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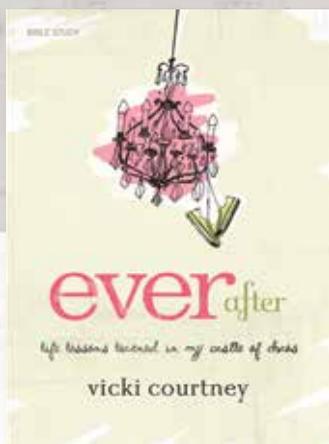
# ever<sup>after</sup>

*life lessons learned in my castle of chaos*

vicki courtney

LifeWay | Women

# Happily ever after should come with a warning label.



Most women grow up on a steady diet of fairy tales and chick flicks that drive our dreams and leave us with a sugarcoated version of reality. This 6-session Bible study addresses the difficulties and blessings of marriage and motherhood. Poignant, funny, and cathartic, Vicki Courtney shares mistakes made, lessons learned, and the hope that Christ alone is the answer to the happily ever after we long for.

Member Book 005558688 \$11.95 | Leader Kit 005558689 \$149.95

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LOOK AROUND...

Explore this sample taken from the first week of *Ever After*.



## about the author

Vicki Courtney is an author and speaker with a ministry that reaches more than 150,000 people a year through events, books, and online resources. A mother of three, she seeks to provide women and parents with the tools necessary to navigate today's culture. She has done hundreds of radio and newspaper interviews, appearing on CNN, Fox News, and CNN Headline News as a youth culture commentator. In addition to being a national speaker, Vicki is a best-selling author of *5 Conversations You Must Have With Your Daughter*; *5 Conversations You Must Have With Your Son*; *Your Girl*; *Your Boy*; *TeenVirtue*; and *Between God and Me*. Interact with Vicki on her blog ([www.vickicourtney.com](http://www.vickicourtney.com)) and follow her on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Of all her accomplishments, Vicki is most proud of being a wife and mother. A graduate of the University of Texas, Vicki is married to Keith and resides in Austin, Texas, where all three children live as well. Their oldest child, Ryan, and his wife, Casey, are Auburn graduates, as are daughter, Paige, and her husband, Matt. Hayden, the youngest, is a student at the University of Texas. Keith and Vicki recently became grandparents to Walker (Ryan and Casey's son).

Vicki enjoys running, shoe shopping, spending time at the lake with her family, and spoiling her grandson rotten. She is also quite fond of her two pint-sized Yorkshire terriers, Lexie and Scout, who she claims are the additional children her husband refused to have.

## about the study

In this return to the fun but unrealistic motif of fairy tales, women will begin to see how their expectations about life seldom match reality—and how God’s desire and plan for our lives are so much better. While culture uplifts fairy-tale happy endings and the bigger-than-life people who live them, real life is quite different. It’s tough out there and women need support from other women of faith. An *Ever After Bible Study* group can provide encouragement as you navigate the joys and pitfalls of godly living in a world that seemingly has lost its focus on God.

A recent empty nester, Vicki Courtney draws on valuable life lessons learned in the trenches of marriage and motherhood. True to her signature style, Vicki addresses challenges as a fellow Christian, wife, and mom who, on her best days, is a work in progress. She shares mistakes made, lessons learned, and memories forged along the way—plus the consistent promise from Scripture that God meets and empowers us wherever we are in the journey.

This study is developed around six group sessions with Vicki’s video teaching, review, mutual support, and home study during the week. Just as Vicki taught and interacted with women around her dining room table, so can you use this study in one or more homes, an office setting, coffee shop, and classrooms at the church. Invite a friend or neighbor to join you and talk about insights together.

Five weeks of home study allow time to think about personal applications and to immerse yourself in Scripture. Abiding in Him and learning more about His plan for your life are priorities in *Ever After Bible Study*. Journaling can help you see how God is at work. Or you may want to make notes in this book and look back to see how your faith, family, or marriage is beginning to change for the better.

Ideally, a group meets for 75-90 minutes each week (or every other week), but if you have less time, eliminate some activities. A church leader or a mom or a group member can facilitate a group using the suggestions on pages 165-174. Customize them for the needs of your group.

Pray about your role and participation in this study. Make a commitment to see what God has in store for you. Pray for the other participants and for where God will take all of you during this six-week journey together.

## meet Vicki's group

Vicki and Keith Courtney teach a group of young marrieds on Sundays at their Austin church. They love being involved in these couples' lives, building deep relationships through a common bond in Christ. So Vicki invited eight women, all from the Austin area, to join her around the dining room table. Each brings a unique perspective to the *Ever After Bible Study* message—just as your group will bring “to the table” their unique needs, insights about Scripture, and joys and sorrows. Meet this group now and enjoy their contributions throughout the study.

Tami Overhauser is originally from California, where she met and married her husband, Chad. They've been married for 15 years. Tami is a stay-at-home mother of four—Rebekah, age 14; Samantha, 12; Adam, 8; and David. 6.

Carrie Betzen, married to Brian for 10 years, has been blessed with two beautiful daughters—Addison, age 4, and McKenna, 2½. She does part-time marketing communications work. For fun, Carrie enjoys running, exercising, reading, baking, and vacationing in tropical places.

Kati Smith has been married to her wonderful husband, Ken, for almost 18 years. God blessed them with two precious sons—Kolton, age 7, and Kooper, 4—after their lengthy struggle with infertility. Kati loves spending time with family and friends, as well as cooking, entertaining, and traveling.

Lyndsey Testone is a stay-at-home mother of three—Kate, age 8; Jack, 5; and Meg, 9 months. Lyndsey and Stephen have been married for 10 great years. She and Jaclyn Benson, also in the group, are sisters.

Jaclyn Benson, originally from Austin, graduated from the University of Mary Hardin–Baylor, where she met her husband, Mark. Married for seven years, Jaclyn and Mark have a seven-month-old daughter named Emma.

Shelly Gleason describes herself as an Austin native. She attended the University of Texas at Austin, where she met her husband, Robert. Married for 15 years, they have been blessed with a beautiful daughter named Abby. Shelly enjoys being a wife and mother and she loves Jesus with all her heart.

Anna Jenkins calls herself a daughter, sister, wife, mother, auntie, Christian, and friend. She loves online shopping, barbeque, coordinating shoes in every color, big jewelry, baking (not cooking), entertaining, sweet tea, professional football, Swedish Fish candy, and decorating Americana-style. Anna and Marcus have been married since 1999 and welcomed Abigail in 2008.

Absent when this photo was taken is Natalie Bibler, who was part of the small group during DVD sessions 1, 5, and 6. Natalie is married to Josh and they have two boys—Jaden, age 6, and Brody, 4. Married for nine years, she serves as a preschool director for Canyon Creek Preschool.

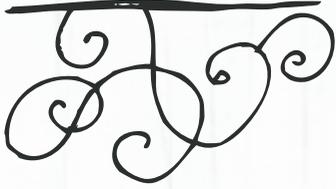


*Standing, left to right: Casey Courtney (on-site coordinator), Tami, Kati, Lyndsey, Shelly, Chris Watson (assistant)*

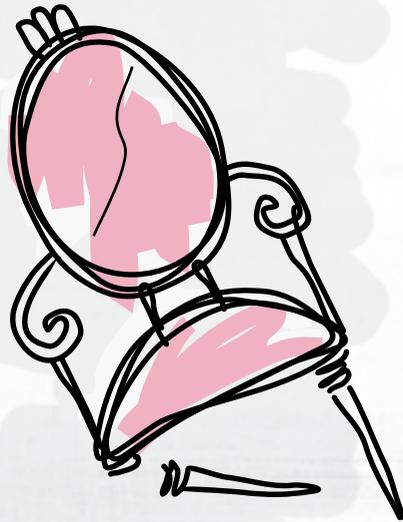
*Seated, left to right: Carrie, Vicki and Scout, Jaclyn, and Anna*

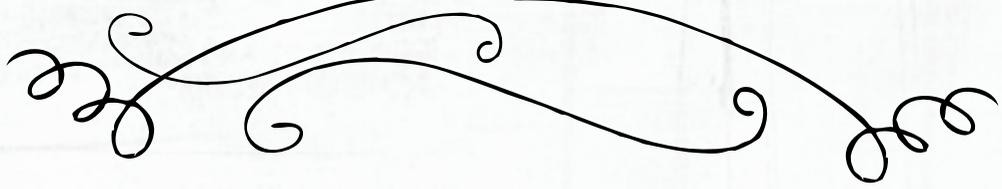
As is always the case, an awesome crew was doing their work behind the cameras, off-site, or in post-production. For those who don't look at video credits, thanks here to Rick Simms, Lisa Turner, Adrian Alverson, Jimmy Patterson, Greg Smith, Paul Lopez, Steve Fralick, and Mike Psanos.

Week 1



fairy-tale letdown





“If you happen to read fairy tales, you will observe that one idea runs from one end of them to the other—the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition. This idea, which is the core of ethics, is the core of the nursery-tales.”

G.K. Chesterton

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

Romans 8:16-17, ESV

## DVD session 1

Today's group: Anna Jenkins, Carrie Betzen, Natalie Bibler, Tami Overhauser

**QUESTION:** Think of a time when the memory and the fairy tale did not match.

A fairy-tale pursuit is really a \_\_\_\_\_ .

### 1 John 2:15-17

A fairy tale puts us at the center of the story.

Love of the world \_\_\_\_\_ for the Father (The Message).

Three predominant \_\_\_\_\_ of our nature:

- Desire of the \_\_\_\_\_
- Desire of the \_\_\_\_\_
- Pride in \_\_\_\_\_

Desire of the flesh = **epithumia** (*ep-ee-thoo-mee'-ah*): a *longing*, esp. for what is forbidden—lust (after)

Desire of the eyes = **ophthalmos** (*of-thal-mos*'): *vision; envy*; (from the jealous side glance) basis of our word *ophthalmology*

### Ecclesiastes 6:9

**QUESTION:** What is your biggest area of struggle?

God has wired us for a bigger, better story than any fairy tale—a story that \_\_\_\_\_ .



Every girl wants the fairy tale. And by fairy tale, I mean the works: the prince, the castle, and, eventually, the little royal subjects running down the castle corridors in matching smocked rompers.

And let's not forget the personal attendants who come as part of Cinderella's dream package.

### *Discuss together*

Throughout this study you will meet eight women who are part of the Bible study group Vicki and her husband, Keith, teach at their church. She asks her small group for their responses to certain questions. You may want to stop the video and answer these questions too.

Other questions to consider include:

In what ways have you gotten comfortable with life as it is now?

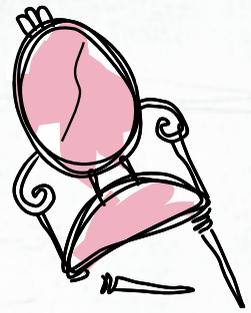
As a believer, how do you juggle living in the world yet not pursuing things of the world?

Downloads of this session are available at [www.lifeway.com](http://www.lifeway.com).

Day 1

## Once upon a Time

Romans 8:18-25



As mentioned in the video, every girl wants the fairy tale. The details may vary from princess to princess, but the end goal is the same: happily ever after.

If you need proof of the fairy-tale pursuit, look no further than Pinterest. Women of all ages and stages of life are pinning their fairy-tale hopes and dreams on virtual pinboards. Long before Prince Charming arrives on the scene, many women have pinned their dream weddings down to the fine details. And heaven help poor Prince Charming when he does show up and eventually takes a peek at Cinderella's engagement ring pinboard. He may hop on his white horse and gallop outta town, clutching his wallet with white knuckles.

Once we are married, the fairy-tale dream continues. My daughter is newly married and has an entire pinboard devoted to "Future Little McMichens." I couldn't help but smile when I saw it.

Pinterest wasn't around when I began writing the dream script for my fairy tale. I remember spending the night with my best girlfriend in grade school and devoting endless amounts of time to naming our future children. For the record, I was going to have twin girls named Tiffany and Stephanie. I'm fairly certain we embraced the concept of the stork delivering them to our doorsteps, given that boys still had cooties. I never did get those twin girls, but as many of us have learned by now, real life doesn't always measure up to our fairy-tale expectations.

Recall

When you were a little girl, how did you imagine your life as an adult?  
Do you recall dreaming about marriage and motherhood?

What factors influenced your fairy-tale dream over the years?

Describe the moment when you realized real life wasn't going to measure up to your fairy-tale expectations.

## Read

The truth is, we don't live in Disneyland. Not even close. One glance at the nightly news, one step on the scale, one new scandal on Wall Street—all remind us of that truth. In theological terms, we live in a fallen world. In personal terms, life is hard.

Read Romans 8:18-25.

What does this passage tell you about life on earth right now?

Based on what you read in these verses, describe the created world. Use as many adjectives as possible.

In verse 18, Paul talked about the glory that will be revealed in us. What do you think that will look like?

In verse 20, Paul indicates that the creation was subjected to something. To what was he referring? \_\_\_\_\_. Read this verse in several Bible translations to see other words that are used.

In verse 23, Paul indicated that believers are eagerly waiting for adoption. Put yourself in the shoes of a child (or parent) who desperately awaits an adoption to be finalized.

Compare that feeling with the waiting Paul described in verse 23.

How does this understanding impact the meaning of the verse for you?

Reread verses 24-25 and express them in your own words.

What role does hope play in your nonfairy-tale life? What role should it play in your life?

The Book of Romans is unlike any other letter Paul wrote. While other epistles were written to address problems in the many young churches popping up in the first century after Christ's resurrection, this book was written to give the Roman church a solid foundation of the crucial basics of the Christian faith. In penning it, Paul provided the church (and us) the total message of Christianity. Almost every Christian doctrine can be found in this book, including living as redeemed people in a fallen world.

Paul used some powerful words to describe our presence in this world—words like “sufferings,” “futility,” “bondage,” “corruption,” “groaning,” and “labor pains” (let's not forget he was a single guy!). These verses are a stark reminder that our lives here as we await Christ's return are not a trip to the Magic Kingdom.

Let's look at one word in particular: futility. Other translations use words like “vanity” (KJV), “curse”(New Living), “frustration”(NIV), “frailty”(Amplified), and “confusion” (CEV). These do not paint a fairy-tale, perfect portrait of our lives. In fact, they demonstrate just how much our lives are *not* like we thought they would be when we were little girls with dreams of Prince Charming, the castle, and royal subjects running underfoot.

The things of this world—“the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride in one's lifestyle”—are not intended to satisfy (1 John 2:16). Our fairy-tale dreams cannot be fulfilled this side of heaven because, well, we're not in heaven yet. We were designed by our Creator for more than this life provides, and when we rely on the stuff of this world to completely satisfy us, we'll be disappointed.

When we expect others to complete us, we'll wind up disillusioned, discouraged, and, many times, divorced. When the next outfit or the next gadget becomes the next "fix" to soothe the deep aching in our hearts, we find ourselves in debt and still in despair. Why? Because God created within the human heart the need for communion with Himself, and until that can take place in a perfect place, we will "groan within ourselves" (Rom. 8:23).

Until then, what do we do? How do we respond to the sobering recognition that this life, however grand or glorious or exciting or picture-perfect, will ultimately disappoint us?

- We can deny that there is anything beyond this life. That's certainly what many people opt to do—deny the afterlife; ignore the existence of God; convince themselves that the ache isn't really there, that they really are happy. That may work for a while, but the yearning for more than this world has to offer will return.
- We can self-medicate to soothe the ache. We can medicate with drugs and alcohol, with as much stuff as we can accumulate and pile in self-storage buildings, with unhealthy relationships that demand more than they can ever provide, with children who provide a second chance to correct our own youthful mistakes.
- The worst response we can have to this ever-present ache is to get comfortable with it. Like the proverbial frog in the pot of increasingly hot water, we sit in our surroundings, never realizing that being comfortable in our environment is actually killing us. Let's not forget, the frog has the ability to jump out at any given time. So why doesn't he? The change is so subtle and gradual that the frog fails to see the danger of his familiar environment.

Are we any different? We settle, we stop seeking the Divine, we convince ourselves that this is the best it'll ever be, so we stay put in our current circumstances. And just like that, we stop living.

The alternative is to live in hope. Like a woman separated from her beloved, we ache and we hope and we read His Love Letter (Scripture) over and over, looking for nuances we missed before. And, above all, we remain faithful.

We remember that eventually we will be reunited with our Lover and that our “sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory” (Rom. 8:18) that we will experience.

Until then, we hope and we wait.

“If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.” —C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

What about you? How have you tried to satisfy the longing in your heart? In what ways have you gotten comfortable with life as is?

## *Respond*

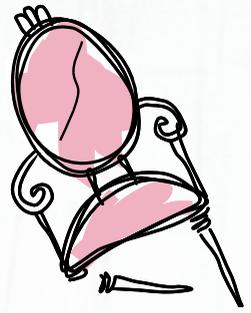
How did God speak to you today?

What is your response to Him?

## Day 2

### Prince-Not-So-Charming

Revelation 4:1-11



*Someday our prince will come. We grew up tucking that promise away in our hearts as part of the dream. For the record, my prince arrived in August 1985 at a Christian weekend retreat for college students. Much like the fairy tales, it was love at first sight.*

Well, for me, at least. He clearly hadn't read the script in which the love-at-first-sight thing was mutual.

I recall a particularly low moment when Keith called me in the weeks after our first meeting and asked me for a friend's phone number. Where was that scene in my fairy-tale script?! (I soothed my heartache by sobbing into my pillow and listening to Air Supply for two hours. And I may or may not have given him the wrong number.)

He finally came to his senses, and we recently celebrated our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. It's safe to say I carried my perfect-prince expectations into my first few years of marriage, even though it didn't take long for the prince to fall off the pedestal I had put him on. Or, rather, the one I pushed him from. He was a bit slow adjusting to the part of the charming prince.

I doubt Mr. Darcy (*Pride and Prejudice*) would have left Mrs. Darcy to play in a church league softball tournament on the day they brought their first child home from the hospital. Or that Mr. Darcy would have called his mother to ask how to get the mildew smell out of the towels.

And I'm still waiting for him to cup my face in his hands and tell me, "You have bewitched me body and soul and I love ... I love ... I love you." I don't think I've ever even heard him use the word "bewitched" in the twenty-five years we've been married. "Witch" maybe, but I digress.

## Recall

What expectations did you have about marriage and Prince Charming?

If you are married, describe a time when you realized your Prince Charming could sometimes be a toad.

Think about a time when someone deeply disappointed you. How did you respond?

## Read

On day 1 you read and reflected on the truth that we live in a fallen world. One consequence of the fall is difficulty in relationships, especially with our spouses. Remember what happened when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit?

Read Genesis 3:16-19.

What consequence did Eve face because of her sin?

What did those consequences focus on?

What consequences did Adam face because of his sin?

What did his consequences focus on?

Adam's consequences centered around work. Think about that for a moment. Where does a typical guy find fulfillment and a sense of purpose and worth? His job. That is often the biggest source of a guy's joy—and of his disappointment and frustration.

Around what did Eve's consequences center? Two primary relationships—with her husband and with her children. Think about that. Where does a typical woman find the greatest sense of fulfillment and joy? In her relationships, specifically with her husband. And where does a woman often find her biggest source of anguish, frustration, and disappointment? Yep, in her relationship with her husband.

So what causes this deep sense of longing and disappointment in so many women? Why do so many women seem so unfulfilled, cynical, bitter, and downright despondent over their relationship with their husband? Because we mistakenly think our husband should fulfill our heart's desire and make our lives complete.

Do you remember the movie *Jerry McGuire*? Of course you do. Romance. Laughter. That handsome lead man (back before he took a ride on the crazy train and jumped up and down on a sofa on live TV). Everything a woman wants in a chick flick. One of the most critical—and misguided—scenes in the movie takes place in an elevator. Jerry and Dorothy are watching a deaf couple communicating with each other when they see the man sign something to the woman, something that earns him a passionate kiss.

While Jerry has no idea what has been said, Dorothy fills him in (because her aunt is hearing impaired). He signed, "You complete me."

Of course, in true fairy-tale form, Jerry sweeps into a room full of women at the end of the movie and proclaims his undying love to Dorothy, using that three-word sentence. And they live happily ever after.

The truth of the matter is, no man can ever complete you. A man can complement you; he can be strong in areas in which you struggle. He can be a great cook or a great checkbook keeper or a patient father. God often puts us together (sometimes humorously, I think) so that our weaknesses and strengths play off (and annoy) each other.

But no man can ever make you complete. Why? Because you were not primarily created for a relationship with a man.

Read Colossians 1:16-17.

According to these verses, who created you and why?

Did you catch that? “All things have been created *through Him and for Him*” (v. 16, italics added). You were created for Him, for a relationship with Him. Yes, you were created for relationships with other people; God told Adam he needed companionship. But in eternity, your relationship with your spouse will no longer be as significant.

Stop for a minute and think about the irony of that truth. We spend so much time on this earth pining for a soul mate, trying to manufacture someone into a soul mate, and expressing disappointment about a soul mate (or lack thereof). Could it be that our affections are misguided?

Read Revelation 4:1-11.

What is pictured in this scene? List some of the descriptions.

Who is seated on the throne?

What happens around the throne?

Summarize verse 11. Compare it to Colossians 1:16-17.

# Leader Guide

by Brenda Harris

Your commitment to facilitate *Ever After Bible Study* will impact your life as well as the lives of women in your group. God wants to challenge, strengthen, and solidify your walk with Christ as you pray, prepare, and guide this study. These suggestions are for six 75- to 90-minute sessions.

- Reserve your meeting space (in a home or at the church) and secure a DVD player and television. If possible, position the furniture so everyone can see both the DVD and one another.
- Arrange for childcare if needed.
- Promote your study through the church's in-house publications, especially for Sunday School and small groups. Make sure information is on the church's website as well. Design a poster for women's restrooms throughout the church. Create and mail a postcard invitation to all women in the church or to specific target audiences you want to reach in the community. Include details about location, times, and childcare, plus who to call for further information.
- Gather basic supplies for each session: name tags, markers,

pencils, notecards, and extra Bible translations.

- Enlist a volunteer to provide healthy snacks if desired.
- Plan to use name tags for the first two meetings; don't assume everyone knows each other.
- Start each session promptly and honor everyone's time.
- Pray for yourself and the women who will be in your small group.

## Session 1: Fairy-Tale Letdown

### In Advance

Gather various children's books with a "happily ever after" motif (*Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Princess Fiona*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Princess and the Pea*, and so forth). Display the books so participants can browse in advance of the session.

Prepare a list of attendees who have already signed up. Allow extra space for others who join the group. Duplicate this list for each participant.

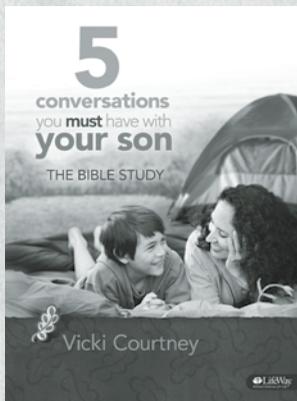
Preview DVD session 1 and identify your own "happily ever after." Each week read Scripture from the video in two or three Bible translations.

WANT TO READ MORE?

Visit us at [lifeway.com/everafter](http://lifeway.com/everafter).

leader guide 165

# other studies by Vicki



## 5 CONVERSATIONS YOU MUST HAVE WITH YOUR SON 6 sessions

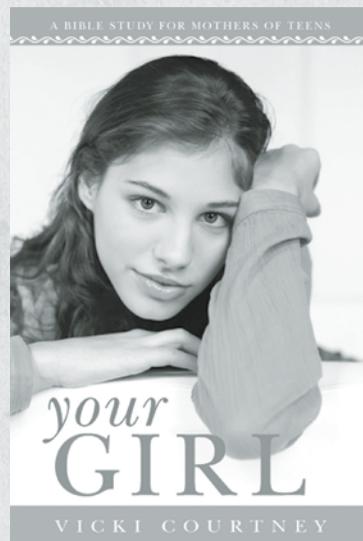
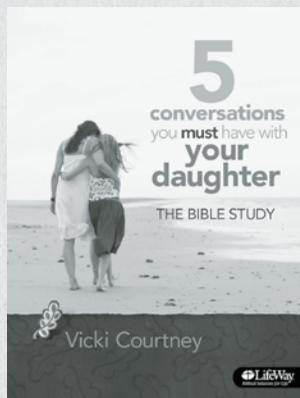
Millions of boys grow older, but very few become great, godly men. And with so many influences from culture, friends, and celebrities, prepare to talk to your son about the tough topics. Because even though knowing what to say—or how to say it—can be hard, there's no one better to teach him about life, love, and faith than you.

Member Book 005342724 \$11.95  
Leader Kit 005342723 \$149.95

## 5 CONVERSATIONS YOU MUST HAVE WITH YOUR DAUGHTER 6 sessions

Your daughter is growing up. The world has a lot to say to her, and she's starting to listen. Even if she doesn't quite know it, she needs you more than ever. It's time for you to press in, to tell her some things she might not know (or might have forgotten) about who she is in God's eyes. These five conversations provide the basis for a whole new way of relating to your daughter.

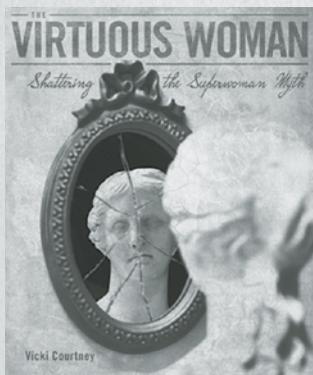
Member Book 005191375 \$11.95  
Leader Kit 005125844 \$149.95



## YOUR GIRL: BIBLE STUDY FOR MOTHERS OF TEENS 7 sessions

Raise a godly daughter in an anything-but-godly world by addressing six of the fiercest battles of the teen years: conformity, self-esteem, sexual purity, boys, modesty, and mean girls. Be challenged and empowered to impart a passion for God in your daughter as she grows to become a godly woman.

Member Book 001303671 \$11.95  
DVD Pack 001303672 \$62.95



## THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN: SHATTERING THE SUPERWOMAN MYTH 6 sessions

For most women, the Proverbs 31 passage offers "more guilt than eating a one-pound bag of M&Ms." Is this the ideal woman? Or is the Proverbs 31 woman an outdated fixture of the past? Unravel the mystery with this study.

Member Book 001114550 \$9.95

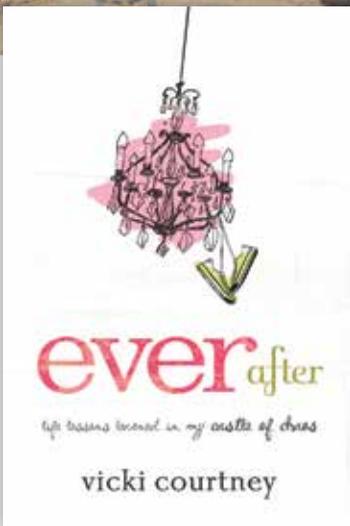
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This is NOT  
the party I  
planned on  
Pinterest.



We want it all: the perfect husband, the perfect house, the perfect kids. With fairytales guiding your dreams and expectations, everyone can expect to be letdown by reality. The truth is, **life is not perfect.**

In *Ever After*, best-selling author Vicki Courtney addresses the realities of marriage and motherhood through the difficulties and blessing of the average day for the average wife and mother.

#FairytaleLetdown



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LET'S BE FRIENDS!



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