

YOUR MARRIAGE

GOD'S MISSION

Discovering Your Spiritual Purpose Together

CLINT *and* PENNY A. BRAGG



Your Marriage, God's Mission: Discovering Your Spiritual Purpose Together
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Acknowledgments

From its inception many years ago, *Your Marriage, God's Mission* generated both excitement and angst in us. Our desire was to craft something highly unique to serve as the catalyst for a Godward movement among marriages. But how? Writing this book became a mission in and of itself, which we never could have accomplished alone. Our gratitude runs deep and wide for the many eyes, hearts, and hands that have touched this work in its varying stages of development over the last several years. They include . . .

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Introduction

The high rate of separation and divorce in our nation and around the world proves that most couples today exist without a coordinated mission. The lack of common purpose makes it easier to throw away a relationship when expectations go unmet, or to exchange it for something or someone new.

Some couples believe there is a reason they are together, but they're stuck in a revolving door of careers, church, pressures, parenting, and more. Penny and I have also met couples who believe God has a particular mission for them, but ambiguity and confusion arise when we ask if they know what that mission is. Almost always they say the same thing: "We know we're supposed to do something together as a couple, but we don't know what it looks like."

We ourselves have been in all these scenarios and then some. It took us a long time to realize that our past experiences, as difficult as they were, would eventually lead us to God's mission for our marriage. To properly set the stage for further reading and application so you can move forward, allow us to take you back into our failure at both marriage and God's mission.

Less than two years after we said, "I do," we were done. In some ways, our relationship ended before it—or God's mission for it—ever got off the ground. We had dated for two years before getting engaged. In addition, we went through premarital counseling, took personality tests, and met with our pastor. All the basics of Christianity 101 were exhibited once we married: attending church, praying over meals, and serving others. We thought that believing in God and loving each other was enough to make for a lasting relationship. Wrong.

Although deep down we knew God had brought us together for a reason, we never stopped to ask Him what that reason was. Instead we made an assumption about what our life was going to look like, what we wanted out of our marriage, and what we were going to go out there and do for God. Unwittingly, we set off on a crash course to make our own hopes and dreams come true. And we crashed.

With one year of marriage under our belts, Penny and I set off on an overseas mission. Our pastor had a connection to missionary work in Papua, New Guinea, and we eagerly signed on. However, we were disappointed when our plans for a summer-long mission to New Guinea turned into a two-week trip to Haiti.

“This isn’t going to be very challenging,” I remember saying to Penny. “Maybe we should hold out for something more . . . adventurous.”

When our first morning in Haiti included an infestation of fire ants in our makeshift bed (wooden planks stretched across a cement slab), I realized we’d gotten ourselves into a little more than we expected. Still, we weren’t about to wimp out.

I’d spent two tours fighting in Vietnam, so our accommodations didn’t jar me that much. In the army I’d spent many nights sleeping on top of an APC (armored personnel carrier) in the jungle. I was a little worried about Penny and what she might be feeling, but I never asked her about it. After all, we had a mission to accomplish. My military mind-set governed my actions and interactions with her and everyone else.

Our two main goals were to construct a cement-block building to function as both a church and a school, and to share Christ with those living in tiny thatched huts. Being in Haiti reminded me of my time in Nam, and my military training allowed me to emotionally disconnect myself from the immense poverty and sickness we witnessed.

I (Penny) began rethinking overseas missions when the fire ants crawled up our legs that first morning in Haiti. Day two was no better. Our team spent ten hours standing up in the back of a flatbed truck that traveled through the jungle on a narrow, unpaved road. Like buoys in the ocean waves, we bobbed up and down with every bump and pothole. Guards in battle fatigues stopped us several times, pointing loaded rifles in our direction. At each checkpoint I held my breath. I wasn’t ready to die!

Eventually we arrived at our worksite and set up camp. At our first meeting there, Clint and I were asked to serve on separate work teams. This unnerved me. I didn’t want to be apart from him, but I wasn’t comfortable expressing my concern. Clint was assigned to the building crew, and I was sent off into the jungle with the evangelism team. My insides rattled way down deep. While we walked slowly from hut to hut, garnering the strength for what we were about to do, my fears mounted. The farther into the bush we journeyed, the further my gut lodged itself up in my throat.

Walking along the dusty pathway, we approached two women escaping the intense heat by stretching out under the shade of a tiny tree. One of them said she had been robbed in the city, and her husband murdered. She was twenty-three.

As we continued walking, another woman with a sick baby and a severely malnourished toddler rushed out from their hut and begged us for medicine.

“Please help me! My baby is sick,” she cried out in Créole. She shoved the baby into my teammate’s arms. “Take her with you to America.”

Through our interpreter, we discovered that the infant was suffering from worms, diarrhea, congestion, and malnutrition. There was no money for medicine. We prayed for the baby and told the mother we'd try to help. She followed us to the next hut.

I peeked inside. There on the dirt floor was a crippled man curled up in a ball, a bag of bones. The hut was dark and smelly. I was afraid something might happen to me if I went all the way inside. The suffering of these people was more than I could bear. To add to my fear and distress, we were taunted by voodoo bands at night along the roadside. I was *this* close to being over the edge, but I didn't say anything to Clint. To anyone. After all, we were doing great things for God and living out His mission for our marriage.

On our final morning, the whole team gathered together for Bible study, prayer, and worship. As we sat in a circle, a woman suddenly burst from the bushes, ran over to Clint, and climbed in his lap. Before I could think, I jumped up, grabbed the woman, and pulled her off him. She screamed at me in Créole. I couldn't understand a thing she said, but I knew it wasn't good. Clint and I never talked about what happened.

Disillusioned, stunned, and shaken by the suffering I'd witnessed, I found no gauge to measure or process what we'd experienced. Once we got home, there was a strange disconnection between Clint and me—a gap that only widened over time. My faith was slowly being eaten away from the inside; Clint wanted to go on another mission.

Gradually I distanced myself from my responsibilities at church and started hanging out with new friends from college. As Clint and I continued to struggle, my thoughts morphed into drastic decisions. Eight months after our return from Haiti, I packed a few things in a suitcase and walked out our front door. Marriage and mission—aborted.

Clint and I aren't trying to place the blame for our demise on that one overseas mission. We take full responsibility for our marital crash and burn. There were actually many miracles during that trip, and we were grateful to be a part of what God did there. But in the end, we were not just worlds apart; we were on completely different planets. As a result, we bottomed out before our second anniversary. Once our divorce was finalized, we turned our backs on each other and walked away.

Eleven years of complete silence passed between us.

When God began reconnecting us in 2002, we were finally able to speak openly about our blowout. Among many other things, we talked about that mission to Haiti and how whatever happened there had sent us into a tailspin. Haiti was the beginning of the end.

In hindsight, we also realized that our problems ran much deeper. That overseas mission just unearthed them. For years the difficulties we endured as children had been stuffed down and glossed

over with strong facades. When the unexpected happened in Haiti, we were unprepared for what it triggered. That one trip brought ugly things to the surface, and we didn't know what to do with them.

Perhaps if we'd realized we were two broken people in need of much mending, things would have turned out differently. Instead we were full of pride and blind to our own brokenness. We harped on our unmet needs and each other's shortcomings. While we were convinced that we were ready for God's mission, we were totally unprepared for marriage.

When God miraculously reconciled us, we knew that we had to make some major changes. Instead of focusing on ourselves, we asked God to heal our brokenness and set us on an intentional course to pursue Him as a couple. In the process of doing so, God revealed His mission for our marriage—a mission we *never* saw coming. It's the reason behind this book. Our mission is YOU.

How to Use This Book

My (Clint's) induction into the United States Army began with a physical exam and a series of assembly line inoculations. Next I was officially sworn in by oath to defend my country. Once that was complete, the other GIs and I were transported to Travis Air Force Base and, finally, Fort Lewis, Washington, for basic training. Upon arriving, we were stripped of our clothes and given fatigues and the standard military buzz cut. Like well-oiled machines, the drill instructors in command bounced us from one person to another. There was a precise way to do everything.

There is something to be said for that kind of regimented approach. While there isn't a perfect prescription to begin discovering God's mission, we suggest that you start by setting aside one hour each week to read this book together, pray, and discuss the questions at the end of each chapter. For consistency, try your best to meet at the same time, day, and place each week. Think of these meetings like regular mission updates and business briefings from a commanding officer or CEO (God). You wouldn't dream of launching a mission, going into battle, or implementing a business plan without meetings. Why would you approach your marriage any differently?

If you've never tried something like meeting regularly with your spouse, it may take some getting used to. Give yourself time. And realize that Satan will work hard to keep you from meeting consistently. Disagreements will tempt you to skip out on being together. It will take an unwavering commitment from each of you to make this time together a high priority. Your marriage is worth it. God's mission is worth it.

During your weekly meetings, turn off the demands of the day. Set aside the distractions of cell phones and other screens. Taking proactive precautions to alleviate interruptions will help you focus

and concentrate on each other. If you have young children, you'll need to make arrangements for their care. But be assured that what you're doing as husband and wife will greatly benefit your kids and create a lasting impact on the future generations of your family.

As in life, some chapters in this book are more involved than others. Don't feel you have to rush through a reading. You may or may not get through one chapter each week. That's okay. Any worthwhile endeavor takes time, effort, and energy.

To enhance your experience, QR codes are imbedded throughout the chapters.* If you don't have a QR code reader app installed on your smartphone or tablet, we highly recommend that you download one and use it to scan these codes. Each one will link you to videos of other couples on missions from God. Our hope is that you'll glean insight and inspiration from their stories.

One final suggestion: keep a notebook or journal to record what God is doing as you meet together each week. (You can each keep your own journal or use one in which both of you will write.) For some people, journaling elicits a visceral response. However, reflecting in writing on what God is doing, and responding to what unfolds, is a powerful way to retrace your footprints and derive meaning from your experiences. Try not to overanalyze or edit your thoughts and feelings. Express yourself freely. You'll be amazed at the way your journal becomes not only a running record of your experiences but a treasured part of your marriage legacy and a testimony to God's faithfulness.

Consider this book a training manual intended to facilitate an encounter with God as husband and wife. Over the course of reading it, you'll strap on the sandals of Joshua, Nehemiah, Jesus, Paul, and others whose hearts were resolutely set on God and His mission. Our prayer is that in the process of encountering Him in *their* lives, you'll discover God's specific mission for your marriage. Make no mistake, He has one—a mission uniquely yours.

Because some couples may not be accustomed to praying together, we've included a prayer at the end of each chapter. You'll also find discussion questions to help you apply what you've read. Reading the chapter is only a small part of your experience. You'll work out your marriage and mission muscles when you pray together, talk about what you've read, and discuss the questions.

You'll get out of this commitment what you put into it. That being said, hold on. You're setting a course for a unique discovery mission with God where absolutely anything is possible. Are you ready? Good. Let's move forward!

* QR codes not included in prerelease galley.

Phase I

Induction and Mission Ops

Chapter 1

Marriage on a Mission

If you take missions out of the Bible, you won't have anything left but the covers.

—Nina Gunter

The Bible is full of special people sent on specific missions. Moses's mission was to bring the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. Joshua's mission was to lead God's people into the Promised Land. Rebuilding the ruined city of Jerusalem was the task given to Nehemiah. Jesus's mission was to do the will of God the Father. The apostle Paul was charged with spreading the gospel and establishing the early church.

Not only did God choose certain individuals to carry out specific missions, but He also chose couples. In the Old Testament, God revealed His original design for marriage through Adam and Eve. Abraham and Sarah were chosen to give birth to many nations in order to establish God's covenant. In the New Testament, Joseph and Mary's mission was to parent the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. The charge of spreading the gospel was given to Priscilla and Aquila. All these couples were given a marriage mission: a specific task assigned by God to be carried out together to accomplish His will.

In fact, God has a mission for *every* marriage, including yours. No matter your age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, life circumstances, or denomination, there is something unique that He wants you to accomplish together over the course of your lives. Whatever God's mission for your marriage includes, it is designed first to honor Him and then to impact others.

The goal of *Your Marriage, God's Mission* is to help you discover God's mission for your marriage and assist you in its development, growth, and ongoing assessment. To do so, we'll share about our own process of discovering God's mission for our marriage as well as that of other couples we've met along the way. You'll also find helpful tools and innovative ideas within these pages, but we promise not to spoon-feed you with prescriptive advice or a set of linear steps. Discovering God's mission for your marriage isn't a program. It's a process. While we often wish we knew both the end result and the means to get there, God isn't like that. Neither is marriage or His mission for it.

However, we do know that discovering and living out God's mission will give your relationship a much greater sense of purpose and meaning. Your marriage, unreservedly set on God's mission,

possesses the power to impact families, neighborhoods, churches, communities, and the world! And no one is better suited for the task than you.

Just as no two marriages are alike, God's mission for every marriage is also unique. The processes He uses to guide each couple differ as well. As your marriage grows and your life circumstances change, your mission may also change or morph into something new. Or you may have one solitary mission throughout your entire marriage.

Having said all that, there is a common purpose in every mission: God created marriage as the vehicle by which the gospel is transported throughout all generations. As you experience God together, your earthly mission will begin to reflect that purpose, set forth before time began. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10 ESV).

In these latter days, as we await the return of Jesus Christ, our world is quaking and shaking with financial upheaval, tragedy, terrorism, shifting weather patterns, and health epidemics that span the globe. We believe God is giving His people one last opportunity to reach up and grab hold of His heart, His plans, His purposes, and His mission.

This is *your* chance.

Now that you understand a little more about what a marriage mission is, the remaining chapters in this phase will explain why your marriage needs a mission and how to discover yours.

Pray Together

God, there is much more to marriage than we ever imagined. We believe You have a purpose and a mission for us to accomplish as a couple. Help us discover the task You have assigned to our marriage. Open our hearts and minds to hear what You are saying as we begin this process together. Make us sensitive to Your Holy Spirit and give us wisdom to make choices in accordance with Your will. Help us remain faithful and committed to meeting each week, without interruptions. Guard us from allowing other things to take precedence over this time we're setting apart. Our marriage and mission belong to You. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Taking the Next Step

Use these questions as discussion points. You may also wish to record some answers or insights in your journal.

1. When you hear the word *mission*, what images and words come to mind?
2. What do you hope to gain from meeting together each week? Discuss your hopes and expectations as well as your concerns.
3. Choose the day of the week, time, and place you'll meet each week. Identify any possible distractions or interruptions. What will you do to protect this commitment?

Chapter 2

Why Marriage Requires a Mission

Marriage has the power to set the course of your life as a whole.

—Timothy Keller

There are several reasons why the marriage relationship requires a mission. We already know that missions are one of God's primary means to accomplish His will on earth. But the purpose of a marriage mission doesn't stop there. The process of discovering God's mission allows you to encounter Him as a couple. In other words, discovering God's mission for your marriage is also about discovering God. The process is just as important as the final outcome.

Let's use the very first couple recorded in the Bible as a tangible example of this truth. Adam and Eve were designed to be the model of God's marriage covenant, and right at the start of their mission, they had the opportunity to encounter God. The Bible says that Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8). God was literally in their midst! But instead of engaging in that intimate experience together, they gave in to temptation and sin. Unfortunately, we live with the fallout of their choices. But because Christ fulfilled His mission to save us from all sin, we don't have to live under that penalty.

When you choose to pursue God and His mission together as a main priority in your lives, be assured that God will show up. No matter how long you've been married, what your marriage history has included, or what you're up against right now, engaging in the process of discovering God's mission together will serve as a catalyst for an authentic encounter with Him that will change your marriage forever.

Another reason marriage needs a mission is that it puts you in joint pursuit of common goals. Plenty of things in your daily lives can divide or weaken your relationship, such as keeping up with the rapid pace of your surroundings, responding to the varied needs of family members, overbooking your schedules, meeting the requirements of demanding jobs, etc. People, addictions, and other pleasurable attractions can act as divisive agents. But a marriage set on God's mission means you're both working toward shared goals, serving God together, and experiencing common events.

Our friends Dan and Pam have discovered that God's mission for their marriage is tutoring at-risk kids. Given their personalities and talents, we can think of no better couple to carry out this mission than them. Their common goals are not limited to helping these underachieving children perform better in school. They also seek to demonstrate tenderness and compassion for each child's overall welfare. This includes actively helping the children's families by preparing snacks and donating school supplies. When lives are transformed at the tutoring center, Dan and Pam get to experience that joy together. When needs arise, they strategize in prayer and planning. When troubles surface, they share in the same sorrow. Their mission bonds them more tightly together.

In addition to encountering God and working toward common goals, you get to use your gifts, talents, and abilities for the good of others when your marriage aligns with God's mission. For example, one couple at our church is gifted in coordinating and serving people. They combine those skills and carry out their marriage mission by preparing meals for bereaved family members and friends following each memorial service.

Our friends Charles and Melanie possess musical talents. Their mission? To colead worship and inspire the next generation to use their God-given gifts for His glory. Their talents could have easily led them in different directions or put them in a competition against each other. Instead, they have allowed God to fuse those talents and gifts together for the benefit of others.

Conversely, a marriage without a mission has a high potential of running on parallel tracks: two people married by contract and obligation but living separate lives. This type of relationship lacks focus and is ruled by haphazard behavior, impulsive decision-making, and cyclical offense patterns. Picture two soldiers in the same fighting unit whose lack of coordinated effort results in their fighting against one another. What ensues is "friendly fire": spouses misidentifying each other as enemies who eventually become targets. Instead of operating as a unit the way God intended, such couples end up merely coexisting. Oftentimes the distance between spouses increases over time until what started as two parallel tracks diverge farther apart. These marriages pack the highest potential for crisis, separation, and divorce.¹

Besides running side by side rather than united, a marriage without a mission fails to take its proper place in God's overarching purpose for all mankind. Think of God's greater purpose as a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece is created to fit perfectly together with other pieces, displaying a larger picture only He can see. Some pieces are tiny; some are bigger. Some pieces are void of color; others are vivid. But every piece is needed to fit together and create the overall picture. Take one piece out of the puzzle and the picture is incomplete.

Marriages were not designed for spouses to operate separately but to be joined together as a symbol of Christ's relationship with believers, exhibiting God's glory for all time. The more couples there are who choose to discover God's mission, the more glorious and extraordinary the final masterpiece will be.

Pray Together

God, although we may not know what Your mission for our marriage is yet, we understand why we need to have one. Help us take the next right step in this process of discovery. Make us aware of the gifts and talents You've given us, and show us how we might use them to serve You and others. We need to work toward common goals, but we want them to align with Your will. We want a marriage that is united, not divided. Help us take our place in Your bigger picture. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Taking the Next Step

Use these questions as discussion points. You may also wish to record some answers or insights in your journal.

1. In your own words, explain one reason why every marriage needs a mission. If you're keeping a journal, write that reason down and place today's date next to your entry.
2. Do you know of a marriage that seems to have accepted an assigned task from God? If so, what is their mission and how are they living it out?
3. What are your spouse's greatest strengths, talents, or abilities? What are yours? Do you have any strengths in common? If so, what are they?