

Foreword by Rev. Joe Kim

Boundless
LOVE

Healing Your Marriage Before It Begins



CHRISTINA & JAVIER LLERENA

Boundless Love: Healing Your Marriage Before It Begins.

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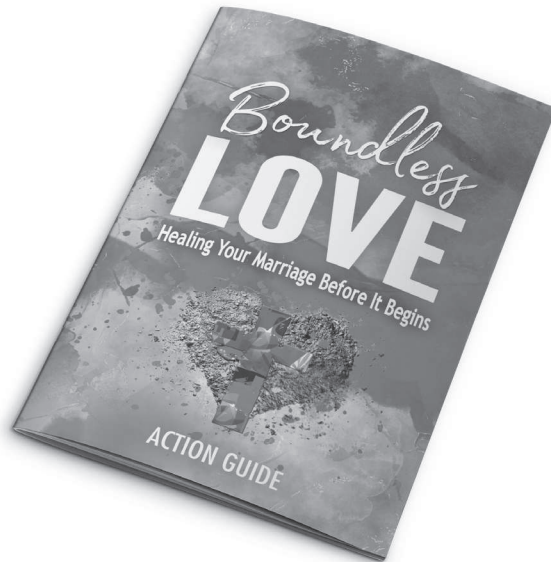
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DEDICATION

Javier

TO OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. You never left me.

To my daughters, Isabel ("Pledged to God") and Lucia ("Graceful Light.") You are my greatest accomplishment in my life. Thank you for giving me the gift of being your father on Earth.

To Sheila and Luis, friendship, brotherhood, and sisterhood. I deeply admire your relationship. Thank you for introducing Christina and me. I love you! I am so grateful for being part of your life. I am forever in your debt for making mine so boundless.

To my siblings Maria, Eduardo, Alicia, and Miguel—we fight a good fight!

Christina

TO OUR DAUGHTERS, Isabel Paulina and Lucia Maria, may you always remember that you are precious in the eyes of God and you are fully loved no matter what you do. You are daughters of the one true King and always protected. We love you with all our hearts and are so thankful that you chose us to be your parents.

To my parents, Paul and Loretta, who gave me everything and more. Thank you for always supporting my dreams and being my biggest fans. Your commitment to one another serves as a living example of unconditional love in action.

To our Heavenly Father. Thank you for holding us in the palm of your hand and loving us as your precious children. We give you all the glory and all the gratitude in our hearts. May our words glorify you and all your gifts.

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FOREWORD I

IF WE WERE TO NAME the top reasons why people today fear commitment, they might include: I'll get hurt just like before and it's hard to trust, it won't work out anyway because I've seen too many failures including myself, I wouldn't be free anymore and it's not my definition of fun, I'm too young and that's for old people, it's way too big of a decision, I'm good with my life now, and why add complications. All these are legitimate, and I have heard them or felt them myself. In my work as a priest, I have assisted all sorts of people in making major decisions (what to do, what not to do, how, when, why). I've noticed that for those who have made a decision that they are happy with (including myself), the most helpful thing was seeking the advice of people who have made the decision already.

This is what the Prophet Jeremiah says, "Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls" (6:16). Not that the advice of people will make our decision for us, but that we might begin to imagine and see ourselves more clearly in an otherwise dark, confusing future. Not that these people

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were perfect, either. Rather they felt the same things, got hurt in the same way, made some mistakes along the way, and made realizations about themselves, about life, and about the concept of perfection. Javier and Christina are those people. Their story is not about two perfect people, rather how God brought two people to perfection through marriage.

The biblical understanding of perfection is beatitude or fulfillment—becoming what we were originally created to be. Unfortunately, there are a whole lot of bad things in the world (and in us) that derail us from perfection. However, marriage is one of the ancient gifts of God that was never taken away or completely destroyed by any evil (thank God). In fact, you could read the entire history of humanity as God’s plan to restore marriage to its original glory—a completely transparent, loving interchange of love between persons which creates something new. The suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the action of the love of a spouse in the face of some horrible infidelity. That kind of love is trustworthy, stable, freeing, dependable, refreshing, renewing, and best of all, without end. Where is this love and is it even possible today? You’ll find a description in the following pages. You’ll find it waiting within you.

—**Rev. Joseph Kim,**

Diocese of San Jose, California.

*“God became one of us, so we
could become like unto God.”*

—Feast of St Athanasius

FOREWORD II

THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF A man and a woman being bonded together shows its roots in Genesis 2:18, “The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” God decides that man cannot do it alone and needs a “helper.” (Don’t get caught up on the word “helper”—it was not intended as a negative term and is also used by God to describe Himself.) God recognizes that navigating through life can be tough, complicated, and sometimes lonely—life can be easier when two people are working together toward a common goal. Later in Genesis 2:24-25, the author explains the point of marriage: two people leave their past lives behind and are joined together to go through life as if they are one. Put yourself in the “shoes” of Adam and Eve at this point in their marriage. At the point of how God originally desired marriage to look. In verse 25, the man and the woman are completely exposed, vulnerable, and intimate with each other without shame. Emotionally, spiritually, physically, they had nothing to hide from themselves, each other, or from God. Now imagine what your marriage could look like if that image was the goal.

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Adam and Eve went on to face life together including its ups, downs, temptations, challenges, and joys—your marriage will as well. “Marriage isn’t easy” is advice given to every young couple by just about everyone who has been married. You are probably sick of hearing it. However, it is such a common piece of advice for a reason: because it is absolutely true. When you get married your spouse will begin to know things about you that you are not even aware of yourself. The knowledge, however, is not what makes marriage tough, it is your willingness to be exposed, vulnerable and intimate with yourself, with your spouse, and with God that makes it so hard. It takes effort, practice, and often, the example of others. In the time that I have known them, I have experienced Christina and Javier to be one of those couples who have the gift of openness, honesty, and of vulnerability about themselves, their marriage, and their faith. As you read this book, I encourage you to not only collect information about marriage and how to prepare; I encourage you to look to how Christina and Javier share about themselves as well. Learn from them and their experience. Christina and Javier have been through the ups and downs, temptations, challenges, and joys. One of my favorite things about this book is that it is not just a plan for a good marriage, nor is it simply a collection of good advice—it is Christina and Javier being emotionally exposed, vulnerable, and intimate with you. This is a rare opportunity for you to hear from a couple who have spent time reflecting, praying, and working on themselves and their relationship. I pray that you engage and learn as much from them and this book as I have.

—**Mark Juanes,**
Global Servant. Sunnyvale, California.

INTRODUCTION

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

—Ephesians 4:2

Marriage Gets No Love

You probably know that marriage gets minimal props these days. Sure, on the one hand, we still romanticize it as a symbol of love, while on the other hand, criticizing it for its lackluster success rate. It’s a sad story that is reproduced in the media with the cryptic message: “Good luck—you’ve got a 50/50 shot at best. Have at it!”

Divorce rates in the United States hover between 40 and 50 percent depending on which state you live, the age that you marry, and your level of education. Hey, we get it. Relationships are messy, complicated, extremely personal, and can kick your butt whether you’re married or not.

However, this depiction is not one that empowers you or your partner to feel pumped, let alone confident about getting

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married. We aim to change that. Marriage can be the best thing that ever happens to you and through you.

Don't Believe the Hype

Marriage is fulfilling, fun, expectation-busting, mind-blowing, and if you include God, spiritually transformative. Believing in the best possible outcome in marriage is actually countercultural because you are not following the pack. Instead, you are forging your own path together—a path that can be bigger than you ever imagined. If you put faith first—at the core of your relationship commitment—you put your marriage on a whole other level.

Building your marriage upon your faith is the secret to success—anything is possible with God. By not letting your flawed and imperfect humanity call the shots in your marriage, you are ahead of the game. So good on you for even picking this book up!

*“A great marriage begins
by becoming a greater
follower of Jesus Christ.”*

—BETH STEFFANIAK

This book is for those who are single, dating, not dating, and engaged—basically anyone who is not married *yet!* In their heart of hearts, they desire to be married and are open to a

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spiritually-based marriage. This may be due to a well-established relationship with God or a spiritual community. This may also be due to spiritual curiosity. And for many, it is due to a spiritual thirst for deeper meaning in their primary adult relationship—one that will last throughout their lives.

Bottom line: this book is for anyone at any part of the spiritual dating/relationship journey!

It doesn't matter if you are single, dating, or not even engaged right now. All that matters is that you are open to including your relationship with God into your current or future relationship with your life partner. Our testimony is that your marriage will not only survive but thrive, grow, and flourish. You will be a very different person in the process. Who's not down for that?!

To have an awesome, outta-the-park, joyful marriage, you can't fall for the statistical predictions or even sub-par, real-life examples of marriage around you now. Divorce rates hover around 45 percent, polls show that young adults under thirty have less confidence in tying the knot than their grandmothers did, and the success rate declines the more times you marry. On top of that, millennials are leading the way by foregoing marriage altogether and simply cohabitating. More and more, we're being taught that marriage won't deliver the happiness we want.

If you are blessed to have amazing marriages to model, that's awesome but not always the norm. Put on the armor of God and roll with a new mindset and let's jump-start your marriage for greatness!

Instead of a "may the odds be ever in your favor" mindset, hold onto the truth that God wants success, joy, and peace in

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your marriage. This book is our invitation to bring your faith into your marriage before you actually get married. We want to prepare your heart, mind, and soul for a relationship that heals, blesses, and inspires you with awesome personal growth and an amazing life together.

Our spiritual mission is to help prepare you for a marriage that few have or talk about—one of deep connection, friendship, intimacy, and boundless love. Being vulnerable is scary and no easy task. We get it. We live it. We fail. Every. Day. But our failures make us smarter, stronger, and—far from breaking us—begin to build us up.

Don't sweat it! God has got this. There are no coincidences, only Divine order. The transformational power inherent in a spiritually-based marriage far outweighs the daily struggles and life's rough patches ahead.

Boundless love means to experience a love beyond what you originally thought possible in marriage. In Matthew, Jesus says that church members should forgive each other “seventy times seven times” (18:22), a number that symbolizes boundlessness.

Unconditional love tests the limits of our consciousness and our ability to forgive. Boundless love exceeds your current situation or what you've witnessed as possible in a relationship. It's that age-old realization, “I don't know what I don't know.” What God has in store for our marriages is far better than what we can create or imagine.

Boundless love is about healing oneself and seeing marriage as a vehicle for change in every area of your life. No one says marriage is easy. We get that. But boundless love is about what you really, really want in your marriage.

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What you really want in your marriage is rooted in what you truly value. Do you aspire to have the kind of marriage that brings you closer to God, builds you up, and encourages you (sometimes in a tough love kind of way) to be a better person? Do you want a relationship that is a fortress of safety, peace, and encouragement?

Not many people talk about the lifelong opportunities experienced in marriage. We more often get a risk assessment complete with potential collateral damage. We get no guidebook or example of how it can actually function or go right. We know; marriage is not for the weak. It can feel like an emotional marathon. Yet, boundless love awaits at every rest stop.

“Before you marry someone, you should first make them use a computer with slow internet to see who they are.”

—Anonymous

We attract our partner into our lives to heal us. God uses him/her to perfectly bring out our spiritual greatness. A lot of sludge comes to the surface along the way. Your “person” is perfect for you, even when it doesn’t quite feel that way.

Not everyone may applaud your relationship. In fact, many relationships are tested early on by family, friends, and faith in each other. Having God as your foundation in your partnership will not only propel you forward in the right direction but also provide a richer context for why conflict happens and what gifts lay behind it.

Rewards, gifts, and blessings can be so much greater than all the failing statistics and bad examples abundant in our daily

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lives. We believe in you and we believe in God. True statement. Nothing is impossible. And we pray that you will feel empowered, uplifted, and ready to rock your marriage with your honey and faith at your side.

Our book reads with two narrators. We share our unique perspectives in each chapter based on our individual life lenses. Each section will be marked, so please know that we are sharing two unique versions of the reality that leads to our marriage.

After reading *Boundless Love*, our prayer, wish, and goal for you is to:

- 1) Love and accept yourself fully as God does;
- 2) Forgive and heal your childhood;
- 3) Know when to say yes or no and stick by your boundaries;
- 4) Cultivate, embrace, and act on your values and what matters most;
- 5) Honor the process of courtship and the gift of mutual respect;
- 6) Experience sexual intimacy beyond sex;
- 7) Talk openly and honestly about money in your relationship;
- 8) Forgive yourself and others for past hurts.
- 9) Envision your marriage and faith flourishing together!

Here begins a new relationship, a new promise, and an exciting, blessed marriage for a lifetime and eternity.

So let's be boundless. Dig in, get a cup of coffee or tea on your own or with your sweetie, and let's go!

XOXO, Christina & Javier



CHAPTER 1

Loving Me, Myself, and I

“Whoever gets sense loves his own soul; he who keeps understanding will discover good.”

—Proverbs 19:8 (ESV)

Loving Yourself Is Not Selfish

(CHRISTINA)

One message that I received growing up was, “You are so selfish!” As a strong-headed, feisty Midwestern teenager in the ‘80s, I wasn’t exactly aware of how my behavior came across to my parents and sister. I knew that being “selfish” was not a compliment and definitely not something you want to be called by the people you love.

Many of us have “luggage” (as Javier likes to say) when it comes to the concept and practice of self-love. “Self-love” may feel awkward, self-helpish, hippy-dippy. . . you get the picture.

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I thought that loving myself was being selfish and not okay. “Who am I to love me? All I see are my mistakes, shortcomings, and faults. I have to work harder to prove myself so I can find a partner who will love me. I need to *fix* myself so I *deserve* love.”

I was driven. Determined to be worthy to receive romantic love, my overachieving personality-on-steroids kicked in. Work out, get a good job, join a dating site. I told myself that if I could just do enough and achieve enough, then I would earn love and be rewarded with a life partner.

It took some time, but gradually I learned that, thankfully, this is not how God works. And it is not how self-love works. You cannot control, earn, or force your way to an amazing relationship and marriage. God is in control (not you) and surrendering this sooner makes the path a lot less painful.

Of course, it is healthy to look at your past relationships and childhood and reflect on your values and what you truly want in a partner. However, we cross a line when we start to feel that we need to work our way to worthiness or bargain with God in order to attract a partner when, deep down, we don't recognize our innate worthiness in God's eyes.

I learned this after spending many years away from God. When I was twenty-eight years old, I decided to get back on the Christianity bus. I spent a lot of time wandering and searching, and then I found a church to call home. My burdens lightened and my heart softened. God and I got reacquainted.

Soon, I discovered that His love covers all the bases. I am precious in His eyes and am automatically worthy just by being alive. It was a big momma, lightbulb, Thank You Jesus moment.

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You Are Lovable by Birthright

(CHRISTINA)

I am worthy because I'm a child of God—warts, calluses, stretch marks, mistakes, wrong turns, and all. Done deal. Stop stressing. That internalization pretty much changed my life forever and always.

I began to really dig into my prospects. Instead of going on Match.com and dating strangers, I decided to date myself. Yep, self and I needed to get right. I “took a break from dating.” All my previous relationships ended in disaster so why not try something new?

The con was over. I knew that my primary relationship was between God and me. I didn't have to earn it. I eased into this idea—it's all good and it's all God—and it doesn't matter who you are or what you thought or what you did before.

Self-love is the magic formula for a deeply-connected and intimate relationship or marriage. I'm sure you've heard, “You can't give what you don't have.” It is the foundation, the big enchilada, the first master lesson of finding your true partner in life.

“You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.”

—Buddha

Faith was a huge part of this for me. Meditation, prayer, affirmations, and therapy were game-changers in moving me into higher consciousness. And, I prayed and prayed and prayed.

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Not to find “Mr. Right” but to become “Ms. Right” and that was a whole different banana.

If you want love, give it graciously to yourself. Be generous, not stingy, and feed your primary relationships—with God and your new BFF, you. By holding yourself up to a new standard of conditional love, you open the door for blessings to come into your life.

The truth was shocking to me. I gave love and forgiveness to everyone else first, and I maybe got the leftovers. You have to nurture yourself to be a vessel and messenger of God. There is no other way. At the end of the day, who can be with you if you cannot fully be with yourself?

We invite you to take your self-love temperature. Is it cold and clammy or hot and on the rise? Who do you see when you look in the mirror? Wink at yourself in the mirror and say, “Hello, sexy beast!” after you wake up. You will crack a smile.

Do you enjoy your own company? I learned to love to go out to dinner and enjoy a movie by myself. I truly appreciated my own companionship with God at my side. The silence, the stillness, and the pure simplicity of hanging out alone became a joy.

God doesn’t have to be found in someone else first. He is in you and with you, all the time. My ability to love me changed my world. It reframed my view of others and they began to treat me differently.

Our prayer for you is that you love yourself as God adores you—wholly, fully, and unconditionally. Yes, it is a lifetime of work, but start with giving yourself some mercy. With Him at your side, your marriage will move your self-love dial so that

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when you lose sight of your perfection—because you will—you will reconcile this illusion more quickly and frequently.

What Is the Story You Tell Yourself?

(JAVIER)

As a child, I remember when the summer started, my Dad arranged a month-long vacation. One time during the six-hour drive, I decided to count every tree I saw from the time I left my home to the house that we rented by the beach. That summer was memorable. I wrote down the number of trees and how many times my dad made me laugh.

Now that I look back, I see how important it is to capture the good in life and write it down. We are often absorbed by digital technology, emails, notifications, alerts, and the daily grind. We can overlook the good inside of us and in our lives.

I started journaling daily nine years ago. I wrote in a notebook every morning about what was happening in my life—my struggles and victories. I covered it all from the birth of my first daughter to the time when my startup CEO boss fled the country and left me and my fellow employees without a paycheck.

I eventually realized that I typed the same storylines over and over in my entries like “I’ve gotten fat and it’s hard to lose weight at my age!” I focused on continual complaints like, “Why can’t I get the job of my dreams?” My journal was a depressing song on repeat.

Every entry had the same theme: struggle. The same old problems didn’t go away. Once in a while, a bit of personal

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praise or mention of victories popped in, but it was too rare to be uplifting.

It became clear that I felt no self-love at all. Perhaps because of that, it was easy to blame the world for my insecurities, health challenges, career struggles, and relationship conflicts.

I was my own judge and jury, sentencing myself again and again to misery. Compassion was missing in my life—compassion for myself. I was a loving husband and father, but what about me? I wasn't encouraging myself or looking for the wins from day to day. I wasn't grateful or thanking God for the gift of life every day.

Loving Yourself Makes Miracles Happen

(JAVIER)

I tend to think of myself as an extrovert. I love talking to people and sharing my stories, and yes, giving all the suggestions I can. I also suffer from social anxiety. Every time I am in a social setting where I don't know people, I go into my head.

Questions come up. Do they like me? Are they okay with what I am sharing? Do I fit in? The more I doubt myself, the more I see people becoming distanced. The more I accept myself for who I am, the more interactions become natural. It is truly incredible that how we feel about ourselves can change our surroundings.

Miracles happen when you start loving yourself. When you shut down the voices in your head that are constantly judging and protecting you from the truth of who you really are, you open yourself to the moment. You see more clearly.

LOVING ME, MYSELF, AND I

It sounds weird, doesn't it? I can say out loud, "Javier, I love you." Or give myself a high five. "I am amazing!" But it's more than a moment of praise. It is about cultivating patience and gentleness with yourself, knowing that you are a worthwhile human being who deserves forgiveness from your biggest critic—you.

The honest truth is that the majority of men wear a mask to show the world that we are okay. But deep inside we are a mess! We battle daily with regrets, fears, doubts, and worries.

I was doing this very thing every day. I would wake up in the morning with an inner critic telling me I would be doing better if my parents hadn't died when I was young. From there I would move into an elaborate "What If" fantasy, recreating a make-believe scenario of having a wonderful upbringing with healthy and perfect parents. No one had problems in my fantasy and everything turned out just right.

In addition to telling me that my life would have been smooth sailing if my parents had lived longer, my inner critic liked to point out the many other disappointments I'd faced over the years, from getting into debt at the age of seventeen to not finishing college to not being satisfied in my career. I would journal those thoughts and list complaints about my life and create more "What If" situations.

In the morning, I would wake up with the same mindset, hoping for a different result. I wasn't looking inside myself. I fixated on others or my environment to show me my next step. I wasn't looking forward in my life and having a vision of the man I wanted to be. I was stuck between the past and present.

I regretted my past—the pain and disappointment it brought. I punished myself with thoughts of "I am not good

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enough.” I emotionally recreated my trauma in a vicious cycle. I would fantasize that I had parents, a healthy childhood, and no lack of the material things that I wanted as a child. I even fantasized about being taller and more muscular than I was.

*The world will never show you
the truth of who you are.*

I did not like the Javier inside of me. I would look at other people and see they were happy and satisfied, especially some of my religious peers, and I would rant in my head, “They are fakers! Look at them pretending to be happy just because they are children of God.”

The truth is that God wants you to fully and unconditionally love yourself first. Why? If you don’t, how can you love others in the same way? If you don’t look for the good, the great, and the amazing in you, how can you look for it in others? If you don’t praise and support yourself in a moment of struggle, how are you going to support others in a meaningful way?

I was living a lie inside myself. I was giving, but not receiving from the source. My Holy Father desperately wanted me to love myself every second of the day. He wanted me to learn to love myself fully so that I could move forward with the plan that He had for me. Jesus calls us to change the world but if we don’t fully love ourselves, that fire inside will never light up.

Have no fears, doubts, or worries, as God is with you. Once we act from our faith in God, He will reveal his next step for us. We might not know His master plan, but we can trust that He will take care of the big picture. We grow to love ourselves as

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He is loving us. We are His creation. There is no imperfection, and His love through us can change the world.

Once you allow love and compassion into your heart, you become powerful beyond belief. Love is life; love will conquer darkness and set you free. When you love yourself, you also allow others to be more compassionate with themselves. If you trust this process, you can change the world, starting with loving yourself.

Reflect on:

- 1) *What action can you do today to show your love for yourself?*
- 2) *When you look in the mirror at yourself, say, "I love you. I really love you." How does that feel? Can you look yourself in the eyes?*
- 3) *What are the proudest moments in your life? Share this with your partner.*