

## Writing Your Marriage-Gospel Story

You have to know how to tell the events of your life as a story or life becomes meaningless. Most of us struggle to do this. This presents a great challenge for marital enrichment. In a life without a story, important things have nothing to attach to and keep slipping off our radar. We survive one day at a time doing what has to be done in a need-driven way (food, bills, shelter, etc...) until we escape through entertainment. This is how many of us also do marriage: a pressure motivated, need-driven mindset (satisfying whatever upset my spouse had last) alternating with entertainment escapes.

In light of this, we must realize that if we're going to do marriage enrichment well, it must be a lifestyle change that connects with our life purpose. That is bigger than most people expect. But we cannot have a really good marriage as an appetizer with the "rest of life" as the main course. Marriage was never meant to be an accessory to "my" (singular) identity for the few hours I am at home. Marriage was meant to be the story in which life happens; not vice versa.

A story is more than a purpose statement. Most of us have tried to write a purpose statement before and seen it fade in relevance with time. Purpose may capture a season of life, but rarely captures our whole life. In the same way that we'll be married to at least a dozen people over the course of a single marriage, we'll change enough to have multiple purpose statements over the course of lifetime.

This is why we are speaking of "story" not "purpose statements." A single story can have many chapters, each with their own purpose and key events, contributing to the same narrative. Whatever is used to give meaning to our marriage enrichment must have this kind of adaptability if it is going to remain relevant throughout our changing lives.

"Our marriages are unfolding stories, not just a series of random events or a collection of facts. The way we understand and retell the story of our marriages to ourselves and others shapes the way we live in our marriages (p. 267)." Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

"Tell your [marital] story. Tell it to your kids, your friends, your brothers and sisters, but especially to each other. The more your story is implanted in your brain, the more it serves as a hedge against the myriad of forces that seek to destroy your marriage. Make your story so familiar that it becomes part of the fabric of your being. It should become a legend that is shared through the generations as you grow a family tree that defies all odds and boasts marriage after marriage of stability, strength, and longevity (p. 142)." Jerry Jenkins in *Hedges: Loving Your Marriage Enough to Protect It*

As you learn to tell your marriage story, we will look at telling it in three sections: (1) birth to wedding, (2) wedding to present, and (3) future dreams and fears. If you are engaged, you will only need to complete the first and third. After you have taken the time to record your life-marriage story, we will go back and learn to identify the gospel themes that are meant to be the "grand narrative" that defines your life and marriage.

### Learning to Tell Your Story

Stories are made up events, but a story is larger than the events that comprise it. This will be a guiding principle as you learn to tell your marriage story. You will begin by listing formative events in your life, courtship, and marriage. But telling your life-marriage story is about more than building a chronologically-arranged list of events.

**Events:** Begin each worksheet by writing in the key life events which shaped you in the order in which they happened. Questions to prompt you in this part of the exercise are included in each section below. For "Birth to Wedding" general time markers are given to help you outline these events. In the other two, it would be wise to begin by charting the time periods that will divide that segment of your life-marriage story.

**Experience:** After you list the key events, it is helpful to assess how you experienced those events. A simple "-5" to "+5" scale has been provided. These represent pleasant (peaceful, joyful, excited, etc...) and unpleasant (i.e., angry, anxious, grieving, etc...) responses to each item. From this you should begin to be able to see what the major seasons of your life-marriage have been like: good seasons (+3 to +5), bad seasons (-3 to -5), mixed seasons, and "blah" seasons (-2 to +2).

In this part of the chart place an "x" where that event ranks on the unpleasant-to-pleasant spectrum. Once you have completed the list and rated the experience of each event, connect the dots to give yourself a visual of how that section of your life story has unfolded. A sample of this completed exercise is provided at [www.bradhambrick.com/foundations](http://www.bradhambrick.com/foundations).



You should begin to notice whether the major shifts (good or bad) in your life have been the result of your choices or situational changes outside your control. You can probably begin to notice where your instincts towards trust or mistrust gained their current force.

**Meaning:** There is a “comment” box beside each event for you to summarize how you originally understood the significance of that event upon you. Comments can be serious or playful, but they should accurately represent the way that event actually impacted you at that time.

What were the common themes you used to interpret the pleasant parts of your life? What were the common themes you used to interpret the unpleasant parts of your life? These are probably the same themes that you use to interpret the pleasant and unpleasant events in your marriage today. Until we see that we are interpreters of life, we are slaves to the interpretations that come to us naturally.

You should begin to notice how you responded to things “in the moment” compared with the significance you give them now. Too often, we only attribute this difference to the passing of time, but most often it is not time that creates change but a *change in perspective* (which is just a more common phrase for looking at the same facts from the vantage point of a different “story”).

We will come back to this column when we begin the process of making sense of our life in light of the “Grand Narrative” of the gospel. We cannot change the “events” column. We cannot change the “experience” columns, at least not our initial reaction. But we can, by God’s grace, change the “meaning” column. Even in light of the gospel, not everything in this column will become pleasant (that is the prosperity gospel, which is a false gospel). But we can interpret our successes and failures, blessings and trials, in a way that protects our marriage from the threats of pride, insecurity, and mistrust.

### **Birth to Wedding**

An exciting, and sometimes unsettling, part of marriage is that two individual stories are becoming one shared story. From the wedding forward, you have two individual histories with a shared present and future. The first chart gives clarity about what has been joined together by your marriage covenant and what is being weaved into one by your married life.

What should you include in your life-marriage story?

- Key events – vacations, accomplishments, tragedies, moves, family changes, secrets
- Key people – family members, teachers, church leaders, coaches, friends
- Major interests – hobbies, sports, organizations
- Significant decisions – good and bad
- Spiritual markers – good and bad
- Accomplishments – goals/dreams set, disappointments, points of progress, and completion
- Jobs – skills developed, key connections established, life-direction determined
- Maturation markers – personal, emotional, relational
- Courtship – meeting your spouse, falling in love, obstacles to relationship, learning each other

### **Wedding to Present**

Agreeing on how to divide the major sections of your married life is the first part of telling your wedding-to-present story. How do the “chapters” of your marriage divide? The first year, children, moves, and jobs are common dividers. But you may think of others.

After you think of the key chapters or headings for your married life, begin listing the key events, people, decisions, spiritual markers, and accomplishments for each chapter like you did for your birth-to-wedding story. Mark the ups and downs of each experience and trace the line that is created.

Remember, the point of these exercises is to build unity (emotional and narrative) in your marriage. So, talk about the things you write. Reflect on how you see events differently now from when they occurred, and consider what that says about what God has done in your life and marriage.



Too often, we think of our Christian testimony in exclusively individualistic terms. But, if marriage makes us “one flesh” then we should be able to give a marital testimony. This exercise will help you and your spouse feel unified in ministry even when you are not doing ministry together. When you have verbalized how your stories have joined, then you can see how you are ever-present in each other’s ministry.

### **Future Dreams and Fears**

Your marriage story is not just about where the two of you have been, but also about where you are going. God created our temporal lives with a glorious suspense called “the future.” When we fail to appreciate this God-given suspense we either surrender to anxiety or apathy. A shared dream for the future is a vital part of unity and romance in the present.

Too often, a marriage begins to deteriorate when personal ambitions and dreams are not woven into a joint story. With this divide, as “progress” is made, a couple begins to be excited for one another from an increasing distance. Or, even worse, other people are more aware of the progress being made, and those other people begin to fill the role of *primary encourager*.

As you write this part of your story, there will be a couple of key differences from the prior two exercises. First, you are writing fiction not history, because you are writing about things that have not happened. Cultivating this kind of joint, joyful foresight is a powerfully important marital skill. Appendix A has a collection of dates to help you review these materials on fun, romantic evenings. This exercise can make for an enjoyable annual “Dream Date.”

Don’t get caught up in merely trying to make plans and map out steps. That is something that can and should be done later. Here you are expressing the vulnerability of shared hopes and fears. That is profoundly bonding. Don’t allow the logistics of implementation rob you of the romance of dreaming. Once you finish sharing about this page, then pick a couple of dreams you each want to pursue.

“A main part of intimacy between two persons is precisely mutual knowledge of their treasures.” Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy*

This page is the fuel for a marital prayer life. Post this in your house in a place that you see frequently or where you pray regularly. Revising this page annually can be a great marital exercise. Once you have a history of what your dreams have been over a number of years, it can be a sweet time reflecting on God’s faithfulness, provision, and reminding yourselves how God’s ways truly are better than our ways (Isa. 55:8-13).

Second, you are writing about things that are separate *and* shared. Your birth-to-wedding stories were two separate stories. Your wedding-to-present story was one shared story. Your future story is an attempt to dream as one. You may choose to write in different color pens for his (blue), hers (pink), and ours (purple) dreams. But include them all on the same page, so that you see the interconnectedness and challenges of your shared hopes and fears.

Start by listing all the roles (i.e., spouse, child, parent, employee, church member, etc...) you currently have or would aspire to have (i.e., 1 Tim. 3:1). Most often, our dreams and fears will cluster around these roles. Arranging your dreams and fears this way is an opportunity to reflect on (or brainstorm if necessary) the way you share each role. Having a shared mindset about the role each dream or fear attaches to makes it more natural to share each dream and fear.



## Sketching our Marriage Story Birth to Wedding

	Unpleasant Experience					Pleasant Experience					Comments
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	
Birth											
Elementary Age											
Middle School Age											
High School Age											
College Age											
After											

Modified and adapted from *Preparing for Marriage* edited by Dennis Rainey (pages 36-37)



### Gospel as the “Grand Narrative”

Most people are unable to talk about the gospel as the theme of their life because they have never thought through their life as a story. Hopefully, your work in the previous sections has removed this obstacle for you and your spouse. This section moves the three story exercises from merely reflective-relational exercises to tracing the hand of God through your life, marriage, fears, and dreams.

The gospel doesn’t rewrite your story; it reinterprets your story. The facts of your life will not change, but the significance of those facts has (or, at least, can) change significantly. For this reason, it is suggested that you use color, more than words, to identify where the core themes of the gospel appear in your life-marriage story. The “x’s” and line will not move, but they will become three dimensional and multi-colored.

The chart below contains the major themes of the gospel and a color-coding system. Use these colors to trace the line that runs through your charts. In some areas the colors may stack like a rainbow as you see multiple themes surrounding the same event.

Theme	Description	Color
God’s Faithfulness	The gospel begins with God’s faithfulness. Before, during, and after our sin and its affects, God is faithful. That is our hope. As the King of Kings (purple for royalty), we can count on God to be faithful. Where do you see God’s faithfulness in your story?	Purple
Sin & Suffering	The gospel is needed because of the marring affects of sin and suffering upon our lives. We are born corrupted by sin. We live in a broken world with people who will hurt us. Our lives are marred (black like spilled ink on a work of art) by these realities. Where do you see sin and suffering in your story?	Black
Undeserved Love	We could not fix ourselves or make up for the wrongs we had done. We deserved punishment and rejection, but Christ lived the perfect life necessary to merit heaven and died the death we deserved (red represents his blood) in order to demonstrate the depth of God’s great love for us. Where do see God’s love and grace in your story?	Red
Faith / Hope	A story filled with sin and suffering should be a dark story. Whenever we experience faith and hope (yellow like the breaking of the morning sun) it is intended to be a reminder that our story has been invaded by Someone greater than our sin and suffering. Where do you see the themes of faith and hope in your story?	Yellow
Joy	Laughter is the privilege of those who feel safe. Soldiers in battle don’t make jokes. Pleasure and joy are common-grace tastes of what God intends for His people and are meant to remind us of the home, Heaven, God provides for those who accept His gift of grace (orange for warm and inviting). Where do you see the theme of joy in your story?	Orange
Generosity	Without the gospel we live in a context of limited time, love, and resources. Before we experience the gospel, life is about getting as much of “it” (whatever you value most) as you can. Once we are filled with God’s love we are freed to be generous (green represents money, which is commonly associated with generosity). Where do you see the theme of generosity (in yourself and others) in your story?	Green
Community	We are saved <i>by grace through faith into</i> a community called the church. This is how we realize that our life is about more than ourselves (blue to indicate the breadth of God’s body, like the sky). Where do you see the theme of Christian community in your story?	Blue
Perseverance	By the gospel God forgives our sin (justification) and shapes our character (sanctification). Character shaping is the process by which God makes us like Jesus (brown for steady, solid growth like a tree). Where do you see the theme of perseverance in your story?	Brown
Surprise	Because of the truths of the gospel we are able to trust God with the unexpected, and God rarely works as we expect Him (asterisk to represent something out of the ordinary). Where do you see God’s unexpected hand guiding your story?	Asterisk (*)

Now that you have completed tracing the gospel themes through your story, examine what you wrote as the significance or meaning of each event in the “comments” column. What did you learn, re-learn, or unlearn about God, the gospel, and your story?