

Chapter 1

Happily Ever After

Do you believe in love at first sight? Do you believe that by some mysterious, invisible force, in one instant, two hearts can be eternally bound together? Let me tell you a true story...

The Meeting

The year was 1978. It was a gorgeous August evening in East Alabama. I would have been on my motorcycle, but my brothers had invited me to check out this crazy young pastor named Steve at a small country church about fifteen minutes from our house. So I left my bike at home and rode with them.

“You’re going to love this guy,” they had told me.

All four of us brothers had become Christians several years before, but we were still searching to find the right church. Since we were all a little “crazy” ourselves, I was very interested in checking out this latest discovery they had made. I never could have imagined how that one church service would change my life forever.

I confess, in the past I had been guilty of going to church to see the girls. After all, church is the best place to find a suitable mate. But this night I was not interested in looking at girls. I came to seek the Lord, and I found Him. But I also found a girl! Not just any girl—*the girl*.

Now, before you allow your imagination to run wild, let me clarify that I didn’t go up and sweep her off her feet with some well-rehearsed, poetic words. This is me we’re talking about here—a simple country boy who grew up outside the city limits of a town with a population of 851.

“You’re Robert Spratlin’s sister, aren’t you?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she replied.

And that was it. I turned and walked away.

You have to admit, it wasn’t that bad an opening line. The problem was I was too dumb to follow through! I seriously wanted to get to know her, but I was too shy to initiate a serious conversation. For now, we were just acquaintances. But the story is far from over. God had arranged that meeting, and He had a plan for our lives.

The One

I didn’t see Gail again for a couple of weeks. I wasn’t surprised, though. I never really thought that such a beautiful girl could be interested in me, so I didn’t get my hopes up.

I was very pleasantly surprised when she showed up at my house one afternoon early in September, brought there by a mutual friend of ours named Michael. The pastor was taking a group of young people from the church out to eat seafood, and I was invited. Maybe they were just being nice, or maybe she really was interested in me. I still wouldn’t get my hopes up.

We met at the church, and all went together to the restaurant. By the time we got back to the church that night, I was ready to get to know this girl better. Besides her obvious outward beauty, there was something intangible that drew me to her. I miraculously overcame my timidity, and we talked for over an hour that night, before she drove off in her Ford Pinto toward her house, fifteen minutes southeast of the church, and I on my motorcycle to mine, fifteen minutes northwest of it.

Over the next few weeks, we found every possible opportunity to be together. The more I got to know her, the more convinced I was that she was the one that God had

prepared for me to be my life partner. There remained but one final confirmation and it was just around the corner.

Are You Sure?

I didn't really need any more proof; I was sure she would make an ideal wife for me. But God saw fit to bless me with a very *sweet* affirmation of His will: sweet potato casserole.

They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Well, she captured my heart with the sweet potato casserole that she brought to the church pot-luck Thanksgiving supper. After that there could be no doubt—we were made for each other! By December 1978, I was shopping for an engagement ring.

“Are you absolutely sure she's the one?” my oldest brother asked me one night.

“Yes, I am,” I replied. “I'm convinced that it's God's will for me to marry Gail.”

“Then we're all happy for you,” he said.

“But,” I added, “The ring is to be a surprise for Christmas, so not a word to anyone.”

“The secret's safe with us.”

But the secret did get out.

“I know what Robert got you for Christmas,” Gail's sister-in-law told her a few days before Christmas Eve, unable to contain her enthusiasm.

“What?” Gail asked, unable to contain her curiosity.

The Wedding

Well, at least she acted surprised when she opened her small gift on Christmas Eve, and I think she was genuinely pleased. We set a tentative date for the wedding, pending my talking to her father to ask for her hand. We decided on June

30, to allow time for her to graduate from high school and plan the wedding.

Her parents were not thrilled with the idea of the marriage, especially her mother. I'm not sure if it was the fact that I drove a motorcycle, or if it was the long hair and beard she didn't care for. At any rate, Gail's father gave his consent, so we moved forward with our plans. Gail was eighteen, and I would be twenty-one before our wedding day.



Saturday, June 30, 1979, was another gorgeous day in East Alabama. In fact, it was one of the most beautiful days of my life. The wedding and reception were perfect. My brother loaned us his car to go on our honeymoon, since I didn't have a car, and the timing belt had broken on Gail's Pinto the day before! In spite of that, our honeymoon in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, was also perfect. I was the happiest man on the planet.

Happily Ever After?

Elvis Presley sang a song called "True Love Travels on a Gravel Road." That's a fairly accurate way to describe it. Don Francisco sang a song entitled "Love is Not a Feeling (It's an Act of Your Will)." That's real life. Most people go into marriage with a fairytale illusion of what *happily ever after* is.

Did you ever notice that, in fairytales, the book or movie always ends right after the wedding, and you don't get to read or see how they lived out their married life? You either read or are informed by the narrator that "they lived happily ever after?" But how does that translate to real life?

First of all, *ever after* is relative to the life span of the marriage partner who dies first. The phrase in the wedding vows "till death do us part" means that they are committing to each other and to God to stay together for as long as they both shall live.

"For in the resurrection they
neither marry nor are given in
marriage, but are like angels of
God in heaven."

Matthew 22:30

God's design for marriage is one man and one woman together until death separates them.

Now, concerning *happily*, the fairytale version of happiness is some type of unrealistic fantasy existence free from problems, heartache, sorrow, pain, or any other unpleasantness. Obviously, real, true happiness has to exist in the midst of all those things. Indeed, how would we know what happiness was if we had never experienced sorrow?

True love doesn't live on *Easy Street*. It requires longsuffering, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. It's not always a warm, fuzzy feeling. Sometimes it's a sheer act of your will—staying true to your word, your commitment, your promise, your mate, your God.

You Can be Happily Married

So many young people today are scared to commit to marriage. They are bombarded by this statistic over and over again: "Nearly 50 percent of first marriages end in divorce." They are so terrified that their marriage will fail that they

choose rather to remain single and enjoy the opposite sex by way of dating, with no long-term commitment.

The good news is that this statistic does not have to apply to you, at least not in a negative sense. If you follow the plan laid out in this book, your marriage will be one of the over 50 percent that does stand the test of time.

I find it very interesting that few people mention the fact that **over 50 percent of marriages are successful**. Have you ever stopped to wonder what kind of people make up that over 50 percent? What do they do differently that makes their marriages last? Do they just get lucky?

Fortunately, success in marriage is not based on luck. Anyone can experience it. That is precisely the purpose of this book; to present a nearly fool-proof, step-by-step plan for “How to find and marry the right person at the right time.” I say *nearly* fool-proof because if someone is foolish, they will reject wise counsel, and therefore miss out on the benefits that God offers to all who will accept them.

The truth is that **you can have a successful marriage**.

First Things First

I have to admit, the ideas in this book are not my own—I got them from another book. You may have read it, or at least started reading it. It’s called the *Holy Bible*.

Unless you understand that God created people and marriage, you won’t be able to glean the full benefit of this book. Consider these verses:

The fool has said in his heart,
“*There is no God.*”

Psalm 53:1a

The fear of the LORD *is* the
beginning of knowledge, *But*
fools despise wisdom and
instruction.

Proverbs 1:7

“The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One *is* understanding.”

Proverbs 9:10

Before you begin this study, take a few moments to examine your relationship with God. Whether you are a single person, or the parent of one, it is imperative that you consider the topic of marriage from God’s point of view, not man’s. God designed marriage to be something beautiful, to be a blessing. It’s just common sense to go back to the source, the Bible, to discover how He intended for it to work. (If you are not sure of your salvation, see Appendix A)

Not Old-Fashioned—New and Exciting

Please don’t give in to the erroneous idea that the thoughts that I am going to share in this book are old-fashioned because they are based on biblical principles, many of which are not widely practiced in modern society. The principles and truths of God’s word are not old-fashioned; they are **timeless**. They don’t belong exclusively to any time in history; they transcend time and culture. God is not limited by time or space, and neither are His truths.

Divine truth, when rightly understood and applied, is always new and exciting. It is always relevant, at any time, in any culture or society. As each new generation discovers God’s eternal Word, they find it to be exactly what they need to live a happy and productive life on this earth.

That which has been *is* what will be, That which *is* done is what will be done, And *there is* nothing new under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:9

The Rest of the Story

I expect you must be wondering how my own story ended. Did that happy young couple in the picture really live happily ever after? Was it really *love at first sight*?

You'll have to read the rest of the book to find out!

The rest of your story is yet to be written. Will you choose to be one of the over 50 percent whose marriage is a success and a blessing? Or will you give in to the pressure of modern society to avoid the risk of a failed marriage by postponing, or even forgoing marriage, accepting instead the fraudulent substitute of dating?

I challenge you to prayerfully consider the plan presented in this book. It is the result of over thirty years of real-life experience in my own marriage, and over twenty years of ministry experience, sharing with other individuals and couples.

Put out of your mind everything you have “learned” about love, marriage and happiness from TV, movies, magazines, friends, and relatives. Many of the concepts in this book may seem radical, but keep in mind that what most people are doing today concerning marriage is not working! The institution of marriage is in serious trouble, and the solution calls for radical measures.

If you are serious about finding and marrying the right person at the right time, I am confident that you can do it, and I'll tell you how.

Real World Application

At the end of each chapter, I have included a “Real World Application” section to serve as a review of the main points brought out in the chapter, and **to apply them to your life right now.**

My “real world” has never been a perfect world. Even though Gail and I were Christians when we met, and I believe I had enough discernment to know it was God’s will for us to marry, we didn’t have the advantage of this book, or any other teaching on the subject. Everything we learned came too late for us to apply to our life. But I’m writing this book for my children and my children’s children, and for anyone who will learn from it and apply its principles.

What if it’s Too Late?

I don’t believe it is ever “too late” to do the right thing. In fact, I believe **it is always the right time to do the right thing**. You may have messed up your life. You may have been going down the wrong path for years. But don’t despair—there is still hope. This is not a book of condemnation, but of hope, of solutions, of answers.

All Things New

I’m sure your “real world” is not perfect either. But, do you know what? God can change your world. No matter how rotten your life has been up to this point, He can make your world new starting right now. But you have to do your part. Decide right now, before we go any further, that you will apply your maximum effort to change your world—your life—and I assure you that God will do His part.

The rest of your story is yet to be written. Choose to be among the over 50 percent group. Prepare yourself for a marriage that will last a lifetime. Don’t settle for less than the best that God has planned for you.

Decide right now that you will apply whatever changes necessary to your life in order to become all that God wants you to be. Commit to God’s method for finding and marrying the right person at the right time. Say “Yes” to God.