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Welcome TO OUR REAL MARRIAGE—AND MAYBE Yours

Jill remembers: It was our first argument, and it happened somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. We were five days into our honeymoon and had stopped at a campground along a winding mountain road. We set up our tent in the rain and got angry with each other in the process. I marched off up the mountain road, fully expecting him to chase after me. Several minutes later I returned to the tent—not chased, soaking wet, and emotionally deflated. *This isn't what I expected marriage to look like.*

Mark remembers: We'd been married just about two years. It seemed as if our entire weekend was just one disagreement after

another. We were simply too different. As we got in the car to head to church, it was evident we were going to be late once again. I absolutely hate being late and I was furious. In my anger, I picked up Jill's purse and threw it on the floor of the car. *This isn't what I expected marriage to look like.*

We're the Savages. We've been married thirty-three years, twenty-five of them happily.

While that seems like an odd way to start a marriage book, it's honest, and probably not so far off from what you've experienced in your imperfect marriage. The blending of two lives into one relationship is hard work. It's complicated. At times overwhelming. It's also humbling, enlightening, and one of the most effective ways for us to grow up.

Most of us entered into marriage with stars in our eyes and a belief that our spouse would meet our needs, fulfill our dreams, and satisfy our expectations. We spent months preparing for our wedding and just a handful of hours—if we had some form of premarital counseling—preparing for our marriage. In our ceremony, we uttered vows that promised we'd love each other “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health,” having no understanding of what that might look like in practice.

Reality set in as soon as you discovered this person you committed to puts the toilet paper on the roll backward. Not only that, but they think, process life, deal with conflict, manage money, desire sex, solve problems, handle stress, and make decisions differently than you do. It appears that indeed opposites do attract, and we think, *This isn't what I expected marriage to look like.*

A real marriage isn't perfect. A real marriage is two people being

perfected. Come along as we share our story, lessons learned along the way, and discover how God uses marriage to refine us in ways we never could have imagined.

OUR STORY

Jill: Mark and I met on a blind date. We each had a friend who wouldn't leave us alone. "You've got to meet this guy," she said. "You've got to meet this girl," he said. Finally in an effort to shut them up, we both gave in and agreed to one date. I was eighteen; Mark was twenty-two. We were engaged three months later and married ten months later. Yes, we were young and in love, but we married with both of our families' blessing.

Mark: I was working for a glass and plastics family business when we married. I worked a lot of hours, sometimes seven days a week. Jill was a full-time student at Butler University pursuing a degree in music education. We were busy, but happy.

Jill: Eleven months into our marriage, the stick turned blue. We were parents before we celebrated our second anniversary. Two years later, I delivered baby number two on my college graduation day. Needless to say, they mailed me my diploma.

Mark: I had never gone to college and felt called into ministry. So after Jill graduated, we packed up our two-year-old daughter and six-week-old son and moved from our hometown of Indianapolis, Indiana, to Lincoln, Illinois, so I could attend Lincoln Christian College (now known as Lincoln Christian University).

Jill: We lived in Lincoln for eighteen months and eventually moved to Bloomington, Illinois, so Mark could intern at a large church we

fell in love with. He finished his bachelor's degree commuting from Bloomington to Lincoln. Eventually we added three more little Savages to the family—two by birth and one by adoption.

Mark: I served as a children's pastor for ten years and eventually planted a church and served as a senior pastor for ten years. Jill started a ministry to moms called Hearts at Home. The ministry grew quickly, and eventually she began to speak and write. We often spoke together on marriage. Our plate was full with five kids and two large ministries.

Jill: Through our twenty years of church ministry, we experienced “for better or for worse.” On several occasions we sought out marriage counseling to get to the other side of conflict we couldn't resolve on our own. Mark and I came from very different families. Our differences seemed to be nearly invisible when we were dating, but magnified as soon as we said, “I do!” What differences we did see before marriage we privately thought we could change over time.

Mark: Six years ago, I lost my way. I remember the day I turned a corner in the wrong direction. After a long season of confusion, a hard season of ministry, a change in employment, and my fiftieth birthday, Jill and I were in Florida on a getaway for just the two of us. I was emotionally depleted, disillusioned with God, and discouraged in every part of my life, including my marriage.

We had enjoyed a few low-key days in her parents' condo. On our last day there, all of my emotions collided. God wasn't changing anything in my life that I was praying about, I wasn't where I expected to be in life by the time I was fifty, we continued to have the same challenges in our marriage year after year, and I decided I was done with it all.

I now know that I was living out a full-blown midlife crisis.

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I came home from that trip resolved to be done with my marriage. Shortly thereafter, a relationship began through Facebook with someone I'd known long ago. Within a matter of months, it had moved from an emotional affair to a physical one. I eventually left Jill to pursue this new relationship. I didn't care what anybody thought. I was doing what I wanted to do.

My thinking was skewed, no doubt. However, during our healing time Jill and I discovered something we call the “slow fade journey.” We will be sharing those fades with you, because if I can prevent any husband or wife from dealing with their life frustrations the way I did, my vulnerability will be worth it all.

When I left, I was headed out of my marriage into another relationship. I had a storm raging in my soul that involved Jill, me, the church in general, and my God. I felt completely hopeless that anything in my life could be different, so I decided to take things into my own hands.

Jill: In 2007, Casting Crowns released the song “It’s a Slow Fade.” The lyrics in the chorus are descriptive of the slow drift that any marriage or any spouse can experience:

*It's a slow fade when you give yourself away
It's a slow fade when black and white have turned to gray
Thoughts invade, choices are made, a price will be paid
When you give yourself away.
People never crumble in a day
It's a slow fade.¹*

Mark: We were “working” on our marriage. We knew each other’s love languages and spoke them often. We had date nights. We did

getaways on a regular basis. We were intentional about communication. In the midst of that much intentionality, infidelity became a part of our story. How in the world did that happen?

THE SLOW FADES

Looking back, it wasn't the big things that made a difference. It was the little things. Things that simmered under the surface. Things unnoticed. Unattended. Untouched.

These unknowns began an unraveling that gained momentum over time. No marriage crumbles in a day. It's a drift of one centimeter to another, one feeling or one decision that leads to another feeling or

*No marriage
crumbles in a day.*

decision that's a little off-center. If left unaddressed, those feelings will draw us away from each other instead of toward each other.

But what if you could see those early symptoms? What if you could identify the slow fade and do something about it before your marriage is in crisis? Or, if your marriage is already in crisis, you could identify the fades you're in and, with God's help, turn things around?

Understanding the slow fades and knowing what to do about them can make all the difference in the world. We've identified seven fades that we have experienced:

- ❖ The Slow Fade of Unrealistic Expectations
- ❖ The Slow Fade of Minimizing
- ❖ The Slow Fade of Not Accepting
- ❖ The Slow Fade of Disagreement
- ❖ The Slow Fade of Defensive Responses

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- ❖ The Slow Fade of Naïveté
- ❖ The Slow Fade of Avoiding Emotion

In talking with other couples—some who just face the daily challenges of marriage and some who have weathered crisis in their relationship as we have—we know that these are common patterns of drifting that every married couple needs to understand, guard against, and correct when identified. Ephesians 4:27 counsels us not to “give the devil a foothold.” John 10:10 tells us that the enemy comes to “steal and kill and destroy.” When we allow a fade to begin, it is fertile soil for the enemy to begin to divide what God has brought together. If the drift continues unnoticed and unattended, the divided relationship heads in a direction toward slow destruction.

In the coming pages we are going to unpack these drifts one at a time so we can identify any slippery slope you might be precariously near or already sliding down. We’re also going to equip you with the tools to turn each one around. Our imperfect marriages are a part of God’s plan for growing us up. When you can identify you’re standing too close to a dangerous cliff or you’ve already begun to slide into a damaging fade, that’s the first step in getting your head and your heart back on track.

But first, we have to confront the Perfection Infection.

THE PERFECTION INFECTION IN MARRIAGE

Five years ago, I (Jill) wrote *No More Perfect Moms*. This book identified what I called the “Perfection Infection,” which leads us to have unrealistic expectations of ourselves and of others, and prompts us to unfairly

compare ourselves to others. A year later, *No More Perfect Kids* followed. Coauthored with Dr. Kathy Koch, *No More Perfect Kids* looks at what happens when the Perfection Infection invades our parenting and we have unrealistic expectations of our kids and unfairly compare them to others. From the time *No More Perfect Moms* was released, readers were asking when we were going to write *No More Perfect Marriages*. Now, you're holding the highly requested and much-anticipated book.

So how does the Perfection Infection affect our marriages? To begin with, we live in a world that presents perfection as attainable. We scan magazine headlines in the grocery store checkout aisle that herald perfect bodies, perfect relationships, and perfect houses. We watch movies that solve big issues in two hours or less. We read novels that simplify relationships. We look at other couples in our churches, in our neighborhoods, and in social media, comparing the insides of our marriage to the outsides of their marriages. Too often we arrive at wrong conclusions, feeling like we don't measure up or wondering if the grass really could be greener on the other side of the fence. When our expectations are unrealistic and our marriage doesn't match up to our expectations, we become discouraged, discontent, and disillusioned with our imperfect, yet real, marriage.

Much of what we experience in our real marriage is far from what we see in the stories and images that surround us. Many girls start dreaming about marriage watching Disney movies where Prince Charming falls in love with his Princess and they live happily ever after. As girls become teens, many discover romance novels that paint a picture of what "love" seemingly looks like. Then we find our favorite sitcoms, which more often than not paint love stories of unmarried people rather than

married folks. And to top it off we have our favorite “chick flick” movies that unintentionally send messages that don’t add up in real life.

For guys, usually we don’t spend much of our life thinking about marriage. We do, however, spend time dreaming of the girl. We love to play and experience adventure, and often come into marriage believing that we will have a playmate, a best bud, and a partner for life. Most guys don’t think about the expectations of marriage; we just assume it will work out. While we may not be drawn to romance novels, certainly magazine articles, movies, and the media in general color our perception of what a love story *should* look like. If a guy dabbles in pornography (and most guys have been exposed to it at some time or another), his expectations of how a woman should respond, both emotionally and sexually, are greatly skewed.

So if our culture makes perfection seem attainable and sets us up for disappointment in the realities of life, where does the temptation to compare come from?

Start with Adam and Eve. Here were two people in the most perfect setting. They had no worries. All of their needs provided for.

Satan came along and started feeding them lies about themselves and about God. They compared their situation to his lies and decided that their life in the garden wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. They acted on impulse and broke the only prohibition that God had given them — not to eat of just one tree in the garden. Despite their perfect existence, they still felt the need for something else, something better. Their children carried on the comparison game when Cain killed Abel out of jealousy. And the saga continues . . . story

It can seem like everyone but us has this marriage thing figured out.

after story in the Bible illustrates that people have always played the comparison game.²

Unrealistic expectations and unfair comparisons fuel discontent in our real marriage. Most of us aren't even aware of it. We're mired in the muck of everyday life. Defaulting to our unspoken expectations and surrounded by images of perceived perfection, it can seem like everyone but us has this marriage thing figured out.

The Masks That Mar Our Marriages

Then we add in the masks that most of us are experts at wearing. We wear them inside our marriages, fearful of being our real selves. We hold back because we don't want to be judged and we don't want to appear like we don't have it all together. Being a people pleaser is more important than being a truth teller about how we're feeling or what we're thinking. Sometimes when we take the risk to remove the mask, our spouse doesn't handle the honest conversation well. This results in clamming back up and putting the mask back on.

We perpetuate the Perfection Infection by wearing masks outside our marriage. We pretend things are better than they are and refuse to ask for help or seek counseling. Some of us feel that asking for help is a weakness. If we do ask for help, we don't tell anyone because admitting we're in counseling would let others in on the secret that we don't have it all together after all.

Some of our masks we inherited from our family in which we grew up. Some of them stem from our personality and temperament tendencies. Others come from our identity issues. Regardless of where they come from, shame, fear, and insecurity fuel our tendency to wear

masks. We tend to hide the parts of ourselves that we consider inadequate or unattractive.

Are some of these masks marring your marriage?

The comedian mask: This mask jokes about nearly everything. Inside marriage, this mask keeps us from taking the things our spouse says seriously. We minimize their concerns and tell them to lighten up. Outside of marriage, this keeps us laughing instead of digging deep at the pain our laughter sometimes covers up.

The caregiver mask: This mask finds its value by accomplishing tasks and being a helper. Inside marriage, this mask is worn by a worker bee who “earns” his or her place in the relationship by doing. Outside of marriage, this mask fuels activity and busyness, often in place of vulnerability and relational depth (if I stay busy, I don’t have to go deep in my relationships).

The know-it-all mask: This mask falsely keeps us “in control.” Inside marriage, it doesn’t allow for differences. Instead of valuing our spouse’s differing point of view, we believe our way is the only right way. The know-it-all mask prevents us from being open to change. It allows us to stay stuck and puts the pressure on our spouse to always be the one to change. Outside of marriage, this facade keeps others at arm’s length, resisting accountability and deep relationships that can mature us.

The pleaser mask: This mask is worn to keep the peace. Pleasers often lie for the sake of keeping peace in the marriage, but underneath their pleasant demeanor, they often feel resentment. Spouses of pleasers are often shocked when they discover this bitterness. Inside marriage, it is worn to reduce conflict and diminish criticism. Outside of marriage, the

This mask says, "If I work harder, you'll approve of me more."

pleaser mask works to keep everyone happy.

The passive-victim mask: This mask keeps us from speaking up and advocating for ourselves. Inside marriage, it results in an "it doesn't matter" mindset. It also places the burden of responsibility on everyone else except the one wearing the mask. Outside of marriage, the person wearing the "passive victim" mask blames others for circumstances and doesn't take responsibility for their own happiness or holiness.

The overachiever mask: This mask says, "If I work harder, you'll approve of me more." Inside marriage, it keeps us doing, doing, and doing some more, sometimes to the detriment of communication and emotional intimacy in the relationship. It also often harbors a critical spirit. Outside of marriage, it leads to workaholicism, overcommitment, and a judgmental spirit.

In our marriage, I (Mark) wore the pleaser mask, the passive-victim mask, and sometimes the comedian mask. I think I wore the pleaser mask knowing that God has wired me to be a servant, but not understanding how to serve and not lose myself. As I unpacked my family of origin, I now see how I wore the same passive-victim mask as my birth father. Which is ironic, because, due to my parents' divorce when I was two, I did not spend much time with him as I was growing up.

The comedian mask always covered up hurt on the inside. It wasn't until I was able to identify the masks and intentionally removed them that Jill and I began to experience a new relational depth.

I (Jill) wore the caregiver mask and the overachiever mask most often. If I am tired or overwhelmed, I can easily default to them even

today. Both of these masks keep me from emotionally engaging in my marriage. They are naturally fueled by my Type A–driven, high-capacity temperament and personality type (more on that later!). It wasn't until I was able to identify them and intentionally remove them that Mark and I began to experience the emotional intimacy we both longed for.

Masks provide us a false sense of security. They keep us from truly knowing one another. So it's time for us to get naked. Emotionally naked, that is. (Well, physically naked is a good thing in marriage, too, but that's for another chapter!) Strip down the expectations, shed the pretenses, peel off the comparisons, and offer your whole self to this person you committed to love, honor, and cherish till death do you part.

Throw Away the Masks!

You are imperfect. Your spouse is imperfect. Your marriage is imperfect. Your masks are a thinly veiled attempt to cover up those imperfections, but you don't need them anymore. You can throw the masks away for good. When you kick the Perfection Infection right out of your marriage, there's no need to hide anymore.

So how do we untangle ourselves from impossible standards and crippling comparisons? How do we stop the fades that simmer under the surface? We're going to answer those questions in the coming pages. For now, turn the page, and let's take a look at where it all begins.

✦ **THINK ABOUT IT** ✦

Of the slow fades mentioned on pages 20–21, which one—just by looking at the title—resonates with your experience? What masks are you wearing in your marriage? How do(es) this (these) mask(s) hurt your relationship?

✦ **TALK ABOUT IT** ✦

My biggest takeaway from this chapter was _____

I've never given it much thought, but I think I may wear these masks more often than I realize: _____

After reading this chapter, I'm feeling _____

✦ **TALK TO GOD ABOUT IT** ✦

Lord, digging in to marriage stuff requires me to dig in to my stuff. I confess that's scary for me. I want to pretend it isn't there. I want to look the other way. Yet if I do that, I run the risk of missing out on what You have for me. I stunt my own growth and stop my marriage from being all it can be. Help me to run after more of You and less of me. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Today's Truth: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

ROMANS 12:2 (NASB)