

Seven Ways to Spice
Up Your **Empty Nest**

See What's Inside
Ashley Willis' Closet

A Story of God's
Redemption with
Blended Families



Building a Bridge Back Together

An XO Marriage Story



1946-2022

This XO Magazine issue is dedicated to Garth Merrick,
married in 1977 to Susie Merrick.

He is survived by his wife, two daughters, two sons and eight grandkids.
A faithful board member of MarriageToday and XO Marriage since 2005.



I have had the privilege of listening to my dad, Jimmy Evans, teach about marriage in settings all over the nation. One of my favorite things he teaches is based on Revelation 2, a passage in which Jesus addresses the church at Ephesus with strong words because they had abandoned their “first love.” To revive their faith and relationship with God, Jesus advises them to return to the things they did at first.

Jesus is talking about perseverance and faith, but my dad also saw a marriage lesson in that passage. How often do our marriages suffer because we move on from the intensity of the first weeks of our relationship? Couples work so hard when they start dating. They dress up for each other. They put their best foot forward. They listen attentively. They make romantic gestures, prioritize communication, and do everything it takes to spend quality time together.

Then, ten years into marriage, they barely acknowledge one another upon returning from work. Instead, they change into sweatpants and sit silently on the couch to stream Netflix.

No wonder divorcing couples talk about “falling out of love”. Love requires effort. When you stop putting in the work or giving your best to each other, the relationship suffers. If nothing else, XO exists to help couples fall back in love. The best way to do that is to remember the things that first brought you together.

Remember how you looked at each other?
Remember how you dressed up for each other?
Remember how you talked and talked and talked?

The best way to reignite the spark is to remember those things and then start doing them again. There’s a lot to be said about comfort and familiarity in marriage. But don’t neglect the excited, eager-to-impress atmosphere that launched your relationship either. Those aren’t just emotions. They are decisions, and they are important.

Inside This Issue

We hope this edition of the magazine will help take you back to those decisions. Ashley Willis gives her perspective on modesty within marriage, while Dave Willis shares his thoughts about teamwork. Jimmy and Irene Rollins discuss marriage and addiction. And don’t miss our fun “Seven Ways to Spice Up Your Empty Nest” feature. There are plenty more articles and features than those, including some thoughtful new content from my dad. As we proceed further into 2022, I hope you’ll take these tips and lessons to heart. Put in the effort, and fall deeper in love with your spouse than ever before.

Cheers,

Brent Evans, Chief Executive Officer

IN THIS ISSUE



HUGE Building Updates **Page 4**



Learn
How
To Be a
Better
Team
Page 6

SEVEN

Ways to Spice Up
Your Empty Nest
Page 40



That's Our
Song
Page 10

A New Cinematic
Podcast About Marriage
& Addiction **Page 29**



How Porn
Affects Your
Brain
Page 38

A photograph of a man and a woman kissing a baby on the cheeks. The man is on the left, the woman is on the right, and the baby is in the center. They are all smiling and looking at each other. The background is dark and out of focus. The image is part of a larger graphic with a blue header and a white footer.

Every Marriage is Worth Fighting For

Every day, we see marriages struggling. We see the pain that comes from failed relationships, and we long to see marriages healed and restored. We believe in the power of God to bring hope and healing to marriages, and that is why we are so grateful for our XO Partners who stand with us in our mission to strengthen marriages and families.

Becoming an XO Marriage Partner is an investment in the future of marriages worldwide. Join us today and help us to build strong, lasting relationships that will stand the test of time and create a brighter tomorrow for generations to come.

Visit xomarriage.com/partners
to learn more.

Building *Update*

By Brent Evans, CEO of XO Marriage

What a time to be immersed in the construction world. We knew that launching a building project during a pandemic would be a challenge. We knew that managing all the planning during a time of economic uncertainty would bring a few unexpected moments. But once we actually broke ground of the XO Marriage building, we thought we could breathe a sigh of relief.

You know what happened next. Especially if you have had recent conversations with builders or developers or even real estate agents.

The last half of 2021 and all of 2022 so far have presented more than their share of headaches for the construction industry. Supply-chain and transportation issues that began with shutdowns in early 2020 have been echoing through the commercial construction industry. We are incredibly thankful our builder has not faced those kinds of challenges—or at least has been able to navigate those without passing the burden to us. We are grateful.

While others have faced lengthy delays for things like lumber, windows, roofing products, and electrical and mechanical components, we were able to get way ahead and order supplies in time to keep the schedule moving on time. Some might say luck is on our side, “knock on wood,” etc. Others might point to the power of prayer, and speculate that maybe God has decided to bless a project that blesses marriages. I’ll let you decide how to look at it, as long as you keep praying for us during this period.

Labor has been another issue. Thankfully, Texas has a particularly low unemployment rate right now, which means almost every business is looking to add to their workforce. Worker shortages are a challenge right now in the commercial construction world. I’ve heard anecdotally about this issue from multiple contractors—not ours, thankfully—who are struggling. Skilled, knowledgeable framers and bricklayers and electricians are always hard to find, and with construction booming all over the state, contractors are competing within a scarce labor pool.

Again, that story is a national nightmare right now. It’s definitely a common story here in Texas. But thankfully, it’s not one that we have faced. That’s an answer to prayer.

One issue that has crossed our path is inflation. The economy is in a really weird spot right now, and any of you who have filled up a gas tank or pushed a cart through a grocery store can relate. The price of construction goods has inflated along with everything else, and we’ve been working closely with our construction personnel to stay on budget.

This all sounds like the set up for bad news, but it’s really just a way for us to count our blessings. Why? Because despite the macroeconomic conditions, our construction process has stayed pretty close to schedule. We are meeting challenges and solving problems. We are still moving forward. We are progressing quickly. We can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Despite the hurdles in our way, we still expect to reach the interior finish-out process this fall. We hope to be moving into a permanent ministry home within a few months.



That’s right: We are only months away from the ribbon-cutting for a structure that is 100-percent devoted to building biblically-based marriages. The end is in sight, and we are thankful.

Our team is excited, but while the building nears completion, our fundraising is only half-finished. We have raised \$7.8 million of our ultimate goal of \$15 million. That means we are halfway to our dream of being able pay cash—and avoid



financing—for the XO Marriage Center.

I know you have been dealing with the same economic uncertainty and inflation as we have. But just like you and your family, we are trusting God to see us through this moment. We are asking Him to guide us toward a brighter future in which couples are thriving, children are growing up within intact families, and society is reaping the

relationships find healing and hope.

You'll help us establish a training center designed to raise up marriage leaders by providing certification courses and leadership resources. These dynamic new voices will help us grow our capacity exponentially as we seek to provide marriage education around the world. The XO Building will become a global hub for building stronger marriages and families.



These aspects of our new building will be incredible. But the parts of the design that energize us most aren't necessarily the production studios or training spaces.

What really gets us excited is how the interior Wall of Champions and exterior Walk of Champions are coming to life. The outdoor bricks on the Walk of Champions will recognize donors who give \$1,000 or more. Inside the XO Marriage building, the Wall of Champions highlights donors who've given more than \$10,000. Both of these eye-catching features allow families to become part of a national landmark for marriage. You'll literally be adding your name to our headquarters, contributing to a lasting legacy we're building for future generations.



benefits of healthier marriages. We are raising a standard for marriage around the world, and we invite you to be part of it.

The best way to do that is to join our fundraising process for the new building. Your gifts will help us build state-of-the-art digital podcast and production studios that help us grow our new media presence, as we reach young couples and new families with a positive marriage message. We'll be creating content that goes out around the world.

You'll help us develop programs to support marriages in crisis and couples in need, including on-site counseling and mediation spaces. From pre-marriage support to crisis intervention, the XO Building will be a place where

Whether you're making a multi-figure gift or just making any small donation you can, we are grateful for your partnership as you raise the standard of marriage. From producing marriage-related content to mediating marriage conflict, from training local leaders to creating a global hub for advocates of marriage, everything about our building is designed to impact families for generations to come.

We are dreaming big at 1021 Grace Lane in Southlake, Texas, and we are asking you to join us in that dream. To learn more about how you can partner with us before the building is complete, please visit xobuilding.com.

HOW TO BE ON THE SAME TEAM

By Dave Willis

Ashley and I have been asked thousands of marriage-related questions over the years. We love answering questions so much that we've actually just launched a mid-week version of the Naked Marriage Podcast dedicated completely to answering your questions. Check out our "Hump Day Q&A" every Wednesday on the podcast and submit your own questions at www.NakedMarriagePodcast.com. Your question might inspire a future episode!

As you can imagine, we get questions about nearly every topic imaginable. We've heard questions about sex, money, communication, parenting, navigating disagreements, rebuilding trust, in-laws, and countless other topics. Of all the questions we receive, one of the most common is, "What is your all-time favorite marriage advice?"

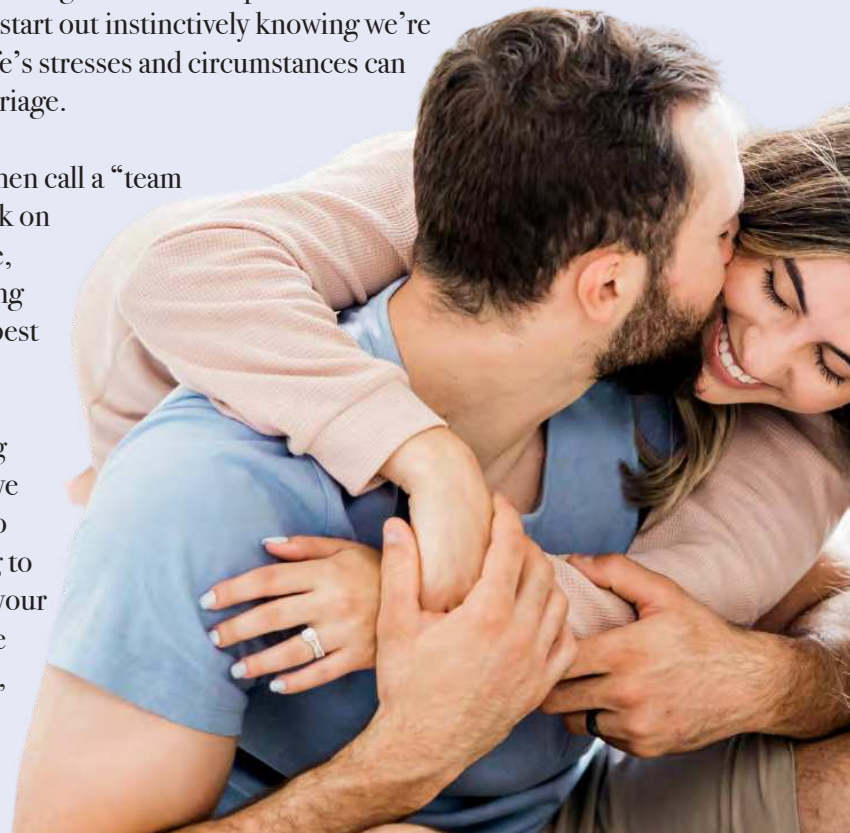
It's a great question, but it's a difficult one to answer. There are all kinds of important nuggets of marriage advice including: put Jesus first, talk about everything, be honest, be patient, be loving, make sure you're prioritizing time together, etc. There are plenty of great pieces of marriage advice, but there's one piece of advice we consistently share that seems to get people's attention more than the others. When we share it, we see people pause, raise their eyebrows and often say, "Wow. I've never thought about it that way before."

Here's the advice: you and your spouse are on the same team. It's never him against her or her against him. You're in this together. This means that in every disagreement, there won't be a "winner" and a "loser." Since you're on the same team, you'll either win together or lose together. Work together to find a solution by which you'll both win. Fight for each other and not against each other, and never forget that you're on the same team!

It might sound like simple advice, but most of the best marriage advice is simple. We as humans tend to overcomplicate things. We lose sight of the simple. We start out instinctively knowing we're in marriage together and we're on the same team, but life's stresses and circumstances can make us lose sight of this important principle about marriage.

If your marriage has lost some of the unity it once had, then call a "team meeting" to apologize and create a game plan to get back on the right track. No matter what's been said or been done, healing is possible. You can do this! Don't settle on living as roommates or rivals instead of living as partners and best friends.

Get back to cheering for each other instead of criticizing each other. Give each other more high fives and fewer eye rolls. Be willing to apologize for anything you've done to contribute to the current brokenness and also be willing to forgive your spouse for their mistakes. Let your words, your actions, and even the tone of your voice all communicate the clear message, "I'm with you. I'm for you. I love you, and I'll always be on your team."



STEP 1

SEASON YOU GOT MARRIED

SPRING = THE OG

SUMMER = THE LIL'

FALL = THE BANGIN'

WINTER = THE UNFORGETTABLE

**DISCOVER YOUR
MARRIAGE
MASCOT**

STEP 2

MONTH YOU GOT MARRIED

JANUARY = SWIFT

FEBRUARY = FLUFFY

MARCH = WHIMSICAL

APRIL = SASSY

MAY = PUNK

JUNE = SCRUFFY

JULY = SAVAGE

AUGUST = FLAWLESS

SEPTEMBER = COURAGEOUS

OCTOBER = FOXY

NOVEMBER = GENTLE

DECEMBER = FRESH

STEP 3

FIRST LETTER OF YOUR LAST NAME

A = ARDVARKS

B = BABOONS

C = IGUANAS

D = DOLPHINS

E = BUNNIES

F = GERBILS

G = FALCONS

H = CARIBOU

I = ELEPHANTS

J = LEMURS

K = OYSTERS

L = PARAKEETS

M = MEERCATS

N = SEAGULLS

O = TURKEYS

P = VULTURES

Q = TURTLES

R = ZEBRAS

S = RACOONS

T = BEARS

U = GORILLAS

V = KANGAROOS

W = DUCKS

X = LIONS

Y = MICE

Z = HIPPOS



VIRTUAL MARRIAGE

By Jimmy Evans

We all benefit from technology. Technology itself is morally neutral. It can be used for good or evil. However, some uses of technology have had three devastating effects on relationships.

1. Distraction

Technology can distract from marriage and family. Online affairs now cause about one-third of divorces. Facebook use itself precipitates about 25% of the conflicts couples have. People do things on social media they would never do in person. People interact with the opposite sex more boldly than ever before. One in seven married people contemplate divorce because of their spouse's social media activity.

2. Isolation & Loneliness

Technology usage leads to a loss of real relationship. One study found smartphone dependence predicts a higher rate of loneliness and depression in young adults. Heavy social media users are three times more likely to feel socially isolated. Social media leads people to feel like they're missing out on events, which exacerbates feelings of exclusion, stress, and insecurity.

3. Addiction

Technology can lead to addiction because of the need for constant connection and stimulation. Dopamine levels elevate with smartphone usage, and the big tech manipulates that fact. Smartphone addiction is highest in young people, especially females. One in four young people exhibit problematic smartphone usage, which is linked to lower self-esteem. The average American checks a smartphone 96 times per day. Ten percent of people will check their phone during sex. One in four adults wake up at least once during the night to check their smartphones. Thirty-nine percent of children wish their parents would spend less time on

their devices, and thirty-eight percent think their parents have a smartphone addiction. Again, there's nothing inherently wrong with technology, but here's the problem: we can't be alone anymore. Technology complicates three truths about intimacy.

1. Intimacy requires privacy.

You can't be intimate unless you're completely alone with another person. Genesis 2:24 says, a man should leave his father and mother and unite as one with his wife. You have to say "no" to someone else to have intimacy with your spouse. Let me paraphrase this verse in modern terms: "Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and they shall become one flesh—unless he has a cell phone and his mother and father can call text, email, post on Instagram, Facebook message, or track him with a GPS location app." You cannot have real intimacy when your spouse has to compete with anyone or anything else.

It's only getting worse. Have you heard of the metaverse? The prefix meta- means something that is beyond what came before, something that is all encompassing. It's no small thing that Facebook changed the company name to Meta. The name represents their vision for your family. They want to be all encompassing and take over every possible area of your life. A virtual reality world is subsuming everything in this world. If you thought the internet was trying to get your attention, then you haven't seen anything yet. Everywhere you go, a network of computers in the cloud is tracking you. You can't even find a physical location for "the cloud" because it is accessing the power of computers and devices everywhere. Data collection programs study you, learn your habits, and target you for money and control. Efforts at neural enhancements

seek to put the power of technology in your brain and body. At some point, none of us will be able to function in society without these enhancements. I believe Jesus is going to come before all this comes to fruition, but it is going to happen.

They not only want our attention, but they also want to change our behavior. They already have. However, to have intimacy, we must be alone, which means we must put down and put away these devices. You can't build your marriage when a device is constantly competing for your attention.

2. Intimacy requires living human contact.

Hebrews 6 lists six basic teachings of the faith:

"Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to [a]perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment" (Hebrews 6:1-2 NKJV). Notice "laying on of hands" is one of the six. Everything in the Kingdom of God is relationally transferred.

What you most need is going to come from human touch. We must touch in the Body of Christ. Stop allowing

technology and the fear of sickness keep us apart. In your marriage, God wants you to say "no" to those things that interfere with your intimacy. The devil wants to seduce you away from something so basic as the need to connect with your spouse and link you up with everyone else in the world. Don't miss out on the person with whom you should most connect.

3. Intimacy requires inviolable rules and boundaries.

You've got to have rules for your relationship that you won't violate. I won't violate my relationship with Jesus for technology, no matter how "cool" it is. He told me to seek God's Kingdom first (Matthew 6:33). God has to rule in my life. His business is first, and my spouse is God's business. I won't give up my marriage or family for technology. I have boundaries.

Every time you pull out your phone and give it more attention than your spouse, you're stabbing them in the heart. They may have tried to tell you that, but you weren't listening. Even if you are using your phone to provide for your family, provide yourself first. You own it; don't let it own you. It is your servant, and not the other way around.

Our Master is smarter than all these companies combined. Keep technology in its place so you can build the intimacy God intends for your marriage or your family. Have a serious conversation about this issue. Then put boundaries and disciplines in place to protect your relationships.



That's Our Song

By Nirup Alphonse



Every couple has a song. Anyone else make mixed tapes for your spouse when you were dating? By nature, songs are invitational. They are poems put to music that create the soundtrack to your love story. Songs not only invite you into a journey, but will also shape your journey. The future of your marriage is dependent on the song that you sing today.

I want to share a song you may not have considered adding to that mixed tape. It is filled with ancient promises that you can claim today as your own. These are found in Psalm 121:

"I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

*My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

*He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.*

Behold, he who keeps Israel

will neither slumber nor sleep.

*The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your
shade on your right hand.*

*The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

*The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.*

*The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore" (ESV).*

For the people of Israel, Psalm 121 was more than just a random song. Three times a year, they would take the trek upward into Jerusalem to worship. Here were the people who journeyed in remembrance of the God who had rescued them from the grips of slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. Here were the people reminding themselves of the gratitude of God's provision in the wilderness. Here were the people walking in the renewal that they were, in fact, God's people.

So what is this song inviting us into? The answer is *confession and confidence*. Let's break these down a little more.

Confession

We look up to the hills in the times of sorrow and realize they have nothing to offer. The Psalmist invites us to confess that we need help, and that it is only God who can meet us in our seasons of need. The good news of the gospel today in your marriage, moments struggle, sorrow, or dysfunction, is that God meets you in your weakness and works powerfully to deliver you. The great tragedy of our marriages today is not that God is unable to help us, but that we are often unwilling to confess we need him. Is there a confession that needs to happen in your marriage today?

Confidence

The Psalmist shares ten things our God will do for us that we cannot do on our own. Can you count them all? Our confidence is in the Lord who guards and protects us. Whether we are awake or asleep, He is still working. Our confidence is in the Lord who governs the sun and the moon. He is the God who stands at your side, covering you in the shade of His presence.

So, when the enemy comes and tells you to be bitter or that the opposition is too great, you stand up, clap your hands, and say, "But I have a song. And it's a song of promise."

Your song is not a theory. Your song is not an ideology. Your song is a person, and His name is Jesus.

ENHANCE YOUR MONEY & MARRIAGE

By Bob Lotich



I don't need to start this article with all the terrifying stats about how money is so commonly a source of tension in marriage. We've all heard them, so no need to rehash that here.

But, instead, I want to point you to four pretty simple things you can do today (or this weekend) to help you get in more unity with your spouse when it comes to your money.

HAVE A “MONEY DATE”

In our house, I (Bob) am the spreadsheet and numbers type, and my better half (Linda) is the chase around a butterfly type.

I enjoy running the numbers, crafting a good budget, and making a plan, which she avoids like the plague. But I discovered that if I wrapped these money conversations in a sugary coating, suddenly she was willing to tolerate our money conversations.

What this looked like for us was taking her to dinner and eating ice cream while we had some of these conversations.

Dinner and ice cream might not work for your spouse, but if you have a spouse who doesn't want to talk about money with you, then ask yourself, “How can I make this less painful for them?” or “What do they love that I could bundle this money date with to make it tolerable?”

It's nearly impossible to be in unity on money without talking about it, so finding a way even to have the conversation is the first step for many.

FOCUS ON THE BIG PICTURE

Now that you have gotten a sitter for the kids and have them at the ice cream shop with three scoops of rocky road, you can start the conversation.

There are obviously a million different things you can (or may need to) talk about related to your money, but here are some big picture questions that are worth discussing.

Ask each other these questions and answer objectively without any blaming, name-calling, or hair-pulling:

What are you thankful for about our finances?

What do you wish we could do?

Are there any dreams God has put on your heart?

Do you have any ideas for how we could do things differently?

GET YOUR OWN SPENDING MONEY

This one simple tweak to our marriage instantly reduced our money fights by about 90 percent.

If you and your spouse don't each have individual spending money, it is time. As in money that you can spend without being accountable to anyone. As in, me spending \$250 on the fifth type of saw I have in the garage, or Linda spending I-don't-even-want-to-know-how-much on a purse to go with her shoes.

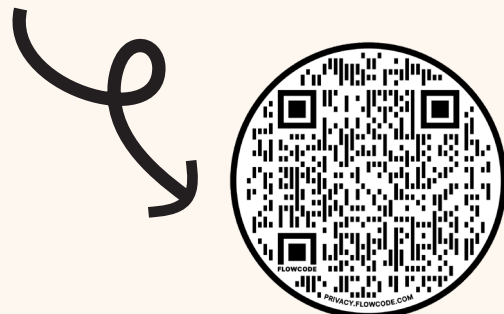
By simply creating a separate account for each of us, we both have the freedom to spend on whatever is important to us without asking the other for permission. This strategy was huge for us.

Because when the grocery budget is running low at the end of the month and she runs out and spends \$150 on a pair of jeans, I don't have to get upset because it was already earmarked for her, not for groceries.

PRAY TOGETHER

If you aren't praying about your finances together, then you are missing out on your secret weapon. God knows our spouses (and us) better than we do, so why not bring Him into this equation?

If you need a head start on some financial prayers to pray together, I created a **FREE PDF** you can download with some prayers that we have prayed over our finances as well as some of our favorite Bible verses to stand on.





Watch exclusive
XO Marriage content
anywhere with **XO Now!**



BLENDING YOUR BUNCH



By Scott & Vanessa Martindale

EXPECTATION IS THE ENEMY OF JOY

We aren't the first to say it, but we agree with that statement. That should be the mantra for your blended family, at least early on. You can rid yourself of so much stress if you remember those six words, or as Scott says, "death by expectation."

Many couples enter a blended marriage thinking the children will quickly adjust to all the new changes, but there may be so many. Your family's situation may change rapidly, but for children, transition is seldom quick. That's okay. You are in this marriage for the long haul, and you've got plenty of time to make this work. It's a marathon, and you're a team. So we encourage you as our first step to set aside any expectations about how your new family's relationships will look or how quickly it will happen. If you force it, then you will feel defeated, exhausted, and depleted. Create a safe, secure atmosphere where healthy parent and sibling relationships can succeed. Relationships happen organically, so trying to force

them to happen quickly can change the character of them. What, then, can you do to create the best possible environment for new relationships to develop and flourish? Here are three actions you can take to help your new blended family:

1. PUT THE "FUN" IN DYSFUNCTIONAL.

Every family has tough seasons. Even the healthiest and most loving families have some level of dysfunction. Building relationships takes time, even under the best circumstances. Once you throw kids into the mix, it doesn't make it any easier. So we encourage you to find ways to put the fun into those dysfunctional moments. Kids like to build relationships around fun activities, but so do adults. You probably didn't meet your spouse one day and get married the next. It took time to build a strong relational foundation. You dated, which means you went to movies, took hikes, shared meals, took vacations, and enjoyed other activities around your common interests. You had fun together and got to know each other.

Ultimately, you fell in love. Children operate the same way.

Many blended families have two sets of kids, and then maybe they have children together. How do you help everyone blend into one family? You do it the same way you did with your spouse—through dating and sharing time together. Children don't usually go from strangers to siblings overnight. They need time to get to know each other, and fun activities help to do that. Identify those things they will enjoy doing together and put them into your schedule. Not everything has to be a big event, but scheduled time together creates stability. You can help your kids begin to see the new flow of your family.

2. CREATE NEW FAMILY TRADITIONS.

A rich history of traditions brings families together. You may look back fondly on some of those traditions you experienced growing up. We don't fully understand the power of these experiences as children. As we grow older, we see the importance of these special moments. Creating family traditions will

give your children something they can know and understand. It will cement family memories in their minds. Your kids need that, especially in a blended family. You will likely have unique challenges planning holiday traditions, especially in the case of joint custody, but it is not an insurmountable issue. Be intentional about your planning. Figure out what works for your family and make it a tradition. These are the things your children will talk about long after you're gone. Give them those memories and traditions that they will be able to point to and say, "This is ours."

3. INVOLVE EXTENDED FAMILY.

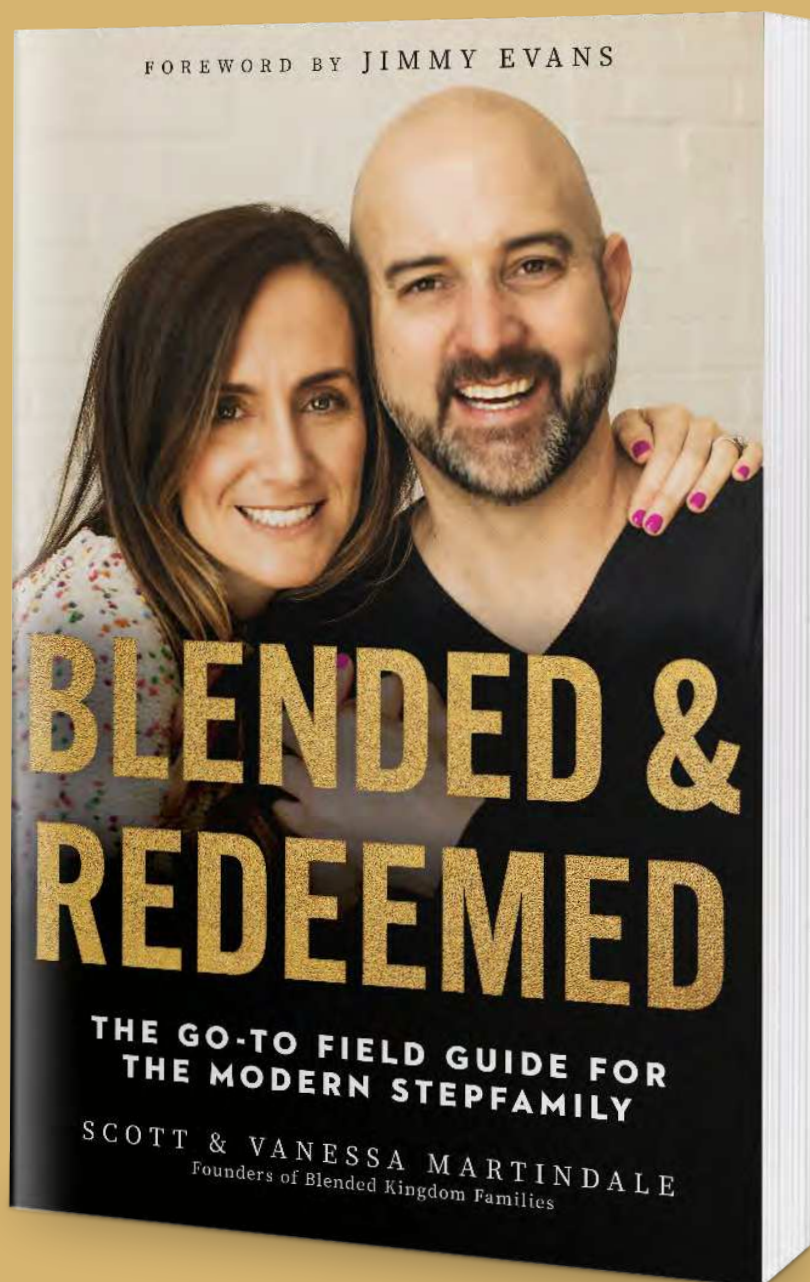
Be sure all the grandparents and the rest of the extended relatives are involved in your new family. It's heartbreaking to hear some grandparents "play favorites." This happens when the grandparents never bond with new step-grandchildren and becomes especially difficult if the family is a mix of biological and step-grandchildren. That's difficult for young children to comprehend but also a hard adjustment for older kids. You can never underestimate the power of a grandparent's love—even if it's a step-grandparent. If you're still in the process of blending your family, or even if you're several years into it but your extended family still hasn't come around, then talk to the grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Tell them how important it is to you and to your children to have the full love and support of the whole family. Make sure they have all the children's birthdays on their calendars and that they are showing equal love through their words and attention. Blending a family is a lot like mixing a cake. You have various ingredients coming from different places. Individually, they may be very different, yet they all mix together to create something wonderful. You and your spouse are the eggs—because you're equally yoked (pun intended.) Your children are the sugar, cocoa, flour, nuts, and chocolate chips. Your traditions and shared time are the oil that holds everything together. Your shared joy is the icing on top. And Jesus is the baking pan that holds everything in one place—poured out to completion. All this makes for a pretty delicious life. An abundant life.



NEW BOOK RELEASE

Couples in blended—or “step”—families often feel misunderstood, even in the church. They struggle with complicated child behavioral issues, battle-pitched custody fights, and difficulty finding unity in co-parenting. Emotions such as guilt, shame, fear, or isolation threaten to overwhelm them. Now is the time for these families to feel heard, helped, and healed. In *Blended and Redeemed*, blended family experts, coaches, and therapists Scott and Vanessa Martindale, go where few dare to venture—into the minefield of today’s blended families. You will learn how to:

- Defend your new marriage from old wounds and the enemy’s schemes
- Turn strangers into siblings through intentional and intelligent blending
- Work and communicate effectively with your ex-spouse as co-parents
- Navigate the fiery furnace of custody litigation
- Bring glory to God and inform the church about your messy and beautifully unique blended family



AVAILABLE NOW!

BLENDEDANDREDEEMED.COM



**Shop our bestselling
resources from the
XO Store!**

xomarriage.com/store

10 WAYS TO SERVE YOUR SPOUSE

The best marriages are built by two servants. We build intimacy, trust, and credibility with our spouse when we take time to learn about them and meet their needs. We paint a beautiful picture of the gospel when we focus our energy on serving our spouse's needs, instead of striving to meet our own. In a culture that promotes self-love, God calls us to self-sacrifice. This is a very high calling, but there are very simple and practical ways you can do this for your spouse every day. If you're competitive, you can even think of it as a "giving contest". Who can serve the most? The only difference is that the ultimate winner will be your marriage.



MAKE DINNER

Many are familiar with "The 5 Love Languages" by Gary Chapman. Well, we believe there is one missing: food! Nothing says I love you more than a full belly, right? Light some candles, turn on some romantic tunes, and enjoy a date night in.

GET UP & GET GOING

We all have a morning routine, right? Get up early and help your spouse start their day on the right foot by making a nutritious breakfast, pouring a cup of coffee, or even checking a dreaded task off their to-do list for the day.



GIFT OF TIME

Sometimes we all just need a moment. Taking care of items that are typically not on your to-do list, so your spouse can have extra time to sleep in or devotions with the Lord can be a huge blessing to them. Try using the phrase, "Let me take (fill in the blank) off your plate, so you can have some time to yourself." You won't be sorry!

PRAYER

You don't need a degree in theology to pray effectively for your spouse. Because of the position that you hold in your spouse's life, your prayers carry great authority. You can simply find scriptures of God's promises and declare them over your spouse. Pray for protection, favor, peace, and for specific challenges they may be facing.



LET'S GO OUT

Surprise! We are going on a date! A spontaneous plan doesn't need to be fancy to sweep your spouse off their feet. Brew your favorite coffee, grab a thermos, and go for an evening stroll.



WORK FOR IT

Who doesn't love a little gift sent to work? Find out what your spouse loves and make it happen. Can you imagine your hubby getting some warm BBQ delivered to his desk? Or your wife getting her favorite beverage or dessert sent her way? The possibilities are endless on this one!



INITIATION IS KEY

It has been said that foreplay begins long before you get to the bedroom. Get the mood going earlier in the day with a flirty text and plan to follow through! Men, shop for some lingerie you would love to see your wife in! Mentionables is a great company that offers model-free online shopping for those special pieces.



WRITE IT DOWN

There are few things that can replace a good, old-fashioned love letter. Take the time to put the pen to paper to tell your spouse what they mean to you.

Put a stamp on it and drop it in the mail. It will arrive just when they need it.

It's a small gesture that goes a long way.

ASK THE LORD

Who knows your spouse better than anyone else? The Lord. Take a moment during your quiet time to ask God, "How can I serve my spouse today?" Maybe it's something from this list, or something completely different. He knows exactly what your spouse is facing that day. He knows how you can represent His heart to them the way no one else can.



IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS

Has your spouse been mentioning something they need or want recently? Take the initiative and stop to grab an iced tea, sweet treat, or even some new socks to let them know you listen and are thinking of them.

FOLLOW US!

For more ideas and ways to keep your marriage fresh and healthy, check out our social channels.



@XOMARRIAGE





The Missing Piece

AN XO MARRIAGE STORY

TREVOR

It all started about a year ago. We don't mind admitting we were in a dark place at the lowest point in our relationship. We had serious communication issues and didn't think we could save our marriage. It seemed easier to get defensive and run away rather than fix it, but I decided that instead of running, I would take responsibility for my actions and try a different approach.

I looked online for marriage advice and guidance, and The Naked Marriage Podcast by Dave and Ashley Willis popped up. I went for a walk with the dog and started listening to Episode 51: "Is Your Marriage in Crisis?" I wasn't a Christian at the time, but thought, I'll give it a go ... I don't have to buy into the Christian stuff.... I'm an engineer and a scientist with a bit of a logical worldview, so I didn't see the point yet. But immediately, Dave and Ashley's tone, authority, experience, and practical tips to make your marriage stronger just made sense. The way they speak is so calm and confident, and they have such a way of making you feel like someone is listening and understanding.

Ashley introduced the episode with, "You are not alone. That is a lie of the enemy. We serve a God who makes masterpieces out of messes. What do you do when your marriage is in crisis [...] in the practical, day-to-day life?" I thought, brilliant, tell me more. Dave then said, "We want to give you some tools, some new thoughts that will help lead you to a place that ultimately will bring some healing. When you're struggling, it's easy to believe a lot of lies. In the work that we do, over and over again, we've seen miracles happen." Well, that had me hooked.

I spent the next few weeks listening, learning to be more proactive, and putting some of the tips and tools into action—and most importantly, learning what not to do. We don't live near family—we've lived in different locations all over the UK—so we've never had people around us who we trusted enough to talk to, but now I had this podcast. One day, I came in and handed my headphones to Steph and said, "You have to listen to this."

STEPHANIE

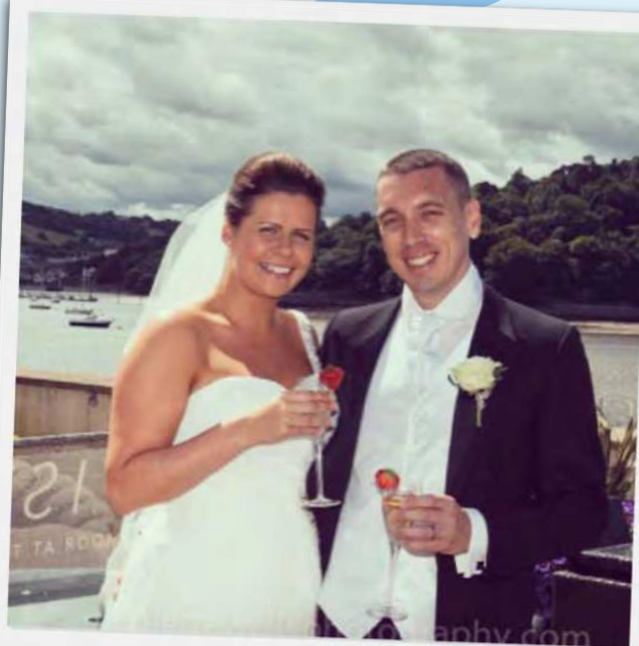
You know, we'd never been in the situation where we wanted to make it work—we'd always just put things under the carpet. So at first, I didn't see the point in listening, but when I saw what Dave and Ashley had gone through, what other couples have gone through, I realized the tools were so useful, and I wondered how I could change myself.

The podcast brought us together and gave us something to connect over. It took a few months, but we'd listen and talk about it. We just kept saying, "That's exactly what's happening to us! That's exactly what we're going through!" We could see we weren't alone and that there were ways to make our marriage work.

At the time, Trevor wasn't a believer, and though I was, I'd lost my way. We'd convinced ourselves faith wasn't something we needed—that it was just a bit of mumbo jumbo, but we started seeing that there was this essential piece missing in our relationship.

We heard on the podcast about the marriage counseling services XO provides, so we booked a session. The coach opened our eyes to real communication and how Jesus has to be first in our marriage. We took furious notes and put her advice into practice. Then, she introduced us to XO Now.

The next day, we started Marriage on the Rock by Jimmy Evans, and now, we're avid listeners—Jimmy's a part of our family as much as Dave and Ashley. We listen to his talks at night, and we just keep looking at each other, going, "This is us. Why did we not know this before?"



Our Wedding



Darcey & Paighton

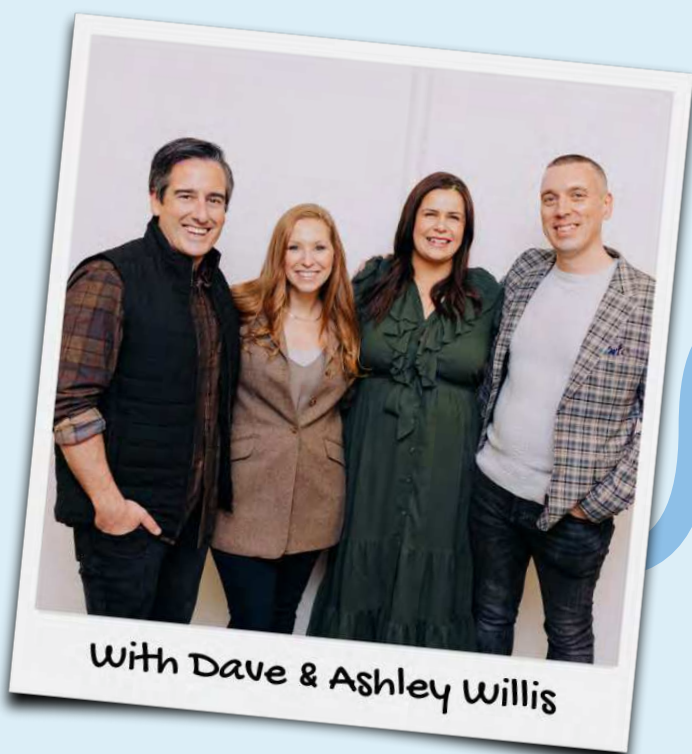
TREVOR

I'd never read the Bible, but a life-changing moment for me was when Jimmy said, "When God created humans, He designed a Jesus-shaped hole." God sent Dave, Ashley, Jimmy, the coaches, and the whole XO team to show us that, as well as how we can deal with all the issues that life throws.

We had a few ups and downs throughout the year, but we got to a point where a light came on, and we realized we wanted the same thing. The only missing thing was Jesus. We started going to church every week, and Steph found her faith again. Our beautiful daughters, Darcey and Paighton, and I got baptized. Our world has completely been flipped on its head for all the right reasons.

We recognize this is only the start of our journey, but we are committed to our marriage and committed to Jesus, and with XO's help, we know we have a bright future. We are communicating better, we have no fear, and are putting practical and proactive advice into action.

We have the support we need—it's not the same as having someone face-to-face since we're in the UK—but we feel like we know these guys so well now.



STEPHANIE

We were just this random couple in the corner of the UK, but because of technology, we've learned so much. I've become a better person; Trevor's become a better person. We were stuck on opposite sides of a broken bridge, and XO helped us build that bridge back to each other. We didn't know anything we've learned so far, and we can't help but ask: if we didn't know, how many other couples out there don't know?

We were listening to the podcast and found out about the conference, and I just knew it was what we needed to do. I love the path we're on, and we're ready to do anything we can to make this marriage better. Everything can only get better by going to the conference. We're not afraid to make decisions, and that one was a no-brainer. Plus, we never really get to have a holiday and this will be our first Vision Retreat! It's great to communicate on Zoom, but we can't wait to be involved in real life. We've already experienced this overwhelming sense that we're not alone, and we can't wait to share that with other people.

Since XO Grapevine: Paighton is four, and just started to walk with the aid of a walker. God not only healed Trevor and Stephanie's marriage, but He is healing their family too.

MAKING YOUR HOUSE A HOME

By Chad and Tori Masters

Want a fun way to test the strength of your marriage? Try building or renovating a home. When we first started our home build, we were young, idealistic, and full of big dreams and expectations. But as soon as the construction began, it was clear that our separate vision for the new house didn't match up. We argued over so many things. Should we get a pool? What colors should the floors be? The couch you want costs how much now? At first, we each fought hard to get our way. You should have seen Chad try to convince me that a mini fridge in our bedroom was a good idea (I eventually caved). But after weeks of heated debate and disagreements over every last detail, something weird happened: we started listening to each other's ideas.

In many ways, our visions still differed. But suddenly there was a surprising amount of overlap between them too. Eventually, what had started as a tug-of-war became an exciting collaboration that led to the home of our dreams. Looking back now, I realize that our biggest mistake in those early days was selfishness – an unwillingness to compromise and truly consider one another's perspective instead of simply insisting on getting exactly what we wanted at all costs. We're thankful for the lessons we learned along the way and want to share some tips for those currently

going through, or planning to go through, a home building or repair project.

Remembering your “Why” Why are you doing this? Whose kingdom are you building? And before you start thinking, “Guys, it's not that serious...” We thought that too until it started negatively impacting our marriage, which threw off our communication intimacy and joy. Something that helped us was to set intentional goals during the construction process that symbolize our goal, which was to build a home that allowed us to connect, invite others in, raise children, and work in. One example of a goal was to write Scripture on the studs and drywall (before paint) and pray over each room and the purpose of the room.

Have you ever played the game Red Light, Green Light? If you didn't, then you missed out at Sunday school. If you did, then you'll remember that green means *go* and red means *stop*. During our home build, we set parameters on specific decisions and color coded them. For example, we would give a “green light” to one another for decisions that could be made without the other person's opinion. When choosing something like the wall paper for our prayer closet, we gave a “yellow light” which meant to check in with each other first before committing to anything. And when it came to choosing something



AMAZON MUST HAVES



We have these in each of our bathrooms. We love that these look very styled without having to fold & style a towel rack!

For our espresso lovers this is a must. Having all the different settings makes it easy & the fact we could keep the aesthetic neutral was such a win.





super important, like Chad and his shower heads, we gave each other the "red light," which meant that we should both be actively involved in that decision. It helps to communicate what is important to you and what doesn't matter as much, because half the fights we had during our home build were over things that, looking back at it, didn't matter to us! We weren't fighting about the home; we were fighting about our miscommunication.

Listen to what your spouse wants. It doesn't matter if it's a neon sign, or a bedazzled headboard. Attempting to invalidate what your spouse wants will typically lead to disagreements and hurt feelings. This doesn't mean you have to accept and purchase an item or decorate a specific style, but you do need to at least hear them out and have a healthy conversation over it. You see, Tori wanted our home

to be very (very) bright and open with neutral colors. I'm down with that but, being the secret introvert that I am, I wanted something moody with character. Something Dark. Cool. Masculine. By being open and discussing it with each other, we were able to settle with a win/win by designing my office to be moody and cool, while keeping to Tori's vision of a bright and open home. It also didn't hurt that I got to hide my office behind a hidden door!

In the end, building a home became one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences we encountered in our marriage. As you practice these tips and honor God and each other during the process, we promise you that your home-building experience can be full of fun memories that will last a lifetime.

This was one of our favorite finds! We hung it over a picture in the entrance of our bedroom & it makes the space look so cozy & inviting!



We couldn't be more in love with this TV. You can download beautiful artwork for it on Etsy & it immediately elevates the space versus having a big black box.



The perfect throw blanket to cuddled up under. Also a great accent piece to drape over the couch for some color and texture.

PURPOSE IN THE PRISON

BY JIMMY & IRENE ROLLINS

We led a church as pastors for 12 years, and while we didn't end up in a real prison, we did find ourselves in an inner prison. Many people are called to do good work and set people free, yet they end up in their own inner prisons. Whether you have problems in your marriage, trauma in your past, or painful issues in your family of origin, we want you to know there is purpose in your prison.

“God can take your greatest misery and turn it around for His great ministry.”

We got free, and we want to give you hope. If you get real with yourself, and not your spouse, then you can find purpose in your prison and ultimately experience freedom. From the outside, we looked like we had it all together. We were in our early thirties launching a ministry with three kids. We had so much passion to bring people to freedom in Jesus Christ, but our internal world was not healthy. On the inside, we were dying a slow death.

We decided that day it was time to hit the reset button. Today is the right time to reset your marriage and say “enough is enough.” Break the generational strongholds by the power of the Holy Spirit. Here is how we did it, and you can too:

1. LEAN INTO THE PAIN

Issues external to your marriage are not your spouse's fault. But your spouse is the blueprint to your healing and growth. If you are dealing with a familiar pain from your past, then start unpacking it. God wants to reframe and redeem it through your spouse. In our case, one of us had a problem with alcohol, while

the other had to say there was a problem. You can't heal a wound by saying it's not there. Lean into the pain and shame, process it, and walk through it. God will do what He does what He does best, which is renew your mind.

2. LEAN INTO PEOPLE

It's hard to get real with someone else. We had to get real with people. I (Jimmy) remember calling one of my good friends and saying, “Hey man, I can't do this any longer. I've come to recognize it's impossible to keep up with who we pretend to be.” I had to call some friends to do an intervention with Irene. While Irene was in rehab, my counselor told me, “If you leave her now, then the new Irene won't be able to heal the wounds that the old Irene created. If you don't love the wife you have, you'll never have the wife you want.”

I (Irene) had to get real with people and didn't know how to do it. Jimmy is so honest. I wanted to know how he does that. My counselor said, “Irene, it's called getting honest; try it sometime.” Growing up, we had a “no talk” rule. We kept things hidden away. Jimmy taught me how to lean into people.

3. LEAN INTO HIS PRESENCE

God wants your marriage to experience a new day because your best is yet to come. It's going to get better. Lean into His presence. We celebrate the goodness of God and the miracle of our family. He created a new thing through our crisis. There's going to be a prison break for your marriage. Give the enemy an eviction notice that says, “You need to leave our marriage. God is freeing you, and your freedom will set others free.”



**A CINEMATIC
PODCAST ABOUT
MARRIAGE &
ADDICTION**



Listen on
Apple Podcasts



YouTube



TWO EQUALS ONE

WITH JIMMY & IRENE ROLLINS

NOW THAT THEY ARE GONE...

By Jimmy Evans

Founder and President of XO Marriage

Life losses are inevitable. If we live long enough, every person we currently know will die—if we live long enough. However, nothing in life causes us to question our identity as much as the death of a spouse. I have walked through grief with many men and women who have experienced the death of the person closest to them—their spouse.

When I say the death of a spouse threatens our sense of identity, I mean we feel stripped, lonely, incomplete, and out of place. Who am I when I am no longer a “we”? I’m sure you remember going through something like this as a teenager. You looked in the mirror and asked yourself, “Who am I?” Your parents, friends, and teachers were all giving messages about who you were, but you had not figured it all out yet. It’s a very unsettling stage in life.

Finally, in young adulthood, you started to understand your place in the world and God’s calling on your life. You got an education or experience. You found a career. Then you met a mate with whom you built a life. Things for you

may not have gone in that exact order, but those are common experiences. Our understanding of our own identities is usually built around those to whom we are emotionally attached. I hope your spouse loved you sincerely and deeply, but even more I hope they constantly reminded you of your identity in Jesus Christ. That is the greatest gift they could have given to you.

Regardless of what you have thought about yourself up to this point in your life, I want to remind that you can know who you are in Christ by pointing you to three passages of Scripture. These messages from God’s Word assure us that we can know exactly who we are.

God always gave special attention to widows, and I would say He also has deep feelings for widowers. He wants you to know you are not without comfort (John 14:16), not abandoned (John 14:18), and not alone (Hebrews 13:5). Allow the Holy Spirit and the Word of God to confirm your identity. You are loved.



Romans 8:12-17

Paul writes that we can know we are sons of God because the Spirit tells us directly. The Holy Spirit confirms to us that we are heirs to all God's promises.

Romans 12:1-3

In these verses Paul tells believers that God has renewed their minds to understand who they are in relation to Him. He's given all of us the faith to understand. Then in that same chapter Paul tells us that we are all part of the Body of Christ, integral to its health, and we should serve with our gifts. We all belong.

Colossians 1:9-14

Paul says we can have knowledge—we can know God's will. And we can know we are “partakers of the inheritance of the saints.”

Go Home

Our story starts with the words, “I want a divorce.” We were in ministry, teaching Marriage on the Rock to couples at the US Air Force Chapel, and suddenly, we spoke these words. Looking back, it wasn’t a single catastrophic event that brought us to that point. Lots of little things led us to just wanting to be done.

Matt recognized a big communication barrier in the marriage that he didn’t see changing, while I (Kristina) lost hope for a better future. Eventually, I recognized the brokenness of our marriage and reached out to a trusted pastor and his wife. I admitted to them that divorce wasn’t an option, so they asked me to consider what I’d do if we were to get a divorce. Through prayer, I realized that I couldn’t imagine life without Matt, but I also knew I couldn’t control Matt’s decisions.

In that moment, God revealed the Bible’s account of Abraham to me in a new way. The story wasn’t merely about faith, but it was also about being obedient. Abraham understood God could either raise Isaac from the dead or He could provide another sacrifice. I remember saying, “OK, Father, if this is going to change, then I’m asking You to change me. I’m trusting that You can either raise this marriage from the dead, or You can provide another sacrifice.”

We tried a constructive separation, but everything seemed to get worse. Committed to still making our marriage work, I came across the mediation services offered by XO. These mediators were God’s vessels to change my heart. I learned I needed to take responsibility for myself and didn’t need to try to be the Holy Spirit for Matt. If Matt was going to recommit to our marriage, then it wouldn’t be because of anything I did. God would have to do it.

When Matt told me he was filing for divorce, I asked prayer warriors I knew to fast and pray for us for three days. And on the last hour of the third day, I received a text from Matt: I want to move forward. I know we have a lot of work to do individually and collectively, but I’m willing to do that. Real change began to happen.

Although it was a strange sensation, I (Matt) could feel someone praying for me. I remember hearing the Holy Spirit say, “Go home.” I told Kristina, “I don’t know what we’re going to do, but I feel like this is what God has for us.”

Looking back, we can see that a lot of opportunities came from our experience. Serving as a chaplain in the US Air Force, I not only had to be able to communicate well but also with intention and truth. This experience equipped me to do that. I’ve seen that most military marriages don’t survive. How could I connect on a real level without that near-death experience in my own marriage? Now, I can explain that there’s nothing a couple can’t work through and nothing God can’t heal.

Ninety percent of my counseling as a chaplain in the military boils down to a priority issue. It is easy to lose focus on our relationships because the mission is so important. What should be your top three priorities? God, your spouse, and your kids. Without that, sin starts creeping in, issues start to happen, and nothing else will work. Priorities are necessary for healing and saving a marriage.



**BY MATT & KRISTINA
SPENCER**



XO Mediator Institute

What if you could become certified to help couples achieve breakthroughs in their marriage?

The XO Mediator Institute was created to certify marriage pastors, lay leaders, and life coaches to help couples reconnect and rebuild their relationships. When couples are at an impasse, they need someone to stand between them to provide discernment, wise counsel, and a plan for restoration. Through our extensive training program, you will learn how to help couples reconcile their differences, utilizing mediation techniques paired with resources developed by Jimmy Evans.

The Mediator Institute Training is an online program coupled with a two-day live

training held in Southlake, Texas. It's an 80-hour training program developed to equip leaders to conduct marriage mediation sessions effectively. After completing the training, you'll be able to walk a couple through an 8-hour intensive with a real-time breakthrough for those willing to surrender to doing marriage God's way.

If you are committed to pointing the hearts of couples back to God, Marriage Mediation is a great resource.

For more information or to register for training, visit xomediator.com.



XO
MEDIATION
NETWORK

Receive Coaching

XO Mediators understand the desperate needs of couples and are equipped to provide solutions for every season of marriage. Our marriage mediators specialize in marriage intervention, regardless of where you are in your marriage: newlywed, career-focused, raising kids, empty nesters, or separated. XO mediators want to provide a safe, confidential environment conducive to addressing primary issues, conflict resolution, and building intimacy so couples can experience long-term restoration.

60 Minute Coaching on Call

Our 60-minutes session is designed for couples or individuals in crisis who need immediate help.

90 Minute Coaching on Call

Our 90-minute virtual session is designed for couples or individuals who cannot overcome a particular area of struggle in their marriage and need direction and clarity.

XO Marriage Mediation

Our 8-hour, full-day, one-on-one session is designed for couples struggling with multiple issues and feeling hopeless about the future of their marriage. This intensive approach allows couples the extended time needed to fully process their primary issues without interruption of time or the hassle of scheduling multiple weekly sessions. Offered in-person or virtually.

**If your marriage is in crisis, please
visit xomarriage.com/crisis.**

Our Marriage Bucket List



Have a Movie Marathon

A comfy blanket, warm popcorn, and delicious movie snacks are all you need to set the scene for your movie marathon. Choose some tried and true classics or brainstorm a list of your favorite movies together, snuggle up, and enjoy!



Visit Each Other's Hometown

Take your honey back to where it all started and give them a tour of the town you grew up in. Be sure to visit all your favorite restaurants and landmarks.



Go on a Vision Retreat

Grab your Vision Retreat Guidebook and carve out some special time to dream and connect with your spouse. We recommend doing this annually!



Get a Couple's Massage

Take time to unwind and relax with some pampering. Maybe a full body massage isn't your thing? Try a fun foot massage and let your partner give you a massage at home.

Order your copy of the Vision Retreat Guidebook at visionretreat.com.



Dance in the Kitchen

Research shows that dancing closely with your spouse increases gratitude for one another. Dim the lights, tune into our Spotify playlist, and hold each other close!



Listen to Live Music

Find a venue that offers live music, grab some appetizers, and put on your dancing shoes. Bonus points if your spot has twinkly lights to sway under!



Check out our Spotify playlist "Waltz Down Memory Lane" to set the mood!



Make Your Own Lattes

Be your own barista and craft your very own homemade lattes. Who knows? You and your spouse could create your very own specialty drink that you will enjoy for years to come.



Recreate Your First Date

Remember that first date with your spouse? Take time to go back to that same place and reminisce those special moments together. Don't forget to snap a picture!

HOW PORN AFFECTS YOUR BRAIN

By Miles McPherson *Senior Pastor of Rock Church, Author,
and Former NFL Football Player*

In our marriages, we have to see the big picture. God created everything and established order in the heavens and the earth. The last thing He made was a man and a woman. The Lord declared it was not good for Adam to be alone, so He put Adam to sleep and took out one of his ribs, fashioned Eve, and presented her to Adam (see Genesis 2:18–22).

"At last!" the man exclaimed. 'This one is bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh! She will be called 'woman,' because she was taken from 'man.'"

This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame (vv. 23–25).

Not only were Adam and Eve physically naked, but they were also emotionally, mentally, and socially naked. Everything was exposed with no secrets. They were one flesh. From now on, whenever you hear the word sex, I want you to think about sameness and oneness. God made the woman

compatible with the man so they could become one.

Sex is about pleasure and bonding, and I want to focus on the bonding part. Bonding is establishing ownership of the wellbeing of another person.

Through it, two people actually become one person, not only in the moment, but also beyond. Now you have just as much ownership over that person's happiness, wellbeing, and health as you do your own because you are them and they are you. Paul says husbands should love their wives as much as they do their own bodies (see Ephesians 5:28). How do two become one? The answer will transform the intimacy of your marriage.

Your largest sex organ is your skin, and your most powerful is your brain. God designed your brain to be neurologically wired to your partner.

Your right brain processes experiences in the moment, such as feelings, sights, and sounds. Your left brain then stores that information for later use. When your right brain is working, your left brain is storing it. With your spouse you have intimacy,



sameness, oneness, feelings, sounds, movements, touch, and sights—all those things are part of your pleasure. Everything is happening in your right brain but kept in the left, which makes you want to do it again.

God made us incredibly different from other animals. Humans are one of few species that have sex face to face. Most of the animal kingdom has no intimacy. God made humans to enjoy this process of oneness. God put mirror neurons in our brains, which allow us to view what is going on in their heart. When you're having intimate moments with your spouse, look them in the eye and connect with their soul. Your eye is a direct extension of your brain and can look into someone else's soul just by looking into their eyes.

"YOUR EYE IS A DIRECT EXTENSION OF YOUR BRAIN AND CAN LOOK INTO SOMEONE ELSE'S SOUL JUST BY LOOKING INTO THEIR EYES."

So when you're being intimate, look into each other's eyes and absorb what's in the other person's heart. Oxytocin is a hormone that bonds people together. Women have more than men, but both genders have it. If we hold someone more than 10 seconds, oxytocin

rises as we bond together. Vasopressin is a hormone that works more in men, but it is increased particularly during orgasm. The problem is when we have sex with someone who is not our spouse this bonding also occurs. If you watch pornography, then your brain also tries to wire you to those you are watching. Your left brain is going, "I don't understand. I can't wire with all these people." Instead of wiring two to become one, your brain becomes confused and tries to create bonding. That is the reason pornography becomes addictive. Still, God says, "I want you to be one."

Recently, someone said to me, "All sins are the same." It is true that Jesus died for all our sins, but they're not all the same. You can go to jail for a wide range of crimes, but they're not all the alike. In fact, the Bible says every sin is outside the body except sexual sin. It's not only physical, emotional, and mental; it's also neurological with lifelong implications. Some couples watch pornography together, thinking it will enhance their intimacy, but it doesn't work like that. What's really going on is they are in bed, not with one person but with multiple people. No wonder their brains are confused and there is no bonding. They try to heighten their pleasure, becoming more extreme to fill that void bonding is supposed to fill. Yet God says, "I want you to become one. We are told to flee sexual immorality"

(see 1 Corinthians 6:18) because it is sin against your own body.

When my wife and I were dating, we were not saved at first. So we were sleeping with each other. Then we got saved and said, "We can't do this anymore." So we got engaged and married eleven days later on September 11, 1984. I told her I wanted to be a man of God and I wanted to protect her, so we married.

We had to start over. In Romans 12:1–2, Paul tells us to present our bodies as a sacrifice and renew our minds. God is so amazing that no matter how your brain has been wired to this point, He can fix it. We all need rewiring. Get rid of all the junk. If you watch a pornography, then get rid of it and get help. It is destroying your ability to bond. How do we get rewired? Read the Word of God, pray the Word of God, and memorize the Word of God. Forgive your spouse and yourself. Then allow the Holy Spirit to rewire both of your minds.

Seven

Ways to Spice Up Your Empty Nest

By Sean & Lanette Reed

one

Don't be afraid of change: Life moves on, and so should we. We're not telling you not to feel or embrace your emotions. Do that, then after a while, get up and adjust to the new season. Don't be stuck in an old way of thinking that doesn't allow you to freely live in the new. With change comes adventure, new opportunities, and, most importantly, growth. When our first child moved out, I, Lanette, wanted things to be the same. I couldn't imagine family dinners without him. I would put five plates out rather than four. A simple mistake told me that I needed to adjust to the change.

two

Volunteer together! Volunteering at a local organization is a great way to soothe that serving itch.



three

See the world. Most parents have been so faithful in raising their children that they get lost within the four walls of their home and office. We want to challenge you to get out and experience the world. An empty nest provides the perfect opportunity to plan trips to places you've always wanted to see.

four

Do you want a home gym, an art room, or a theatre room? It's your home and since this is a new season with just you and your boo, make your home suitable for the two of you. Most homes are set up for a family with long-lasting furniture, no glass decor or sharp objects. You can change all that. Freshen things up and get all the fancy things. Feel free to leave a spot available just in case the kids come to visit, but that's it.



five

Get into something new together: Empty nesting is all about rediscovering who you both are. What better way than to create a new hobby together. You'll learn so much about your spouse and laugh a little.



six

Have regular dinner parties! Gathering people around the dinner table is one of our favorite things, especially now that we have an empty nest.

seven

Host a game night with friends! Hosting a time of laughter with friends will always cheer you up and give you something to look forward to. It's a reminder that you don't have to go through this season alone.

Game Night

FOR TWO

Pandemic

Players must work together to help eradicate diseases before they take over the world. A truly cooperative game where you win or lose together.
Amazon \$34.50



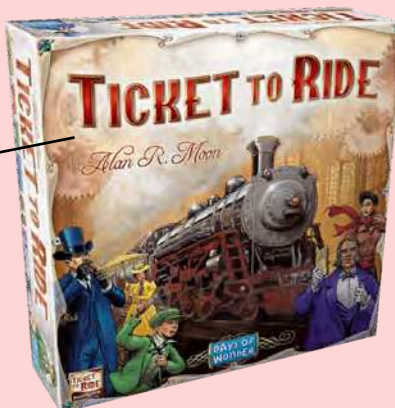
The Couples Game

This is a game of fun questions meant to make you laugh with your partner. It is not a "get to know you" game or overly mushy gushy... it's just for fun!
Amazon \$20



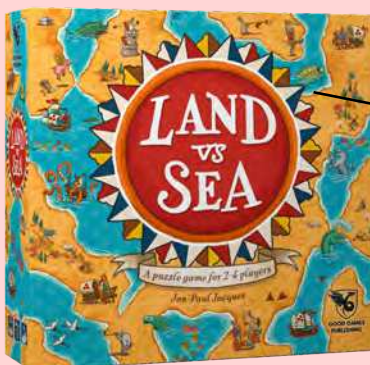
Ticket To Ride

A cross-country train adventure game that is fun and easy to learn. Build your tracks across the United States in this fast-paced and strategic board game.
Amazon \$45.13



Land vs Sea

Family friendly & fantastic for 2 players, the game's objective is in its name-map more land while your rivals map more sea.
Amazon \$29.99



Modest is Hottest

By Ashley Willis



I recently saw this trending adorable jean jacket with pearl details at Burlington Coat Factory, and when I saw the super affordable price tag, I knew I had to have it, and I decided to get it two sizes too big to embrace the trendy oversized look. I paired it with some ripped black jeans, a white tank top, and some black and white Adidas sneakers, and I loved the outfit. Also, I am excited that sneakers are in style and can go with almost any outfit. So, consider investing some quality sneakers like these Adidas ones. You will be so glad you did!

*Jean Jacket with Pearl Detail \$19.99
Burlington Coat Factory*



Even though my husband, Dave, and I talk an awful lot about being “naked” on our *The Naked Marriage* Podcast, I am still a huge fan of clothes (wink, wink). Since all of us have to wear clothes, we might as well have some fun with fashion, right? I sure think so. I love fashion! I think it is a fun way to express oneself, and I especially love it when I can put different outfits together on a budget.

As a young teen, I would often browse thrift stores like Goodwill and the Salvation Army with my mom, and we would find the coolest clothing items. We also enjoyed looking at clearance racks at our favorite stores. For us, it made shopping more fun, and it allowed us to get more for our money. As an adult, I still shop in thrift stores and consignment shops frequently, but I also buy new items on occasion. When it comes to buying clothing and accessories, I generally stick to this rule: Spend less money on trendier items and spend a little more money on fashion staples. Since trendier items tend to come into style and go out of style in a short amount of time, it makes a lot of sense to spend less on them. Wardrobe staples are a different story. We need to invest more money into the pieces that we wear often and keep for years, and purchase brands that are known to stand the test of time and wear.

Another recent trendy favorite of mine is this cute maxi dress that I found on Amazon. I love looks that are boho-chic, and this dress fits the bill. It is under \$40 and so versatile. I have worn it in the fall with a faux fur vest and boots, and I've worn it in the spring with a wide black belt from Target, black sandals, and a black, wide-brimmed hat.

Long Maxi Dress \$34.98
Amazon



Heshe Backpack \$84.99
Amazon

One important fashion staple for every woman is a good handbag. This is the Heshe leather backpack/purse I found on Amazon, and it is perfect for everyday use as well as travel. I really like how it can be worn as both a backpack—which is very on-trend right now—and a crossbody purse. This bag is made of all genuine cow hide leather, and it is super durable and comfortable to wear. It is also a really nice way to take a casual outfit up a notch. I am so glad I splurged a little on this wardrobe staple!



Last, but not least, I am so obsessed with this equestrian-style tweed blazer that I got from Goodwill. It is super classy and on trend, and under \$10. I love to wear this blazer with a light brown camisole, dark high-waisted jeans, a light brown belt, and boots. It adds sophistication to any fall outfit.

Madewell Wyeth Wool Lux Hat \$84.00
Goodwill Tweed Blazer \$10

Whether you're shopping for trendy items or wardrobe staples, it's important to remember that fashion can and should be fun. Be willing to experiment with different styles and colors. Try a new trend. Spice up your outfit with some new accessories. More than anything, be sure that the clothes you pick reflect your personality and preferences. Remember: you are God's masterpiece who He made beautiful inside and out. Be blessed, Friends!

LORD,

**THANK YOU FOR OUR MARRIAGE.
FILL US WITH JOY, THAT BRINGS
US STRENGTH. LEAD US WITH
LOVE WHICH CONQUERS ALL. MAY
WE SEEK YOU IN THE GOOD TIMES
AND THE BAD, AND MAY OTHERS
SEE YOU WHEN THEY LOOK OUR
WAY. SHINE YOUR LIGHT ON OUR
PATH, THAT AS WE WALK HAND
IN HAND, OUR FEET KNOW WHICH
DIRECTION TO GO. MAY OUR LIVES
BRING YOU GLORY ALWAYS, LORD.**

IN JESUS' NAME,

AMEN.



Mark 10:9

"Therefore
what God
has joined
together,
let no one
separate."



20 XO 23

YESTERDAY.TODAY. FOREVER.

xomarriage.com/conferences

