

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

What did you Expect?

REDEEMING
the realities of
MARRIAGE



What Did You Expect? Redeeming the Realities of Marriage

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PULLING WEEDS

Marriage really is just a long-term exercise in gardening. If you've done any gardening you know there simply aren't any shortcuts. When you drive by that house festooned with gorgeous flowers of a wide variety of colors and kind, tell yourself that what you are looking at is hard work. Gardens begin with hard work. Clearing the land isn't fun, but it's essential. Digging holes for the seeds isn't enjoyable, but it, too, is a necessary step. The work of regular watering and weeding is also a necessity. Pruning off wilted flowers and dead leaves is necessary for plant health, too.

Why is it that we don't expect our gardens to just grow by themselves—you know, from weedy land to lush garden—yet we expect our marriages to blossom beautifully without the daily work of pulling up weeds and planting seeds? I must confess that I just don't get it. I don't know why we think that the most comprehensive and long-term of all human relationships can stay alive and thrive without the same commitment we make to our gardens. Perhaps one of the fundamental sins that we all commit in our marriages is the sin of inattention.

Did you ever drive by that house (maybe it's yours) where the garden was planted by an impatient or lazy gardener? You can see some evidence of flower life, but the plants are not healthy, and the view is surely not pretty! I think there are many, many marriages just like that. They were not planted well, and they haven't been tended well since. Let me stop and ask you right here: is your marriage in some way a picture of neglect? Was it planted well? Has it been weeded and watered with regularity? Have you lacked the motivation to do the hard work of seeding and weeding and then stood back wondering why things don't look prettier?

COMMITMENT 2

This chapter and the next are a call to take a gardener's approach to your marriage. You have to be committed to pulling out weeds and planting seeds, or you will simply not have the marriage that grace makes possible.

WELCOME TO MY WEED GARDEN

I couldn't help thinking, "How could someone live like this?" Sam and Sarah always seemed to be in a rush and to be too busy. Maybe the biggest weakness in their marriage was impatience. They seemed to want too much too soon; they both worked long hours so that they could acquire all the things they had decided they needed in order to enjoy the "good life." Their impatience ("got to have it now") kept them too busy. Sam seemed too busy to "romance" Sarah. No, I don't mean extravagant vacations to exotic destinations or once-in-a-lifetime gifts. He didn't do the little things—a daily morning hug before leaving the house, a silly card with an "I love you" note, an unexpected dinner out, a "for no other reason than I love and appreciate you" bouquet of flowers, or actually saying, "I love you"—on a regular basis.

They had little time for real look-you-in-the-eye conversation. Sarah knew that little things were becoming big things that could grow into huge, destructive things and that she needed to talk about them, but there never seemed to be time. Oh, she would drop hints; she was good at dropping hints, but Sam wasn't good at picking them up. More and more Sarah saw Sam as preoccupied and clueless. More and more it seemed that the kind of conversation they needed to have wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

All this made for a minefield of little conflicts. No, not "get the missiles out of the silo, this is war" battles, where there is more angry noise than actual communication. Sarah and Sam seldom screamed; they didn't have time for things to escalate to that level. But, because they weren't talking and because their relationship lacked unity-motivating tenderness, they disagreed all the time. They knew when going into their marriage that they got up on different sides of the universe each morning. These differences had the potential to make their relationship exciting, engaging, and mutually growth-producing. It also meant that theirs was a relationship that would need constant weeding. Disagreeing

Pulling Weeds

all the time made their life together complicated, discouraging, and exhausting, so they both developed habits of staying clear of conflict, which often meant staying clear of one another.

Their busyness constricted their shared spiritual life down to an hour and a half on Sunday morning. They didn't read or pray together. Conversations about matters of faith seldom came up. In fact, there was little Godward motion in the marriage at all. They almost never talked about the blessings and calling in their relationship with God. When spiritual things came up, the conversation was more institutional and schedule-oriented. They would look at their schedules and briefly discuss whether they could participate in an event or a ministry.

It was hard for them to make any long- or short-term plans with one another. There were some big decisions that they needed to think through together, but they never seemed to be able to find the time. There were decisions that needed to be made about Sarah's continuing to work and whether they were going to continue to live in their present house. Because they were not talking these things through with one another, they began to develop individual thoughts about them. As these differences began to seep out, discussing the important decisions became all the more distasteful.

As it always does, the distance and coldness in their relationship made its way into their sexual life. Going to bed at night wasn't typically done together, and when it was, it wasn't typically warm. They didn't end their day in a moment of tenderness or with expressions of love. In fact, going to bed was often quite silent. Sam would plop into bed, roll over, and begin to sleep, while Sarah was still sitting up reading. Or Sarah would close her eyes while Sam was still across the room writing Facebook responses.

Sex is not the fuel of a good relationship; it is the expression or fruit of one. So it is impossible not to drag the character and quality of the relationship into this moment of nakedness and vulnerability. Sam wasn't attracted to Sarah as he once was; she had become a distant friend. And when they had sex, Sarah battled with feelings of being used. As sex became more mechanical and unfulfilling, it became less frequent. Yet, their lack of good communication made it seem impossible to talk about this delicate topic.

COMMITMENT 2

Sam and Sarah were not in a disastrous marriage, but they were in a very weedy one, and the weeds were about to choke the life out of the love that was once there. But don't be too hard on them. We agreed we are all "weedy" people who need to pull personal and relational weeds daily so that the flowers of love and grace may grow. Sinners (which, in case you forgot, all of us are) always drag their sin into their marriages. Weeds of thought, decision, desire, motivation, word, and action cannot be completely avoided this side of heaven, so pulling weeds is the necessary commitment of any good marriage.

JEREMIAH AND YOUR MARRIAGE

God's words of commission to Jeremiah have a powerful and practical application to your commitment to a daily lifestyle of marriage reconciliation. Yes, I know that God's call to Jeremiah is individual and specific, since he was being called as one of God's prophets. It is not God's call to Jeremiah that is interesting and helpful; it is the content of the call. Embedded in God's words is a model for how real and lasting change takes place. It is wonderfully helpful for diagnosing and correcting your marriage in the places where both are needed.

The words are brief but beautifully and accurately descriptive: "See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). If change was to take place in Israel (and it was desperately needed), God is saying that this is how it will have to happen: pluck up and break down, plant and build. God is saying that change always has two sides to it: *destruction* and *construction*. Change is needed because there are things in you, or in your situation or relationship, that need to be uprooted or torn down, and if change is actually going to be change, there are new things that need to be planted or built in the place of what was uprooted and torn down.

For your marriage to be healthy, you must have *destructive* and *constructive* zeal. I know that this sounds funny, but for your marriage to be what it was designed to be, there are things that need to be destroyed. But, like the problem of weeds that keep jutting their heads out of once-clear ground, this destructive agenda cannot be a one-time commitment. In some way, there are things, little and big, in the way

Pulling Weeds

of what our marriages should and could be. I am going to suggest what some of these may be, but it is important that you know that what I am giving you is a general, pump-priming list that you need to expand and apply to the specifics of your own marriage.

Selfishness

Maybe it's a leap for the best cookie, a quick movement toward the best seat in the TV room, or controlling the flow of the conversation with friends. Perhaps it is pouting so you get to go to the restaurant you want, arguing too hard to make sure you win, or doing something nice, but making sure that the other notices. Maybe it's being too busy to be bothered, not volunteering to help, or taking offense too easily. Perhaps it's wanting the one who hurt you to hurt as well, presenting yourself as more spiritual than your spouse, or taking your good old time when you know the other is waiting. Maybe it's refusing to forget what you say you have forgiven, manipulating a bit to get your own way, or being less than candid because you just don't want to have the conversation. Perhaps it's being so busy taking care of yourself that you have little time to care for the other, wanting from him or her what you are unwilling to give in return or making more demands than concessions.

It really is there in all of us—selfishness—because it is the DNA of sin. Perhaps nothing is more destructive in marriage than this. Perhaps it is the root of all the dumb and nasty little things we do to one another. Maybe it is the reason we make those big, disastrous choices that have the potential to end marriages. Doesn't Genesis 3 point us in that direction? At the bottom of it all, what is wrong is that we want our own way, and, in wanting our own way, we want to be sovereign over our little worlds, making sure that what we want is exactly what we get.

All this is a horrible reversal of God's design, so it will never work. We were constructed as social beings, made to live in vertical communion with God and horizontal communion with one another. Nothing works in life (let alone in marriage) when the human community is comprised of a bunch of self-appointed little sovereigns seeking to set up their own little kingdoms. That way of living precludes relationships and guarantees war. The other-centeredness that we were designed for and that God uses to rescue us from us is the only way of living that

COMMITMENT 2

makes us able to live with one another in respect, appreciation, and peace.

Selfishness is like liquid clay; it will shape itself to the contours of whatever vessel it is poured into. You and I aren't necessarily less selfish than other couples around us; we are differently selfish. Since none of us is sin-free, we all need to look for evidences of the DNA of selfishness shaping the way we think, desire, act, and respond in our marriages. This is a weed with a huge root system and the vitality to suck the life out of marriage.

But don't be discouraged or overwhelmed. As I said earlier, the cross was specifically designed to free us from our slavery to ourselves. Grace is a can opener. It alone has the power to free us from the vacuum-sealed can of our selfishness. So where are the weeds of selfishness in your marriage? How are you doing at finding them and pulling them?

Busyness

There is no doubt about it: too many of us are trying to have hundred-dollar conversations in dime moments. Too many of us have left little time in our schedules for meaningful conversation, tender connection, and focused problem solving. Too many of us have little time for relational reflection and introspection in our marriages. Too many of us are doing marriage on the fly. Marriage, too often, is what we do in between all the other things we are doing that really determine the content and pace of our schedules. But marriage doesn't function very well as an in-between thing, and marriages surely don't tend to thrive when we leave them alone and ask them to grow on their own. A marriage that is going to grow, change, and become increasingly healthy needs cultivation. Like a garden, it doesn't do well when it is being neglected.

So, why are we so busy? There may be many answers to that question, but let me suggest one that is particularly true of Western culture. The answer may surprise you: *materialism*. I think we all have been influenced by the materialism of Western culture, which says that happiness and fulfillment are to be found in material things. If you are a Christian, you would say that is wrong and that you do not believe it. But that does not discount the fact that the influence is very powerful, and the evidences of its seduction are in all of our lives in some way.

Pulling Weeds

The constant pursuit of bigger and better material things sucks away our time, energy, and relational vitality. We not only have to work way too much to acquire material things, but once we have them, we are enslaved to the responsibility to maintain them. And with all our acquiring, the things we have acquired don't satisfy the longings of our heart. So we go out and get more, as if we are running a race that has no finish line.

Many of us live in houses way bigger than we actually need. Many of us have closets that are stuffed with clothing we seldom wear. Many of us are spending way too much money on restaurants, entertainment systems, big vacations, and luxurious cars. And if that does not describe you, perhaps this will: almost all of us are living beyond our means in some way.

Again, because it is built on a lie (material things can make us happy), materialism can't and doesn't work. It leaves us empty, in debt, and addicted, while taking our time, attention, and energy away from the most important human relationship in all of life. I cannot tell you how many times I have had a husband or wife say to me, "I would love to do these things [things that keep a marriage healthy], but I simply do not have the time." Could it be that we work too much because we want too much, and we keep working and keep wanting because what we are looking to for satisfaction simply does not have the capacity to satisfy us? Meanwhile, the weeds continue to grow, and our marriages suffer as a result. Could it be that you are too busy? What keeps you too busy or too exhausted to address the struggles of your marriage and to do the good things that make your marriage grow?

Inattention

Think of your physical body. Healthy people are healthy because they pay attention to their bodies. They pay attention to what they eat. They pay attention to signs of illness or disease. They pay attention to the need for regular exercise. They don't expect to be healthy without paying attention and responding to what they see and feel. I am deeply persuaded that many marriages get to an unhealthy place simply because they have been neglected. Sadly, many of us are better at responding to crisis than we are at working on prevention. We are all guilty, in some

COMMITMENT 2

way, of taking our marriages for granted and, in so doing, taking one another for granted.

Here's how it tends to happen. Courtship is all about attention, because you are trying to win the other person. You pay careful attention to his or her likes and dislikes. You quickly learn what responsibilities he carries and what his schedule is like. You listen for the tone of her voice, and you examine the expression on her face. You study how he responds to various situations. You pay attention to what tends to upset her and what has the power to bring her joy. You learn where he needs support and encouragement. You learn what she finds comfortable and what she considers to be difficult. You become a student of his personality, tastes, politics, theology, family, history, and dreams for the future. You do all this because you are committed to know her and know her well, and you are committed to know her well because you want to win her.

Now, none of this is wrong in itself. True and lasting love is *knowing*; that is, it is a commitment to love another in ways that are specific to who he or she is and what God has called him or her to do. But it is very telling that this positive attention to the other and to the health of the relationship tends to wane once the person has been "won." This has more of the feel of a hunt than it does of a marriage. It is the sad dynamic of, "I don't have to pay attention to you anymore because I now have you." Sure, few people consciously say that to themselves, but it is the way many of us actually end up living with one another. We begin to relax too much and quit working as hard, so our marriage begins to suffer. There are not many couples fifteen years into marriage who would say that their relationship with one another is more understanding, more unified, and more loving, giving, and serving than it was when they first got married. Few would say that their marriage is more of a tender, intimate friendship than it has ever been. But many couples look back on courtship and wonder what happened. Remember: a healthy marriage is a healthy marriage because, by God's grace, the people in that marriage never stop working on it!

Is your marriage suffering from inattention? Have you become comfortable with taking one another for granted? Are you neglecting the work that is necessary to keep your relationship healthy?

Pulling Weeds

Self-righteousness

Do you welcome those moments when your husband or wife approaches you with a criticism or concern about something you said or did? Are you glad that God has placed you next to someone who helps you see yourself with greater accuracy? Do you embrace and act on the thought that you could be a better husband or a better wife? When you are approached with a criticism or concern, do you ever redirect the conversation, working to convince the other that you're not the only sinner in the room? Have you actually invited your spouse to confront you in places where he or she thinks it is needed? Do you ever blame your words or behavior on your husband or wife? When you feel a twinge of guilt, do you work to relieve your guilt by self-atoning arguments for the rightness of what you said or did? How active is your "inner lawyer," internally arguing in your defense, even as the other person is speaking? Have you tended to think that all the weeds in your marriage were brought in by your spouse?

I was there—self-righteous—but I did not know it. I was an angry man, but I simply did not see myself with anything approaching accuracy. In fact, I was quite hurt when Luella would characterize me as angry, and I was quite convinced that she was a discontented wife. Once (and this is humbling to admit) I actually said to her, "Ninety-five percent of the women in our church would love to be married to a man like me!" Can you believe it? I was convinced of my own righteousness and, therefore, convinced of my innocence. Oh, by the way: Luella very sweetly informed me that she was in the five percent!

What about you? Has self-righteousness kept you from weeding your marriage? Have you failed to keep the soil of your marriage clean, so that good things may grow, because you don't think you have any weeds? What thoughts, desires, motives, goals, choices, words, or actions need to be uprooted if your marriage is ever going to experience what God's grace makes possible to experience?

Fear

You and I are probably more motivated by fear than we think. Fear is most often not an experience of trembling dread. It is most often not an experience of hand-wringing anxiety. Fear is most often a way of look-

COMMITMENT 2

ing at your world that shapes the thoughts of your heart and, because it does, structures the way you respond. Perhaps your struggle is with the *fear of failure*. Perhaps you spend too much time thinking about the “what ifs.” Perhaps you are all too skilled at conceiving the bad things that may result if this or that happens. Perhaps you have spent so much time meditating on and preparing yourself for potential difficulties that you unwittingly fulfill your own prophecies. Maybe you are not actually responding to your spouse based on what he is doing but on what you are afraid he might do.

Or maybe, for you, it’s the struggle with *fear of man*. Perhaps you’ve attached too much of your inner sense of well-being, your security, and your hope to your husband or your wife. Maybe you are all too skilled at riding the daily roller coaster of his responses to you. Perhaps you work too hard to read his emotions. Perhaps what he thinks simply means too much to you. Maybe she is too able to make or break your day. Perhaps you work too hard to please her. Maybe her affirmation means more to you than it should.

I am persuaded that fear of man is a huge issue in the struggles of many marriages. I think that many of us are trying to get from our husband or wife what we will only ever receive from God—peace. Desires for acceptance and respect are not wrong in and of themselves. These desires remind us that God designed us to be social beings. We were made to live in community. Yet, it must be said that although the desire for acceptance and respect is not wrong, it must not rule our hearts. When these desires rule our hearts, they cause us to turn our husband or wife into our personal messiah, something that never results in good things in our marriages.

Is fear a weed that needs to be pulled out in your marriage? Is there a way in which your husband or wife has become your replacement messiah? Are you so afraid of failure that it keeps you from doing with courage the things God has called you to do in your marriage? Do the “what ifs” keep you from living in your marriage with joy in the here and now?

Laziness

It’s hard to admit, but laziness is a big issue in our marriages. We know that we shouldn’t go to bed angry, but it seems that it will take too long

Pulling Weeds

to solve our conflict. We know that we need to clear up this morning's misunderstanding, but it won't leave us much time to relax before bed. We know that we are not on the same page financially, but working it through simply isn't very exciting. We know we need to discuss what is happening in our sexual relationship, but we simply don't want to face the uncomfortable nature of that conversation. You know that you are bitter, but there just doesn't seem to be time in your schedule to examine and confess it. You know that things are not right, but you tell yourself you should wait for a better moment. You walk away from an argument, and you know you should go back and ask for forgiveness, but you don't know what you will get into if you do.

It's a fact: laziness is rooted in self-love. It is the ability to take ourselves off the hook. It is the willingness to permit ourselves not to do things we know we should do. It is believing that good things should come our way without our having to work to get them. It is opting for what is comfortable for ourselves rather than what is best for our spouse. Laziness is always self-focused and self-excusing. Laziness is undisciplined and unmotivated. Laziness permits us to be passive when decisive and loving action is needed. Laziness allows us to avoid when we should be engaged. Laziness expects more from others than we require from ourselves. Laziness demands good things without being willing to invest in them. I am persuaded that laziness is a much bigger deal in our marriages than we have tended to think. Check out these proverbs.

I passed by the field of a sluggard,
by the vineyard of a man lacking sense,
and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns;
the ground was covered with nettles
and its stone wall was broken down. (Prov. 24:30-31)

Isn't this exactly what we have been describing? Your marriage is inflicted with difficulty because you have failed to act to keep it what God intended it to be.

The desire of the sluggard kills him,
for his hands refuse to labor. (Prov. 21:25)

COMMITMENT 2

Often, marriages are troubled by discontent and unfulfilled desire. Proverbs connects these to laziness. Because you are not doing the hard work of following the command principles of God's Word, the good desires that you have for your marriage remain unfulfilled. This heightens your discontent, adding more trouble to your marriage and making it even harder to deal with the things you must deal with for your marriage to be what God designed it to be.

The sluggard will not plow by reason of the winter;
Therefore he shall beg in harvest, and have nothing.
(Prov. 20:4 ASV)

The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside!
I shall be killed in the streets!" (Prov. 22:13)

These proverbs capture the excuse dynamic of laziness. We take ourselves off the hook by giving ourselves plausible reasons (excuses) for our inactivity.

The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns,
but the path of the upright is a level highway. (Prov. 15:19)

Where does laziness in marriage lead? It leads to disappointment, discouragement, discontentment, and future trouble. In a fallen world, very few things are corrected by inaction.

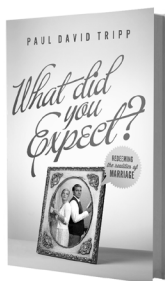
So, what about you? What about your marriage? When was the last time you looked for weeds? When was the last time you and your spouse sat down together and took an honest look at your life together? Are you paying the price in your marriage for neglecting the first step of good relational gardening? Have your unity, love, and understanding been choked by the weeds of selfishness, busyness, inattention, self-righteousness, fear, laziness, or something else that has gotten in the way? You don't have to be afraid of examining your marriage, no matter how weedy it may be, because God meets you in your difficulty with his amazing grace. He blesses you with the grace of wisdom, patience, strength, and forgiveness. If you are God's children, it is never just you and your spouse, somehow hoping that you can work your way through

Pulling Weeds

your problems. No, there is a third Person who inhabits every situation and location of your marriage. He is with you, he is willing, and he is able to come to your aid. In fact, in his grace, he has made you the place where he lives. Perhaps for too long you have let the weeds of sin choke the life out of your marriage. How about standing up and beginning to pull out the weeds? How about believing that, as you do, he will give you just the grace you need at just the moment you need it?

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