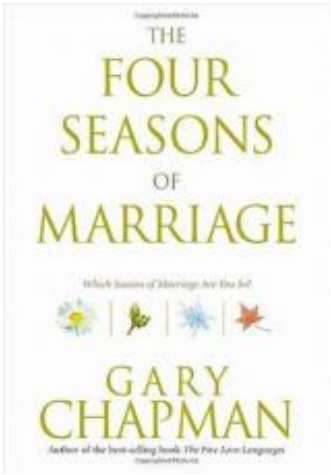
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The Four Seasons of Marriage

by Gary Chapman



About the Book

Take a walk through town or a mall and you're sure to spot an older couple strolling hand in hand, their facial expressions and body language giving clear evidence of a quality of love that has gone the distance. What a rewarding feeling they must enjoy knowing they've beaten the odds; not only is their relationship still intact, but it's actually thriving. What does it take to have a marriage like that? What joys and struggles have they experienced along the way? We'd all like to know the secrets of their success.

Whether it has been years since your wedding day or only days since you returned from your honeymoon, one thing is certain: You are in the most special relationship two people can have. Sometimes, marriage may be a complete joy, whereas other times your life together may seem like an incurable disease. If you've been married for a while, your feelings have probably run the gamut between those two extremes.

All marriages experience the four seasons, including springtimes of vibrancy and excitement, fall seasons of discontentment and uncertainty, winters of anger and despair, and summertimes of growth and deepened love. Couples whose marriages survive --- and thrive --- have refused to give up, steadfastly sticking to the belief that their efforts to improve their marriages will eventually pay off.

Discussion Guide

Part I: The Four Seasons of Marriage

The Nature of Marriage

?Each person is also endowed by God with certain latent possibilities. The partnership of marriage is an ideal environment for nurturing and developing these gifts and abilities.?

1. Imagine a culture without marriage as a fundamental institution. Considering all aspects of culture --- social, spiritual, financial, sexual, emotional, and generational --- what benefits does monogamous marriage bring to society?

2. Many people, it seems, approach marriage as if it is a contract that can be broken if one party fails to uphold his or her end of the bargain or if the situation simply doesn?t feel right anymore. The Bible, on the other hand, speaks of marriage as a *covenant* (Malachi 2:14). Discuss the differences between a contract and a covenant and the impact of those differences on a marriage. You may want to refer to a Bible dictionary or my book *Covenant Marriage: Building Communication and Intimacy*.

3. In the United States, divorce rates hover somewhere around 50 percent. What do you see as common causes for this unfortunate phenomenon? Consider cultural trends, various stresses from outside the marriage (jobs, relatives, schedules, media), and internal factors (character qualities, attitudes). What are some practical ways in which a couple can set up a hedge of protection around their relationship against divorce?

4. What does it mean to say that marriage is a *purposeful* relationship?

Winter

?Just as most people wouldn?t lie down in the snow and wait to die, there?s no reason to passively accept the coldness of a wintry marriage. There is a way out, and it begins with hope.?

1. Discuss the characteristics and emotions of a winter marriage. Make a list of words and phrases that typify this season.

2. What brings most couples to the winter season of marriage? (Hint: It?s a one-word answer.) Discuss how this factor can affect a marriage and how to avoid falling into this trap.

3. Most couples have experienced a winter season in their marriages or know couples who have. Keeping identities confidential, discuss relationship factors you have observed that contribute to a winter marriage.

4. How do ?attitudes foster emotions?? How can choosing a positive attitude help a couple avoid or get out of the winter season?

5. What *actions* usually characterize a winter marriage?

6. Imagine that a friend has shared with you about the serious problems in his or her winter marriage. What can you say that would be helpful? What should you *not* say?

7. Read Matthew 13:15-16 aloud. What do these verses say about a hardened heart? What do these verses suggest about rigidity in a marriage? Consider the negative, snowballing effect of resentment in a relationship. Why is it necessary to deal first with a hardened heart before it?s possible to heal a marriage?

8. Read Jeremiah 33:10-12 aloud. How might these verses offer hope to a troubled marriage?

9. ?When two people choose to love again, the melting ice of winter will water the seeds of spring, and winter has served its ultimate purpose.? Discuss the positive side of the winter season of marriage. What are some things you can do to move your marriage toward spring or to keep it from moving deeper into winter?

Spring

?Change is perceived as an opportunity for new beginnings, and springtime couples fully expect to make the best of those opportunities.?

1. Discuss the characteristics and emotions of a spring marriage. Make a list of words and phrases that typify this season.

2. Share with the group about a spring season from your marriage. How long did it last? What events prompted its beginning? its end?

3. Discuss how other areas of life --- such as careers, children, relatives, health, or finances --- can affect a spring season for better or worse. Consider potential threats to a spring marriage as well as events that can enhance the season.

4. ?Because we are creatures of choice, we can create new beginnings whenever we desire.? This sounds good, but let?s get practical. What specific choices in attitudes and actions can we make to turn a fall or winter marriage into a spring marriage (or protect a spring marriage already in full swing)?

5. Coping with a fading spring can be difficult for an unprepared couple who thought the season would last forever. If you?re willing, share insights about how you?ve dealt with the change of seasons in your marriage or what you?ve observed in other marriages.

6. ?Even in the springtime, there can be difficulties, but the prevailing attitude is one of anticipated growth rather than despair.? Discuss the importance of attitude and behavior in establishing or maintaining a springtime marriage. What can you do to make some positive adjustments in this regard in your own marriage?

7. An ?attitude of gratitude? characterizes spring marriages. What is the value of maintaining a spirit of thankfulness about your spouse?

8. Read Psalms 28:7 and 62:8 aloud. How does trusting God teach us to imitate his trustworthiness? How does God?s trustworthiness enable us to take the risk of trusting someone else?

9. Discuss the downside of the spring season of marriage. What are some things you can do to keep spring alive?

Summer

?If our marriage is in the season of summer, we will share a deep sense of commitment and satisfaction. And we will feel secure in each other?s love? Summer does not equal perfection, but it does mean that couples in this season have a sense of accomplishment and a desire to keep growing.?

1. Discuss the characteristics and emotions of a summer marriage. Make a list of words and phrases that typify this season.

2. Explain your understanding of *constructive communication.* What makes communication effective? Share your ideas about the importance of communication and what happens when it?s lacking in a relationship.

3. Talk about various forms of nonverbal communication and how they can be beneficial (or can add confusion) to a situation.

4. Jeremy and Ruth made some ?extra? vows to each other when they got married. Discuss any general guidelines that you and your spouse established for your life together that weren?t part of the traditional wedding vows. Are there any guidelines you?d like to establish now that you understand the characteristics of a summer marriage?

5. ?Couples who desire to continue in the summer season will consciously give each other the freedom to think, feel, and react differently.? Discuss the importance of accepting each other?s differences. If you?re willing, share about a time you either succeeded or failed at this and how you and your spouse were able to move on to a greater understanding of each other.

6. How can our differences refine us? Read Proverbs 27:17, Mark 9:49-50, and Colossians 3:15. Describe what a relationship would look like if two people had identical personalities. How would the relationship be weakened?

7. Discuss with the group any books, video series, or seminars you?ve found helpful in developing your marriage. What did you gain from these tools?

8. What role has spiritual growth played in your marriage? What benefits have accrued as a result of your faith? Describe a couple whose marriage you respect because of their faith. What are the evidences of their faith in their marriage relationship?

9. Discuss the downside of the summer season of marriage. What are some things you can do to ?water? your relationship and keep it growing, fresh, and vibrant?

Fall

?It takes both spouses to move a marriage from fall to spring, but it takes only one to move from fall to winter. The way we think and the actions we take make all the difference.?

1. Discuss the characteristics and emotions of a fall marriage. Make a list of words and phrases that typify this season.

2. Recall a time when you felt either discouraged or downright depressed about something in your life (not necessarily stemming from your marriage). How did that event affect your attitudes, feelings, and actions about other areas of your life? Discuss the effects on your marriage of ongoing stress (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, social, financial). What are some avenues of help for getting through tough times?

3. As a group, spend time sharing favorite Scripture passages that offer hope for dealing with the fall season of marriage.

Make a group list for each member to keep handy. Here?s a couple to get you started: Psalm 16:8-9; Psalm 31:23-24.

4. Read Psalm 42 aloud. Make a list of words, phrases, and concepts that offer hope in God?s power to repair struggling marriages.

5. It?s a cliché that change is inevitable, but there?s no denying that it?s true. Discuss the positive and negative aspects of change, including good and not-so-good habits of dealing with change.

6. Fear is one of the emotions often experienced in a fall marriage. Talk about the destructive forces of fear on individuals and relationships. What are some things that people commonly fear? When does fear become a negative hang-up instead of simply a concern? How does fear devalue the Lord?s power and goodness?

7. Complete the following sentence and discuss it with your group: ?Without a doubt, the number one contributor to the fall season of marriage --- overwhelmingly --- is the action of _____, or taking no action at all.?

8. Nurturing common interests is one way to avoid neglecting your spouse. Is it easy for you and your spouse to come up with activities you both enjoy? What have you done to discover mutual interests? How can couples overcome the unsettling realization that they don?t seem to have much in common? How is faith a bond that unites people regardless of their personalities or interests?

9. Discuss the positive side of the fall season of marriage. What are some things you can do to move your marriage toward spring or to keep it from moving toward winter?

For Group Discussion Share thoughts within your group regarding the profile. Allow for a broad range of disclosure --- some members may want to talk a lot, whereas others may not feel as comfortable.

1. Were the profile results in line with how you?ve been feeling recently about your marriage? If not, how did they differ?

2. Which words in the profile stood out to you the most? Which ones bothered you? Which ones brought a smile?

3. Was the profile helpful in prompting discussion with your spouse?

4. Take time to encourage each couple in the group. Highlight specific strengths you see in each person and discuss how those strengths can enhance his or her marriage. This step may be especially helpful for couples in the fall and winter seasons, who may be feeling discouraged by their profile results. Affirmation from others can go a long way toward helping them see the value of persevering in their relationship.

Part II: Seven Strategies to Enhance the Seasons of Your Marriage

Strategy 1: Deal with Past Failures

?Dealing with past failures often clears the debris in a relationship and paves the way for implementing the other strategies.?

1. Why is it important to deal with past issues before moving forward? What might be some consequences of not addressing those issues? If you?re willing, share a positive or negative personal experience.

2. Of the three steps involved in dealing with the past --- identifying past failures, confession and repentance, and forgiveness --- which have you found to be the most difficult? Why?

3. Why is it important to look at our own failures first when dealing with past hurts? Consider what the Bible says about this. Look up the following verses and summarize the insights they offer:

Psalm 50:6

Lamentations 3:58-59

Zechariah 7:9

Matthew 7:2-5

Romans 2:1-7

4. Read Psalm 78:1-8. What are some potential benefits of working through past issues?

5. Ecclesiastes 3:15 says, ?God will call the past to account.? Discuss how this truth works together with Isaiah 43:18: ?Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.?

6. Read Isaiah 43:19-21, 25. What truths and hope do these verses offer to a spouse who is hurting? What characteristics of God can we rely on to see us through difficult times?

7. It isn?t always easy to let go of hurts; in fact, sometimes it?s very difficult. Love, however, ?keeps no record of wrongs? (1 Corinthians 13:5). In practical, day-to-day living, what does it mean to keep no record of wrongs? Does it mean that we no longer feel the pain? How much continued discussion should be ?allowed? regarding the hurt?

8. Share about the difficulties or resistance you may feel about focusing on your own mistakes in your marriage.

9. While communicating with your spouse, have you developed the habit of using ?I felt . . .? examples instead of ?You made me feel . . .? accusations? Discuss the power of the ?I felt . . .? method for diffusing tension and defensiveness. If possible, share a personal example.

10. Read Psalm 51 aloud. How do King David?s heart attitude and words challenge you?

11. Discuss the three benefits of dealing with past failures.

Strategy 2: Choose a Winning Attitude

?What we think *largely influences what we* do. *In turn, our actions greatly influence our emotions. This connection between attitude and actions opens a door of hope for all couples. If we can change our thinking, we can change the season of our marriage.?*

1. ?The most common mistake couples make is allowing negative emotions to dictate their behavior.? Discuss this idea with your group.

2. ?It is not what happens to us but how we *interpret* what happens to us (our attitude) that makes the difference between success and failure.? Share about a situation overcoming extreme difficulties that you?ve experienced or observed. How did attitude affect the outcome?

3. Discuss the five characteristics of a Christian worldview and how they foster a positive attitude.

4. How is an attitude based on who a person is more productive than one based on his or her actions?

5. Describe your role in your spouse?s life. How can reminding yourself of your role encourage you to maintain a positive attitude toward your spouse?

6. Summarize and discuss the five steps that break the cycle of negativity.

7. Read Psalms 69 and 102 aloud. How did the writer?s attitude shift from the beginning to the end? What example does that set for us?

8. Read Romans 14:17-19. How can these verses be applied in a marriage relationship?

9. Although we can?t change people directly, how can our actions influence them? Share about a time when you either influenced someone or were influenced by someone and your attitude or behavior changed as a result.

10. Why is choosing a good attitude often difficult? How can we find the strength to overcome those difficult barriers?

Strategy 3: Learn to Speak Your Spouse?s Love Language

?Nothing holds more potential for changing the season of your marriage than learning the truth about love.?

1. ?Our culture is largely ignorant of the true nature of love and its effect on human relationships.? Discuss modern culture?s views of love. How is love portrayed in the media?

2. Talk about the concept of a ?love tank.? This may be a new idea for some people in the group. Spend a few minutes sharing thoughts about the role that spouses play in filling each other?s love tank.

3. What characteristics are recognizable in a person whose love tank is empty? full? How are other areas of life (parenting, career, self-esteem, ministry) affected by an empty (or a full) love tank?

4. Describe *emotional obsession* and its role in developing love. What is the average duration of this stage?

5. What are the benefits of the first, euphoric stage of love? What is the downside?

6. Describe the second, more intentional, phase of love. What are the pros and cons of this stage?

7. Read 1 Corinthians 13 aloud. What key words, phrases, and concepts show that love is *intentional*? Spend some time discussing how to foster these qualities.

8. How does withdrawing in anger reap negative results?

9. Briefly define and discuss the five love languages. Are these ?languages? true to life for members of the group?

10. Discuss each group member?s love language, as well as how it was identified. The added insight from others in the group can often help members who are having trouble figuring out which language is theirs.

11. If you?re willing, share when and how you and your spouse discovered each other?s love language and how your relationship was affected by expressing love in those ways.

Strategy 4: Develop the Awesome Power of Empathetic Listening

?Open communication is the lifeblood that keeps a marriage in the spring and summer seasons. Conversely, failure to communicate is what brings on fall and winter.?

1. What does *empathy* mean? What does empathetic listening encourage, and why?

2. Describe the atmosphere of a relationship that has a successful history of empathetic listening. What do we sabotage by failing to listen empathetically?

3. What is involved in the shift from *egocentric* to *empathetic* listening? Read James 1:19 and Philippians 2:3 aloud and apply them to your answers.

4. Describe the difference between *perceptions* and *feelings.* Which of these are we more likely to observe or understand? Why is it important to understand *both* in our spouses? Discuss how your listening skills can affect your spouse?s self-esteem.

5. What are some reasons why people are noncommunicative?

6. Discuss the differences between Dead Sea people and Babbling Brooks. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each type? Which one describes you? Which one describes your spouse? What do Deuteronomy 32:2, Proverbs 10:19, Proverbs 15:1, 4, and Philippians 2:4 say about talking too much?

7. Read Isaiah 42:2-3. Discuss how Jesus set the example for communicating in a healing way.

8. Define and discuss the four aspects of learning to listen empathetically. Which one is typically the most difficult for

you? Why?

9. Do you ever catch yourself believing that your viewpoints are usually the most accurate and that those of others are wrong? What feelings does it evoke in you when others seem to think they are always right?

10. Role-play in the group at least one positive example of how to affirm someone even when his or her opinions differ from yours.

11. What is the ?capstone of empathetic listening?? Why is this important?

12. Read aloud the fourteen steps involved in learning empathetic listening. Steps 10-12 focus on clarifying and summarizing your spouse?s ideas and emotions. Why is it important to give feedback regarding your understanding of your spouse?s communication?

13. ?When [couples] seek to resolve --- rather than win --- an argument, they not only discover workable solutions but also find intimacy with their spouse.? Discuss how you?ve seen this work in your marriage (or in someone else?s).

Strategy 5: Discover the Joy of Helping Your Spouse Succeed

?A successful wife is one who expends her time and energy helping her husband reach his potential for God and for doing good in the world. Likewise, a successful husband is one who helps his wife succeed.?

1. Take time to hear each group member?s definition of *success.*

2. Discuss the following statement about spouses serving each other: ?A truly great husband is one who is willing to serve his wife. A truly great wife is one who is willing to serve her husband. If you want to breathe new life into a fall or winter marriage, start serving your spouse.? If you?re willing, share how your spouse serves you and how that makes you feel loved.

3. How does human nature make it difficult for us to serve others? Is the typical societal definition of *success* based on power or love? Explain your answer.

4. As you seek to grow in serving your spouse, why is it important to begin on a spiritual level by asking God for help?

5. Review the ?three simple questions to help your spouse succeed.? What keeps you from asking your spouse these questions?

6. What do a person?s complaints reveal?

7. What are four practical ways to help your spouse succeed?

8. Read aloud Proverbs 12:25, Proverbs 25:11, Romans 15:5, and 1 Thessalonians 5:11. Discuss your definition of *encouragement*.

9. If you?re willing, share how your spouse has helped you succeed at something.

10. Brainstorm some practical things you can say to a spouse who has a dream that you see as unrealistic. How do you support your spouse as a *person*, regardless of his or her *dream*?

11. Read aloud Ephesians 6:7 and Colossians 3:23. What do these verses say about our attitude toward helping our spouses?

12. Discuss the pros and cons of emotions and how God intends for our emotions ?to be motivational instruments that move us in a positive direction.?

13. ?Respect does not indicate that you agree on everything, but it does mean that you give your spouse the freedom to be an individual.? Discuss how this works in a marriage. How can respect strengthen your spouse and your relationship?

14. Brainstorm some healthy and respectful ways to express disappointment in someone?s actions.

Strategy 6: Maximize Your Differences

?After thirty years of counseling married couples, I am convinced there are no irreconcilable differences, only people who refuse to reconcile? When each spouse recognizes and affirms the other?s uniqueness, the differences themselves weld the couple into an unbeatable team.?

1. Poll the group to find out how many couples are cases of ?opposites attract.?

2. What are the five steps for maximizing differences in marriage? Briefly discuss each one.

3. If couples are willing, ask husbands and wives to share a mild irritation (something their spouse does) and then answer the following two questions: Why do these things irritate me? What differences do these irritations reveal?

4. ?In most cases, the reason you get irritated is because your spouse doesn?t do something the way you would do it.? Discuss how this idea corresponds to our human tendency to be egocentric.

5. Read aloud the list of common differences between husbands and wives on. Which of these characterize you and your spouse?

6. Discuss the idea that ?every difference has a positive side.? Share one difference of which you and your spouse have discovered the positive side. What was the process of learning to appreciate that difference? (Your response to this question may provide encouragement for others.)

7. Imagine a marriage in which spouses stifle their differences to ?keep the peace.? How can this have negative results and actually destroy growth and peace?

8. How can facing our differences cause fear or hesitation in us?

9. Discuss marriages you?ve observed (perhaps your own) in which the spouses maximize their differences. Contrast

these examples with marriages you?ve observed (perhaps your own) where the spouses? differences are allowed to weaken their relationship. How do these relational dynamics affect each spouse in the marriage, as well as in other areas of life (parenting, friendships, jobs, ministry)?

10. Read Romans 14:19, Ephesians 4:29, and 2 Timothy 2:24. Discuss how these truths offer wisdom for maximizing our differences.

Strategy 7: Implement the Power of Positive Influence

?Thousands of people live in these self-made prisons because they fail to understand the power of positive influence. It is true that you cannot change your spouse, but it is equally true that you can and do influence your spouse every day? When a husband or wife is willing to choose a positive attitude that leads to positive actions, the change in the spouse is often radical.?

1. Do you have a story of how you changed as a result of someone else?s influence? Have you seen someone change because of your influence? Share with the group.

2. What is the difference between being an *influencer* and a *manipulator*?

3. How do most people react when they feel manipulated?

4. What does manipulation communicate about a person?s self-esteem? honesty? pride?

5. Read Psalm 120:3-4 and 1 Peter 2:1. How is manipulation deceitful? Based on these verses, how does God feel about deception?

6. Discuss the idea that we don?t have to be controlled by emotions, whether our own or our spouse?s. When is it difficult to apply that concept? What are some helpful tips to putting it into practice in daily life?

7. Discuss with the group various positive choices you?ve made --- from trivial to crucial --- that went against your feelings at the time.

8. What is the first step in any positive change? Discuss the idea that ?positive choices lead to positive actions that result in positive feelings.?

9. What value is there in admitting your feelings but not being controlled by them?

10. Skim 1 Samuel 1?2, the story of Hannah?s desire for a child. Describe her emotions, how she dealt with them, and how she became a person of influence in positive rather than negative ways.

Part III: Putting Your Plan into Practice

Moving Forward from Here and Now

1. What is one key truth you gained from this book? this study? the group discussions?

2. Which strategy spoke to you the most? Which strategy spoke the most to your spouse?

3. Have you been able to apply any of the strategies in your marriage yet? If so, share what you?ve done and the results.

4. Have you and your spouse shared any meaningful moments through the Make It a Date, For Couples in Private, or Commit It to Prayer suggestions? If you?re willing, share a highlight or two with the group.

5. What goals have you set on your own or with your spouse for the coming months? What steps will you take to implement them?

Author Bio

Gary Chapman, PhD, is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling *The Five Love Languages* series. With over 35 years of counseling experience, he has the uncanny ability to hold a mirror up to human behavior, showing readers not just where they go wrong, but also how to grow and move forward. Dr. Chapman holds BA and MA degrees in anthropology from Wheaton College and Wake Forest University, respectively, MRE and PhD degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and has completed postgraduate work at the University of North Carolina and Duke University. He and his wife of 45 years, Karolyn, live in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

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