

An interview with Rhonda Stoppe, author of *Real-Life Romance*



Do you believe in true love? In a world of broken relationships and hurting people, it can seem as though heartache is all around us, marriages are doomed from the beginning and relationships aren't worth the risk. However, in *Real-Life Romance: Inspiring Stories to Help You Believe in True Love* (Harvest House), Rhonda Stoppe sets out to show that heart-fluttering, long-lasting love is all around us, if we just take the time to look for it.

Q: *Real-Life Romance* shares real-life accounts of ordinary people who found extraordinary love. How did you find and collect the stories included in your new book?

Real-life love is all around us; we just have to look for it. That elderly couple sitting in the pew at church — what's their story? How did they meet, fall in love and stay in love for so many years? Those lifetime lovers are my heroes of the faith because their lifelong love reflects Christ's love and offers hope to anyone who wants that kind of romance.

My husband and I have been in ministry for 30 years. In that time we have had the privilege of watching many young people fall in love, meeting people with incredible love stories and walking the elderly through the death of their loved one. The love stories we have heard in our years of ministry, along with speaking at women's events, I have heard story after story of real romance that offers hope. I truly believe the world is ready for a book celebrating that kind of love.

Q: It's important to point out that *Real-Life Romance* is not a marriage advice book. Who did you write the book for and what was your intent?

Exactly! *Real-Life Romance* is not a marriage self-help book. Since there are many great marriage advice books on the market, I wanted to write a book that was a breath of fresh air. We are all drawn to a good love story. Look at the movies and romance novel industry. People are riveted as they follow the story of a couple who ends up falling in love and living happily ever after.

However, those love stories don't always honor Christ. As believers, we tolerate when the couple in the story is involved in intimacy outside of marriage because we really want to see the ending where they fall happily in love. I wrote *Real-Life Romance* to share love stories that are testimonies of God's faithfulness of drawing two people together to fall in love in a Christ-honoring way.

At first I thought I was writing this book for married people — to inspire them to rekindle the passion in their own relationship as they recall God's providence in their own love story. As I wrote, however, it became apparent this book is also for single people (from teens to adults) who not only love a good love story but are also waiting for God to guide them to their own happily-ever-after.

Q: When people think of romance, candles and roses come to mind. What actually is romance, at least from your point of view?

Romance — real romance — is loving someone for who they are and believing the best about that person. I think of 1 Corinthians 13, which says, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." That's romance.

Choosing to believe the best about your love when they haven't measured up to your expectations? That's romance. Choosing to see their beauty after they've been up all night with a sick baby, and they look like a train wreck? That's true romance. It's the love we long for and the love we hope to give. This love is possible when our love for Christ is deeper than our love for any other person in life.

Q: When did you first realize you were in love with your husband, Steve?

I met Steve when I was only 14 (almost 15) years old. He had come home from Bible college and was way too old for me. At that age, six years' difference is a big deal. I remember when I met him for the first time that he took my breath away. After a quick interaction with him, I walked away and literally thought, *I'm going to marry him one day.* (Immediately, I was embarrassed at the thought because I was young and knew this would be impossible.)

I watched him date all the college women in our church and wished he would look my way, but I knew I was too young. Throughout the years our paths would cross. When our siblings were dating each other, I was often nominated

by my parents to be their chaperone. Steve would come along from time to time. As I got older, the time came when. . . Well, I am not going to tell you the whole story. You can read it in the first chapter of the book! Let's just say, I knew I loved him almost from the start, and it took God a number of years to work out the timing of our love story.



Q: What lessons did you have to learn about God's timing after you first met Steve, then later on in your marriage? What advice do you offer to those who may be growing impatient in finding the love of their life?

As a young girl I was naive about how real romance would be found. Because of the age difference between me and Steve, it would be awhile before we would become a couple, but looking back, I see how God orchestrated our steps. He was in control over the timing of our story. I recall how one night Steve called me on the phone while I was on a date with another young man. Just when the young man and I were moving toward a place of inappropriateness, Steve called. He had no idea at the time that his phone call was God's timing to rescue me from going down a path I wasn't equipped to steer away from. Since our story began by relying on God's providence, remembering His sovereignty in our story has helped us to trust God's timing and providence throughout our marriage and as we look forward to our future.

God's timing is the common thread that runs through *Real-Life Romance*. God is sovereign and providential throughout the timing in our lives. The more you keep your eyes on Him, the more you can trust that no matter what circumstances are happening around you, He is in charge of your future. If it's His will for you to marry, He is able to bring two hearts together to fall in love and spend the rest of their lives glorifying Christ together. Story after love story in *Real-Life Romance* reveals how waiting on God's perfect timing brought true romance that lasts forever. I think these stories offer real hope and encouragement to anyone who is waiting for God to write their love story. For moms who are praying for God to bring a spouse to their children, these stories will help them show their kids how God is even more interested in guiding them toward their happily-ever-after than they are.

Q: How does God fit in with romance and true love between a husband and wife?

God is the author of true romance. He is the one who saw it was "not good for Adam to be alone." Think about it for a moment. Here was Adam, the perfect man, walking in ideal unison with his Creator, yet God made Adam to need a mate and graciously provided him with Eve.

In the same way, God calls us to live in relationship with Him through Christ. He also recognizes our frailty and provides us with a spouse not only to cherish and adore but to help us run the race He has set before us. Christ-honoring, selfless love in marriage is the beautiful picture of Jesus' love for the church.

Q: Even though all of the stories tell of a love that has endured, every couple faced their trials too. Some of the couples faced addiction, such as pornography, alcohol and drugs. What is the common thread between couples, and how did they work through their issues to make their marriages stronger?

Whenever I speak at a women's event or my husband and I teach at our *No Regrets Marriage Conference*, we inevitably hear someone's heartbreaking story of how his or her spouse is addicted to pornography. I share one story in the book. Chuck and Angie met when they were young. Both were Christians, and long before they met one another, both had committed to Christ that they would wait to have sex until marriage. After they fell in love and married, the two settled into married life. You can imagine Angie's surprise when Chuck seemed less than interested in enjoying her in their marriage bed. One day Angie stumbled across the reason for Chuck's lack of interest. He had been viewing pornography. When Angie approached Chuck about what she had discovered, he was quick to apologize and promised it would never happen again.

But happen it did, repeatedly. The more Chuck wrestled with his addiction, the more Angie resented him for his sinful behavior. For Angie, forgiving Chuck was hard, but resenting him was even harder. As Angie pressed in to her love for Christ, He gave her His selfless love for Chuck. As Chuck allowed God's Spirit to strengthen him in his battle against his addiction, he has seen strides of great victory. Angie credits prayer for getting her through. It was humbling when she realized that whatever sin she was addicted to was equal to Chuck's. They both had to break free of their sinful struggles.

I also share a story of a couple who battled alcohol and drug addiction. As a young woman Jennifer battled with feelings of being used and unwanted while for most of Jeff's life he wrestled with feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. Both tried to mask their pain through alcohol and partying. That's where the two one day collided into

each other. Eventually, they were wed. Jennifer stopped drinking when she found Jeff and thought her love for him should be enough to make him stop as well. As time went on, Jeff's drinking turned to drug addiction. After their first baby was born, sadly Jennifer moved out of their home, but she never gave up on Jeff. After she started attending church and found Jesus, daily she asked God to save Jeff too. Through a wonderful set of circumstances Jeff came to Christ and broke free of his addictions, and the two were reunited. That was more than 25 years ago. Their love is stronger than ever, and these days they serve Christ together as worship leaders in their church.

Both couples were able to heal their marriages by bringing Christ into their marriage. They wouldn't have been able to do it on their own.

Q: How do you and Steve keep the romance alive after 30-plus years?

Through the years of raising toddlers and teens, Steve and I made it a point to choose each other over any other earthly relationship. Our kids always knew our love for one another was steadfast and that they were not able to come between us, no matter what. In 30 years of ministry we have watched marriages crumble when a parent regularly sides with a child in disagreements against his or her spouse. We've observed weary parents of terrible two-year-olds turn on one another by reacting to their spouses in a disrespectful and unloving manner.

One of the perks of ministry is getting a bird's-eye view of the damage that can be done to a marriage if a couple refuses to love each other with Christ's selfless love. We've also had the honor of watching others love each other deeply the way God intended. Throughout the years we have been mentored by many married couples who showed us how to romance each other through the different seasons of life. These days, we are now learning from those same mentoring couples how to grieve when their spouses go home to Jesus. As they grieve with hope, we too know one day Christ will grant us His strength should He call one of us home before the other.

For Steve and me, real romance says, "I choose you, no matter what, when or where we find ourselves in life. It is you and you alone whom I adore."

Q: Could you share a little bit of one of your favorite stories from the book, aside from your own?

There are 25 stories in *Real-Life Romance*, and in some ways each is my favorite. At the end of the book I got to share the love stories of all four of our adult children. I think these would have to be my absolute favorites. Every parent hopes his or her children will find someone who loves them deeply and for a lifetime.

From the day each of our kids came into our family, Steve and I prayed diligently that God would bring to each one a spouse who would love Jesus more than he or she loved our child. We know that loving God with all of your being is the only way His perfect love can spill out of one's life onto a spouse. God graciously answered this prayer for each of our children. These days we pray the same prayer for our grandchildren.

Q: Both of your daughters and their husbands have faced challenges of their own — challenges many couples face. Can you share a little bit about their struggles with growing their families?

When my youngest daughter, Kayla, and her husband, Estevan, were expecting their first baby, they were saddened when the doctor told them the ultra sound revealed the baby she had been carrying no longer had a heartbeat. They were heartbroken over their loss but drew strength from knowing God was lovingly in control of all aspects of their life, and their trust in Christ drew them closer to one another for comfort.

That Christmas, Kayla and Estevan sent out a beautiful letter to their friends and family sharing just how sweetly God had walked them through their trial with His peace. Their testimony of God's faithfulness was read by numerous people who did not know Christ. Amidst the storm, their love for one another and trust in Christ shined brightly.

A month after Kayla's miscarriage our family was overjoyed when our eldest daughter, Meredith, gave birth to her second child, Ivy. Ivy had been born with some unexpected deformities. In a moment everything changed.

Throughout time Meredith and her husband, Jake, came to understand the syndrome God had allowed little Ivy to be born with. Rather than questioning God, the two had come to realize that the Lord's love for Ivy far exceeded their own and that they could trust Him with their sweet baby girl. This grandmother's heart was encouraged by Meredith's wisdom and peace when one day she said to me, "Mom, this is Ivy's trial, and God has invited us to prepare her to walk through it."

Great love stories don't always consist of two people falling in love and living without a care in the world. Rather, true love stories are wrapped around real life where God calls two people together to love Him and to love each other no matter what trials might come in life. When the love of two people is deeply rooted in Christ's love for them, their response to life's trials will reflect to a watching world how knowing Jesus really is the way to true love, joy and peace, no matter what challenges may come — and in this God is glorified.

Q: What encouragement do you offer those who feel they have already lost their chance at love or don't deserve to find love?

I often meet people who believe they've lost their chance or don't deserve to find love. Maybe they have been loved poorly by a parent or rejected by someone who promised to love them forever. The point of your need is not that you find a person who won't hurt you; rather, your deepest need is to learn how deeply God loves you and will never forsake you.

I think of the Samaritan woman in the Bible. She had been loved badly. We don't know the details of her story, but we do know she had a number of husbands and was even living with a man who wasn't her husband when Jesus went out of His way to find her at the well.

I love teaching the message of the Samaritan woman because many can relate to her story, but the highlight of this account in Scripture is that Jesus found her at the point of her need. Even though He knew the intimate details of her sordid past, Jesus valued her and offered her "Living Water." The thing that stood out most to her was, "He told me everything I have done!" That is what she proclaimed as she ran back to the village to call others to come and meet Messiah!

Her story offers so much hope because God never gives up on anyone. He is concerned about you and wants you to know His love for you is not based upon your performance but simply upon His own choice to love you with an everlasting love. When you devote yourself to learning from Scripture all you can about how much Jesus loves you and ask God to show you how to love Him with all of your being (see Mark 12), then you won't be tempted to find your worth in finding a person to fall in love with you. Rather you will be able to rest in knowing God's love for you is what makes you valuable. When you learn to trust God in this way, you can rest in whatever His plan might be for your love life. This trust will give you courage to wait on His timing and providence for your future.

Q: You close the book with a shorter story about finding a mate to help you run the race. Could you share that illustration?

When our son Tony was in the ROTC at Texas A&M University, he was the head of his unit. One woman under his command had a hard time keeping up with the men when they ran a great distance. When they arrived at their destination without her, they were chastised and required to do push-ups until she arrived. As commander, Tony needed to be sure she kept up the pace with the rest of the unit, so he ran in back alongside her. With both of their eyes focused on their destination, Tony would place his hand in the small of her back, and she would keep up the pace. When he removed his hand, she lagged behind.

I tell this story to show a wonderful word picture. The Bible says that as Christ followers we're running a race He has set before us. He calls us to keep our eyes fixed on Him, the author and finisher of our faith, and to shake off whatever easily besets us in our pursuit to finish well.

When looking for a mate, it's tempting to take your eyes off the prize of Christ and focus on who might be "the one." Let's follow the example of the woman in Tony's unit. If you run this race of life with your focus on the One who calls you to run, and one day you look over and see a man whose eyes are fixed on Jesus and who places his hand on the small of your back to help you run your race — marry him! (If you're a man, and you one day find your hand on the small of a woman's back, the back of a woman who runs with you, you might want to consider marrying her.)

Learn more about more about *Real-Life Romance* and Rhonda Stoppe at www.NoRegretsWoman.com, on [Facebook \(RhondaStoppeNoRegretsWoman\)](#) and on [Twitter \(@RhondaStoppe\)](#).