadn't come from a Christian background, he seemed to have something I was missing. He had his imperfections, certainly, but he also had a relationship with God that I didn't understand and didn't know if I could ever have. But it was so real and personal that I wanted it.

As James went to college and he and I continued to date, I saw the reality of Jesus in his life, and it caused me to reevaluate my own relationship with God. On one of our dates, as we discussed our faith, James said, "Jesus is as real to me as you are, sitting next to me."

That was when a light bulb turned on in my head. "Jesus is not that real to me," I said. "He's someone I've heard about all my life, but He isn't *real*." I had a church relationship but not a real relationship with Jesus. I had all the form but none of the fellowship.

One night after James and I had attended a Saturday night service at another church, I was convicted that I really didn't know Jesus in a personal way. Later, when James let me out at my house, he prayed with me and did not try to tell me whether I was saved or not. He said, "You just go in and talk to God." I was so deeply moved by God's Spirit that I had trouble going to sleep.

*We decided early
in our relationship
that our commitment
to God and to each
other was imperative.*

The next day was Sunday, and in the morning I went through my typical routine. I dressed for church, taught my junior girls' Sunday school class, went to the choir room and put on my robe, and sang in the choir. Then my sister and I walked to the pulpit and sang a duet as special music before the pastor preached. When he finished his sermon and gave an altar call, to everyone's amazement I came out of the choir—robe and all—walked down front, kneeled, and invited Jesus into my heart. I stood up, took the pastor's hand, and said, "Brother Hale, I just gave my life to Jesus!"

“Betty,” he said, “you’re the best girl in this church! What do you mean?”

“Please stop telling me how good I am,” I said. “I’m tired of trying to be what I’m not. I just met Jesus.”

After that, James and I moved to a new place in our relationship. We made a total commitment to God and to each other, and after four years of dating, we affirmed our commitment by getting engaged.

When James asked me to marry him, we were only nineteen years old and filled with dreams of our future together. I looked forward to a lifetime of giving my love to him and of sharing every part of my life with him, including my strengths and my weaknesses.

We decided early in our relationship that our commitment to God and to each other was imperative. How else would we learn to stand firm when the going got tough? If we were always backing away from difficulties, we would never succeed at anything.

We stand on that commitment to this day, nearly fifty years later. We know that without commitment, without those forces in our lives helping us stand strong, we cannot love each other fully. It has taken a lot of trial and error, but we’ve learned valuable lessons along the way.

FINDING A FULFILLING RELATIONSHIP

◆ JAMES

Betty and I know that our marriage is blessed, and we honestly and truly enjoy each other. If you’ve watched our inspirational talk program, *Life Today*, you’ve seen us interacting in a joyful manner, revealing not only our love for God but also our genuine, joy-filled love for each other. This expression isn’t just a show we put on while the cameras are rolling; it’s who we really are.

It hasn’t always been that way. Like every couple, we’ve gone through some serious challenges in our marriage. In the process we’ve learned a lot of things about ourselves, about God, and about how to truly live in love. These are the

things we want to share with you, because we believe it is possible for every couple to live in a joyful, love-filled relationship.

In the pages that follow, we will tell more of the story of how a pretty girl from a secure and loving family and a boy from an impoverished and dysfunctional background ended up with an incredible fifty-year love relationship. We hope you'll be able to see that no matter what your background is, no matter what has happened thus far in your marriage, you can have a thriving, growing, fulfilling relationship.



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Take some time to recall how you met the love of your life.

In what ways are you and your spouse alike? In what ways are you completely different?

How has your commitment to God and to each other made a difference in your marriage?



Key Ingredients

What's in the heart is what really matters.

JAMES

*B*etty and I are convinced, through personal experience and observation, that if you want to live in love and have a successful marriage, three qualities are essential: *commitment, communication, and cooperation*. Unless you and your spouse have a total commitment to each other, open and honest communication, and a willingness to work together, you're in for trouble.

From the day we were married until this very day, Betty and I have been determined to have a joy that nothing could destroy—no circumstance, no problem, no disappointment or failure. Not that we haven't faced challenges over the years, because we've certainly had our share. But through all the ups and downs, we've stayed committed to each other and have been willing to embrace another important *C* idea: *change*.

Our journey of a joyful marriage has required continual transformation. When we first married, we didn't have a single glorious experience that has carried

us through nearly a half century. No, the more God imprints us and affects us, the more we're *being* shaped and changed. At sixty-six years of age and after forty-seven years of marriage, both Betty and I believe we are still soft clay in the hands of a mighty God. We are determined to remain yielded in His shaping hands.

What is the current attitude of your heart? Do you need to become more pliable in God's hands? Have you become hardened by the heat and pressures of life? Or are you still soft and malleable, still willing and able to be changed by the Potter?

As Betty and I submit to the necessary changes in life, we don't impose them on each other. Instead, we embrace them, and that acceptance overflows into our relationship. We still get frustrated with each other and have discussions, even heated ones. Our marriage wasn't made in heaven, but it's a relationship that heaven's power is still shaping. And this same power can shape your marriage as well.

Let me give you a bonus tip at no extra charge: no matter how much you are tempted to scrutinize your spouse, it's more important that you stay pliable yourself!

We encourage you to yield yourself to instruction and training just as an Olympic athlete or a person working toward a professional goal would yield to the rigors and discipline of training. In any pursuit of excellence, you must submit to the processes of training, improvement, and change. We understand this in athletics and music and dance, but sometimes we forget the same principles apply to marriage.

DO YOU WANT TO GET WELL?

What do you really want for your marriage? Are you satisfied with the status quo, or do you want more?

A story from the life of Jesus relates to these questions. One day He en-

countered a disabled man at the pool of Bethesda.¹ This man had been lying by the water for a long time—thirty-eight years—within sight of the pool and its restorative powers. But he had never found a way to get into the water at the proper time, when healing would occur.

When Jesus saw the man, He asked him an interesting question: “Would you like to get well?”

On the surface this seems like a silly question. Why wouldn’t the man want to get well? But Jesus knew that with healing and restoration would come new responsibilities. Was the man willing to do what it would take to be healthy and stay healthy?

Here’s where the story strikes close to home. If your marriage is something less than what you had hoped for or expected, do you wish to get well? Do you really want to communicate and work together better? Do you want to know each other better—physically and emotionally? Do you want to grow spiritually as a team so you can better advance the kingdom of God?

I’m certain you have ideas and suggestions for changes your spouse could make, but the “would you like to get well” question is not for your spouse. It’s for *you*. Are *you* willing to change? Are *you* willing to do what it will take to pick up your marriage from the ground and get it moving forward again?

In our years together of life and ministry, Betty and I have observed firsthand what statistics reveal: many people—perhaps *most* people—are not happy in their marriages. They’re simply hanging in there, keeping a stiff upper lip, and letting the rough end drag. Many people stay married only for the sake of their children or for some other reason, but they are not for one moment enjoying the relationship they’re trying to hold on to.

This breaks my heart.

It also brings us back to the question that Jesus asked the man at the pool of Bethesda: “Would you like to get well?”

I believe it is possible to face every marriage challenge in true harmony of heart and to win the battle in every area. Whether your struggles are with money,

sex, kids, parents, faith, or what color to paint the bedroom, God wants you to have success in your marriage. Don't misunderstand me: you will not always win instant victories, and some struggles may last until death. But you can be delivered from recurring defeat if you face those challenges with a commitment to God and to each other and communicate openly and honestly.

I've experienced some instantaneous deliverance at times in my life, and I like it that way! But most victories come progressively as we learn to train our appetites and tame our flesh. Discipline is a pain, but it's necessary for a meaningful life.

In this book we're going to ask you to be honest about yourself and the condition of your marriage. It's only when you honestly face reality that you can hope to be honest with your mate. Our desire is to offer you hope, encouragement, and a vision for how wonderfully blessed your marriage can be. In order to do that, we must be truthful with you about what it's going to take.

CHANGE BEGINS IN YOUR HEART

I know this may disappoint you greatly, but this book is not about changing your husband or your wife. No sirree! Nor is this about following ten rules or seven steps for a better marriage. Real, lasting change cannot be imposed from the outside. It has to happen inside of us. In the words of Jean Sullivan, a twentieth-century French writer and priest, "Unity cannot be imposed from without... Every message that does not ripen in the individual conscience is dead."²

I like that image of ripening, because it brings to mind the natural process that makes fruit edible and delicious. There are some external steps that can be taken to help fruit ripen—for example, ethylene gas is used to ripen bananas—but those procedures only mimic the natural, internal process of the fruit itself. The best fruit ripens on the vine or on the tree through a normal maturation process.

Growth in a marriage is very much like the ripening of fruit: it has to hap-

pen on the inside before it will ever be seen on the outside. Qualities like commitment, trust, and concern are all interior traits that cannot be imposed on a person or a marriage relationship. How would you force a husband or a wife to be trustworthy or caring? These types of things have to come from inside a person or a relationship before they can become the foundation for a thriving marriage.

Even after forty-seven years of marriage, I'm still committed to myself and my own interests, but I'm equally committed to Betty and to our relationship. I'm also committed to making the necessary changes to become a better husband and a better person. That's because I've learned that in looking beyond myself to the well-being of Betty and our relationship, I have the greater possibility of achieving my own dreams.

That's why this book is as much about your inner transformation as an individual as it is about what you as a couple can do to strengthen your marriage.

Ideally, you and your spouse will read this book together, but the starting place for change will always be in your own heart.

◆ BETTY

I agree that change has to start in your own heart. And I think that can look a little different for the husband and the wife. As a woman I've seen that it's easy to enter marriage with a mothering attitude: "I love him, but he has a lot of things that need changing, and I'm just the one to do it." Another temptation is to think that your husband isn't quite stepping up to his proper leadership role, that he's not quite as committed to God as he should be.

Because women naturally want to be helpful, they have a legitimate need to feel needed. Often they think, *I can help him change or perhaps even make him change*. Trust me, that rarely happens! If that's your attitude, you're starting off on the wrong foot. First, you're unlikely to succeed, and, second, if you do change your husband, it won't be the change you want. Then you really are in a mess. You will have actually positioned yourself in the leadership role, when

in fact most women find their greatest peace, joy, and security when the husband leads wisely.

For example, if a wife bosses or nags her husband or puts him down because he's not spiritual enough, that's only going to make him draw back even more. I think I saw some of that in my parents. My mom thought she could make my dad feel ashamed to the point that he would want to take on more leadership and want to go to church with the family. But I believe it only made things worse.

The best way to help a husband? Pray for him. God has to be the One to change him or inspire him to be a godly leader.

The principle that meaningful change always begins with oneself actually applies to both husbands and wives. Before you start visualizing changes in your spouse, you need to allow God to change you. Then, when your spouse sees the

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Pray for him.*

genuine change in you, he or she will come to realize that a true heart change is desirable and beautiful to behold.

Early in our marriage I could see James's imperfections (isn't it always easier to see flaws in someone else?), but I was determined to keep my own imperfections hidden. That was mostly out of fear—fear that I wouldn't be accepted or that I wouldn't be loved—but it manifested itself as pride.

For example, at church one day we were asked to write down some of our sins. I couldn't think of any of my own, so I wrote down James's failures. That's pretty arrogant, but that was my focus at the time. Until we can be honest with ourselves, until we can face our own shortcomings, sins, and failures, we'll be stifled (and I was), and we won't be able to go anywhere in our walk of faith.

As you read the following chapters, from time to time you may have to set aside a natural human tendency to ask, "But what if my spouse..." Of course there will be plenty of things for you and your spouse to work on together, but real change always begins with you and the transformation of your own heart.

When transformation and healing take place in the human heart, the result is always an overflowing of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation in relationship. Inner transformation will not only make you a better mate, but it will also make you an inspiration to your spouse.

Our desire is to connect with you at whatever point you are in your marriage and to show you what's possible. In other words, no matter where you are, we have a vision of where we believe you can go. Our hope is to show you enough from our relationship to cause you to want to get your own marriage on a solid footing.



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

What do you really want for your marriage?

How would you evaluate the commitment, communication, and cooperation in your relationship?

What are some changes you should consider that would help your marriage thrive? (Remember: it is always wise to look openly at your own life first.)