

The Wedding Vows 20 Years Later

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My wife and I recently celebrated 20 years of marriage. I could have written the obligatory blog post or Facebook update to show how amazing she is and how undeserving I am and how glad I am we get to go on this journey together and how I hope we get 20 more years on this journey. I believe those things and could easily say them and mean them. But I didn't.

I could talk about how much joy I still have when I see her or hear her voice. But we have both come to realize that after 10 years those things were easy to say, but after 20 there is a whole lot of other things in our lives that will not allow me to write something trite because 20 years of marriage is not easy. It has been very hard. The fun of the first 10 years disappeared a bit in the light of other developments. We often say to each other, remember when we used to make up corny songs or give each other silly nicknames? Of course we remember, but we do not do that nearly as much now. We still do some of that, but they have mostly disappeared in the light of other developments.

In the second 10 years of marriage God has made sure we understand things about ourselves we did not wish to learn. He has brought us into certain kinds of suffering that we may never be free of in our "earthly tents." He has shown us how fragile life is with our marriage, our kids, and our continual struggle with selfishness and heart idols.

So on this our 20th anniversary, we want to share some thoughts about marriage, mostly for my younger married and not yet married readers. We often think about you with a bit of envy that we

cannot go back to the time when marriage was easy and a daily adventure. It really was easy in comparison with what has come to us. And we know our experience will not be common to all, or the timing of what we have learned, but we hope others find it helpful as we have found it helpful to meditate on our marriage and share these things with you.

What I offer below is not some well crafted, annotated essay. It is my anniversary morning thoughts, unplanned beyond the time it took to write it. We talked as I wrote, and this post accurately relays how we feel. This is what 20 years of marriage vows have meant to us. Though we could obviously say much more, we hope to convey that we are not complaining. We cannot talk about the vows without mentioning the hard part of the vows. It is not pretty or easy, but it is good.

To Have And To Hold From This Day Forward

Having and holding each other felt pretty doggone good 20 years ago. I remember as a young unmarried man thinking of how amazing it would be to be married one day and holding a woman who loves me at any moment of any day that I would like to hold her. And now 20 years later we hold each other less often than we did, but still a lot. Some days, right in the middle of the day, we will go lay in the bed for a bit and hold each other and talk about whatever. It still is a joy, though we find ourselves thinking of something that needs to get done and move on.

In a bigger sense, we 20 years later have still only each other to have, and each other to hold.

There is no one else, and we love that. And we are still each other's best friend. What we started in only having and holding each other has continued. And we look forward to more days, weeks, months, and years of only holding one another.

In the last 10 years, we did not just get the pleasure of having and holding each other. We had to, often because there was little else in this life given to us by God to cling to. We still had each other. We held each other when under attack from gossips, when Molly had both of her brain surgeries, when horrible things happened to our children, when the things of this world and the messengers of Satan afflicted us. In those moments we fell into the arms of God and each other.

It is not good for man to be alone, and at times in ministry and in various ways, it has been very lonely. I remember many days and nights, from early on to two days ago, where something in me needed to hold someone and she was there. By God's magnificent grace he has provided me with a beautiful, godly, loving wife . . . to have and to hold. An inseparable union, we move forward together.

For Better, For Worse

We have had remarkable "better" times. I know a lot of married people who seem to love each other very much. Good for them. But I cannot think of anyone who has more fun being married than Molly and me. It's a trip. And "better" times are grand, when the bills are paid and the basement is not flooding and the kids are getting good grades and there are not any cavities. When times are good we sing together and enjoy each other's company. We forgive each other quickly and enjoy each other's idiosyncrasies. We make time to hang out and talk, to get alone, to spend time around others. But anyone can endure the better times.

Especially during the last 10 of our 20 years the "worse" times have been pretty bad—some very bad. Some things we have been through are still too painful to describe in a reflection like this, so I won't. Many who know me already know some significant "worse" times through my blogging during and after Molly's brain surgeries. We have not had it as bad as many others, and we have had it worse

than many others. But comparison is not the point and is not how we think of our marriage. This is our road. It is our marriage.

We have had to preach the gospel to each other a lot. In worse times the gospel can get lost. God has given us each other to put someone there day by day to speak of the cross and peace and grace and love and forgiveness when one of us is distracted by the worst of our own sinfulness or the bad things that happen to us. Our stresses tend to bleed into each other's lives because we are one, but we endure together. Sometimes the one not suffering gets angry or bitter. Meanwhile, the one who is suffering is suffering well and reminds the other of how Jesus suffered for us, and the gospel breaks us of our bitterness.

I had no idea what "worse" would look like in marriage. We were both naïve. We thought we took the high and happy road by being fully committed to covenantal love for one another, and that would lead to a ton of better and little worse. Experientially, it has not. Though we have never even discussed divorce, it does not take the breaking apart of a marriage for a married couple to be broken. Still God, through giving us one another, makes those "worse" times, as bad as they are, really a "better" time because He is there with us and because we are there with each other.

For Richer, For Poorer

We have never appeared on the "richer" side of things. My income has always been less than able to provide all the things we generally believe we need as middle class Americans. After all this time our kids have not gotten braces and do not have money for college. The last 5–6 cars have been free or almost free, by necessity. Our last three homes have been parsonages or missionary housing, free of charge, and we have never owned a home or townhouse. Nearly everyone our age is driving something newer and better. Everyone's house is bigger. Everyone's retirement account is fuller. Probably not completely fair, but the feeling is there and mostly accurate.

But 20 years of marriage has taught us that a bigger house does not make for a happy home. A

nicer car often means a bigger car payment which we do not have. We are not living for retirement, because we realize real rest is coming on “That Day.” Sure, we would like a new BMW or Suburban to drive. Really we would. But being married and having four amazing kids and keeping things simple is a kind of riches to us.

When times have been very tight, we still retell the stories of God providing vans and houses and groceries. Our kids are not hearing stories of financial achievement, but of faith and of a God who provides far beyond what we deserve. Our marriage has endured times where we have gone without because we go with God and with each other. We go with the church who has loved us and given so much for the gospel’s sake.

We hope our finances improve and we are able to provide our kids things that they want. We are working and praying toward that end, but if we cannot, we know One who can provide in riches and in poverty. He has proven himself over and over. And my wife and I remind each other of that as often as we can.

In Sickness And Health

In connection to money, we should add here that the plan from early on, like many couples, was to keep Molly home from work during the formative years of our kids until she could work (if she chose to) once they entered school. It was very difficult, but we did it. She was earning almost \$30 an hour as a dental hygienist early in our marriage. But we sacrificed for the kids. She worked at home with our kids and I held one or more jobs while full time in school. Then came her diagnosis with Chiari I Malformation, resulting in two brain surgeries. These operations pretty much eliminated her chance at that career or much of any other career.

She took a job working at a local elementary school with a special needs kid during school hours last year. It messed her up, and she had to stop. Still many local friends think she stopped for no particular reason. Truth is, it was devastating to her health. Because she’s pretty and always looks happy around others, most do not realize the sickness runs deep and has ongoing effect. Few understand

what daily life is like when “health” seems to be a condition that will never describe her adequately again until That Day.

Molly is “sick,” never fully well, always living below the level of those first 20 years of her life and first 10 years of our marriage. Right now, for example, she wakes up every day wondering if she will have that particular headache that puts her down for a full day of vomiting and out of commission for anything else. And it is all a result of something no doctor is able to change.

Both of us have suffered varying levels of depression and anxiety the last 10 years. The last 10 years both Molly and I have lost our ability to sleep well. Sometimes we cannot fall asleep. Sometimes we cannot stay asleep. Rarely do either of us feel fully rested.

The first 10 years of our marriage I was in various stages of health, working hard both mentally and physically. After a few fun years of mountain biking and being in amazing shape, I found I had a few disc problems in my upper back. Often one day of exercise messes me up for weeks. Lifting weights has become nearly impossible. The only trip my family took to Disney World, I could not ride any coasters with the kids because of extreme pain when both awake and asleep.

We have had times of health, and times of “sickness.” What we have learned along the way is that we get to endure together and help each other in the sick times. I have told Molly many times that as odd as it seems I have found the times of her greatest fear and deepest sickness, namely right before and during her brain surgeries, to be times of great growth for me. She is helpless and needy, and I get to serve her. I learned to take care of her household duties as well as do my own work as a pastor. I learned to have someone lean hard on me in times of incredible need, and I enjoyed being there for her. I learned to lean hard on God because I was forced to live beyond my means—which is what I should have been doing all along.

Sick times have only begun. Our 20 years of marriage have us both about the age of 40, which is still young. We do not feel that young. Times get so bad that Molly will look at me and say, “I sure wish

Jesus would hurry up and come back.” She means it. And yet being married in sickness and health means we hold each others’ hand while waking up another day and working hard for each other, for our kids, and for the sake of the world hearing the gospel. What a joy to have all this pain and endure it together as husband and wife for all this time.

To Love And To Cherish

What love meant to us 20 years ago was ridiculous. It meant a lot of awesome physical things (at least for me) and a general vibe of fun and adventure and playfulness and a general attitude of “What’s next? Let’s go do it!” For Molly it meant security and companionship. It meant sharing life with a best friend and lover.

Now, 20 years later, love is so much better though at first it does not feel like it is. Love early on was all over the place. It was public displays of affection and big toothy grins in photographs. It was weekend trips and events and discovery of wonderful life stuff. We got to explore the world we inhabited and the pleasures of marriage together, and it was exciting. It has not stayed quite that way.

With the births of our children in particular, the quick, heated, excited kind of love began to shrink. Actually, it did not shrink so much as it transformed. Now our sharply directed love for one another became spread out. Anyone who tells you that you can experientially love your spouse the same before having kids and as you are raising your raise kids is not telling you the truth. It becomes work. Justin Buzzard has had to write a book about how to *Date Your Wife* because too often we stop.¹ The first years of marriage were a constant date. Since having children, dating has had to become intentional. And those deep conversations into the night have become conversations into the evening after the kids are in bed and the last household chores have been done and “OH MY look at the time, I have to get up early in the morning for a MOPS group.”

We thank God for those years of racy love and the millions of kisses and endless hours of playful teasing. That is a part of our love for and cherishing of each other. We thank God for the years

of settling in to a deep and abiding love through huge mistakes, hurtful arguments, angry comments, putting off forgiving each other, apathetic stretches, and lulls between moments of kissing each other like we really mean it and do not have something better to do.

Love has lost some of its glorious youthful bite, but it has grown into learning I need to listen to her like her voice is living water poured into me. Love has become seeing gifts I am still learning to discover. Cherishing her has grown into a daily job of staring at her once again, like I did before, thanking God for the years on her face because it is those years of knowing each other deeply that gave her mildly aging face character and tells a thousand stories of her love for me, beyond what I have ever deserved. I have learned that loving and cherishing my wife almost never has to do with what sounds good to me, but learning what sounds good to her and letting her have that to her heart’s content and being the one to enjoy supplying it for her. And yet I am so far from doing that like I should. How much I love her, and how much I have yet to really love her.

Until Death Do Us Part

To end this briefly, we have not gotten there yet. We have known for a long time it can end any day. We have never realized that more than right now. We have been given a 20 year gift and hope to enjoy it longer. But after 20 years, we have absolute certainty that we have been given to each other less to have fun and more to work for each other toward that common joy of life eternal. We are not headed toward a more perfect eternal marriage with each other, but with the Bridegroom who will show us what this momentary marriage was always pointing us to. It took us 20 years for this idea to actually sink in, but in many ways we have only scratched the surface of understanding what forever will look like. But considering the massive pain we have endured and the indescribable joy we have found in 20 years together, eternity is going to be a stunner.

I love you, Molly. Keep walking with me in these broken bodies and with these selfish strug-

gles with sin; hold my hand, and let's stay on this narrow path to something far better than what has so far been so amazingly good.

ENDNOTES

¹Justin Buzzard, *Date Your Wife* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).