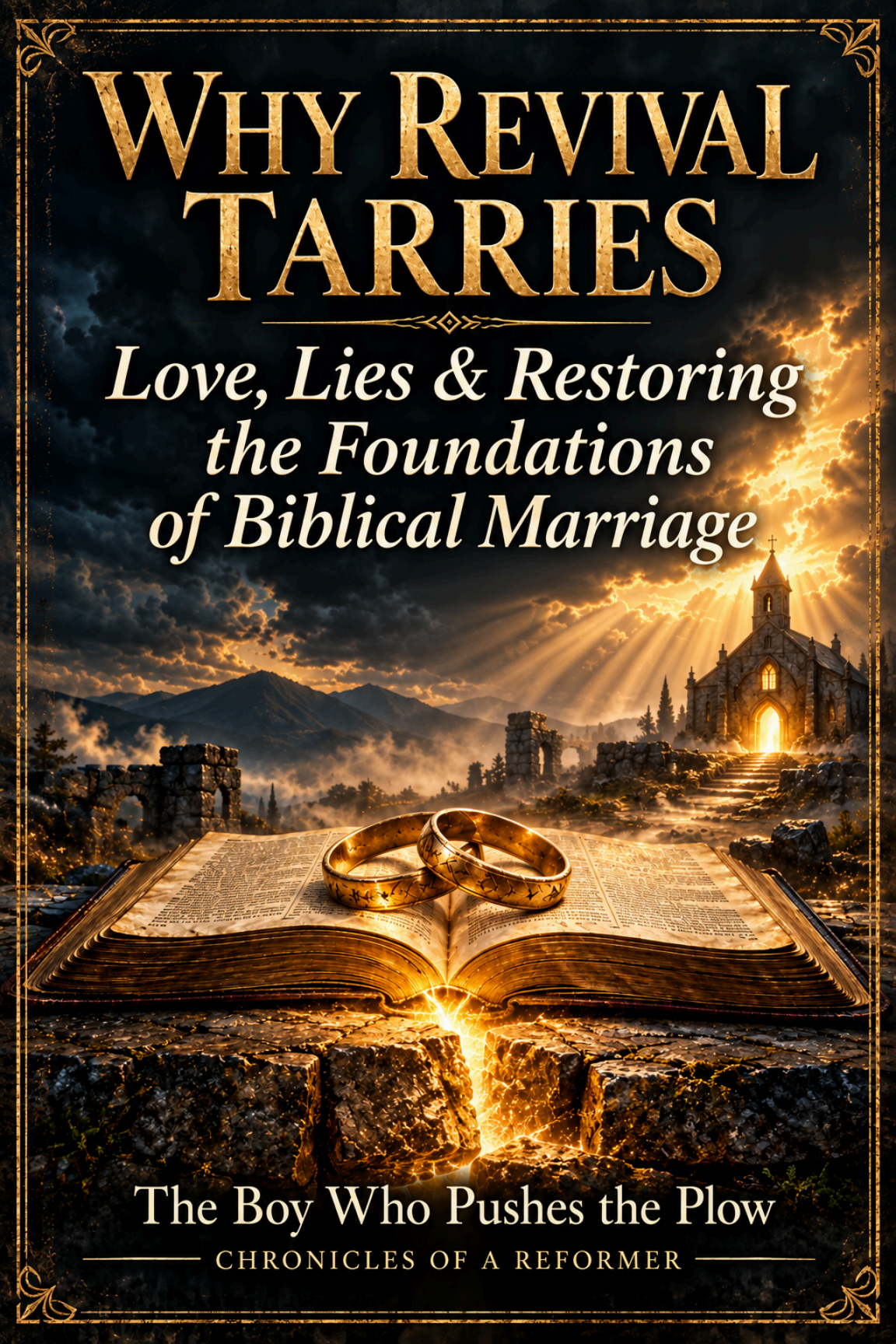
Why Revival Tarries

Love, Lies & Restoring the Foundations of Biblical Marriage



The Boy Who Pushes the Plow

CHRONICLES OF A REFORMER

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"I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost."
— William Tyndale

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation (NLT). Other versions are marked: NKJV, NIV, ESV, AMP, AMPC, TPT.

Some names and identifying details have been changed. Illustrations described as pictures or stories often told are offered as illustrations, not as accounts of specific people.

This book is part of the *Chronicles of a Reformer* series and is the deep dive on the season of Revival from *The 9 Seasons of the Kingdom of God*.

Acknowledgments

As of 2026, I have had the privilege of being married for over 23 years to a beautiful woman of God who fears the Lord and takes the weight of covenant seriously. Without her endurance, accountability, and conviction about marriage, these pages would not have been possible. I thank her for being willing to push the plow with me.

We married after three and a half months of dating. While I would never advise anyone else to do that, the grace of God and our commitment to covenant have refined us and taught us many of the lessons reflected in these pages.

I owe the title of this book, and much of its heart, to Peter Vescovi and his wife, Emily. They preached the best message on marriage I have ever heard, and they preached it together, as a couple, which made it all the more profound.

Some of what you will read in these pages I first heard from them. The rest is what the Lord has shown me over the years. My prayer is that together it helps you see the covenant of marriage for what it is: sacred and holy.

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INTRODUCTION

The Plowboy and the Revival That Tarries

> *In this time of our deep need, help us again as you did in years gone by. And in your anger, remember your mercy.*
>
> **Habakkuk 3:2**

Five hundred years ago, a scholar named William Tyndale stood in front of a learned churchman who believed the Bible was too holy, and too dangerous, to be put into the hands of ordinary people. Tyndale answered him with a promise. If God spared his life, he said, he would cause a boy that drives the plow to know more of the Scripture than the churchman did.

Tyndale paid for that promise with his life. But the plowboys got their Bibles.

I write as one of those plowboys. I'm not a scholar. I played college football as "the guy," went through the NFL Combine, and spent about twelve seasons in the NFL as a journeyman. What I know, I learned the way a plowboy learns: one furrow at a time, with my hands on the handles and my eyes on the field, letting the Word of God turn up the hard ground in me before I ever tried to turn it up in anyone else.

A plowboy doesn’t own the field. He just keeps the furrows straight and trusts the Lord of the harvest.

Why This Book

All over the world, believers are praying for revival. We fast for it, sing about it, and hold conferences on it. And we should. But I’ve come to believe that one of the biggest reasons revival tarries is not up in the heavens. It is at our kitchen tables.

The Church was meant to look like a family, and the world was meant to look at our families and see the Kingdom. Instead, the world often sees the same brokenness inside the Church that it sees outside of it: fatherless homes, marriages treated like contracts, purity treated like an old-fashioned rule, and divorce handled either as nothing or as an unforgivable sin. We have been very good at preaching against the sins of the world and very quiet about the sins we tolerate in our own house.

Underneath all of it is something deeper. The enemy has rewritten the definition of love. He has convinced a generation that love is a feeling, that a spouse is supposed to complete you, that marriage is a deal you can walk away from when it stops paying out. Those are lies, and lies always have victims.

> *Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land.*
>
> **2 Chronicles 7:14**

Notice where God starts. Not with the culture, but with His people.

Revival doesn't begin in the stadium. It begins in the bedroom, the living room and the dinner table.

A Word of Thanks

I need to give credit where it belongs. The title of this book, and much of its heart, came from Peter Vescovi and his wife, Emily. They preached the best message on marriage I have ever heard, and they preached it together, as a couple, which made it all the more profound. A husband and wife standing side by side, teaching on covenant, carried a weight that no single voice could. Some of what you will read here I first heard from them. The rest is what the Lord has shown me over the years, sometimes gently and sometimes through correction. My prayer is that together it helps you see the covenant of marriage for what it is: sacred and holy.

The Season of Revival

This book is part of *Chronicles of a Reformer*, built around what I call *The 9 Seasons of the Kingdom of God*: Refinement, Repentance, Revival, Reformation, Recalculate, Revolution, Release, Reward and Repeat. Every believer, every family and every church moves through these seasons, and each one has its own work.

This is a Revival book. Revival is the season when God breathes on what repentance has cleared away. These seasons can overlap; they are not a rigid sequence. As we seek His fire, we must let Him deal with our foundations. That is why this book explores marriage, purity, fatherhood and the lies we have believed about love. You can't pour new wine into cracked wineskins.

How to Read This Book

The book has four parts.

- **Part One: Why Revival Tarries** asks why the world loves Christ but not His Church, and traces it back to broken families and a Church that has gone quiet about covenant.
- **Part Two: Sex Was God's Idea** reclaims purity as a gift to give, not a thing to lose.
- **Part Three: Seven Lies About Love** answers a question I often ask myself: if I could go back and talk to my twenty-

four-year-old self before the wedding, what would I tell him?

- **Part Four: Restoring the Foundations** paints a picture of a marriage-centered home and the kind of Church it builds.

Some chapters will comfort you. Some will step on your toes. A few deal with hard things like adultery, abuse and divorce. If you have been wounded in those places, please hear me: this book is not written to condemn you. The God who hates divorce is the same God who is near to the brokenhearted. Truth and grace walk together in these pages, or they don't walk at all.

Every chapter ends with **For the Road**: three questions and one line to carry with you. Don't skip them. Better yet, don't read this book alone. Read it with your spouse, your small group or a few friends who will be honest with you.

> *Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name.*
>
> **Malachi 3:16**

God listens in when His people talk honestly about Him. He writes it down. Some of the best fruit of this book will come from the conversations it starts around your table.

As always, eat the chicken and throw away the bone. Test everything by the Word. And let’s ask the Lord together to restore the foundations, so that revival no longer has a reason to wait.

For the Road

1. When you pray for revival, what do you picture? How does your picture change if revival starts at home?
2. Which of the seven lies about love do you suspect you have believed?
3. Who will you read this book with, and when will you start?

Revival tarries until the foundations are restored.
Let’s go rebuild them.

PART ONE

Why Revival Tarries

Why does the world love Christ but not His Church?

CHAPTER 1

Better Than a Gang?

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

John 13:35 (NKJV)

Pastor Francis Chan tells a story from the last year or so before he stepped away from the megachurch he had planted, around 2010. The church had just baptized a young man who had come straight out of gang life. He was on fire. He had walked away from everything he knew, and leaving a gang is not like canceling a gym membership. It can cost you your safety. The day he went under the water, the whole church celebrated. Heaven was rejoicing, and so were they.

A couple of weeks later, Chan saw him in the hallway and asked how he was doing. He expected a glowing report. Instead, the young man's face fell.

He told Chan he'd had the wrong idea about church. When he was jumped into the gang, he said, they became his family on the spot. They had his back day and night. If he was sleeping on the street, they were sleeping on the street with him. They didn't get together once a week to talk about life. They did life, all the time. Then he got baptized into the family of God and found Sunday

services, a small group now and then, and a lot of polite handshakes in the lobby.

Not long after that conversation, he stopped coming.

Chan said that story broke his heart, and that it seemed as though "Satan stole God's playbook." People are drawn to gangs, he said, because in so many ways gangs are doing things the way the Bible describes, except for the killing.

Let that sit for a minute. A young man who had been in a gang looked at the Church and said, in effect, "I've seen real family, and this isn't it."

When the world finds more loyalty in a gang than in the Church, revival is not late. Revival is being held up at our front door.

Wounded, or Right?

Every pastor has met the disappointed church member. Every one of us has been tempted to file them all in the same drawer: bitter, wounded, critical, offended. Some of them are. There is such a thing as a critical spirit, and it will never be satisfied by any church on earth, because what it really wants is somebody to blame.

But I want to ask a harder question, and I want to ask it of myself first. Are the people who walk out of our churches always just

wounded? Or are some of them telling us the truth about something we're missing?

The young man in Chan's hallway was not looking for a better worship band. He wasn't asking for a coffee bar or a shorter sermon. He was looking for exactly what Jesus promised: a family that would lay down its life for him. He had read the brochure correctly. We were the ones who failed to deliver.

Listen to how the early Church is described.

> *All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.… And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had.*
>
> **Acts 2:42, 44**

That is not a once-a-week event. That is a household.

Sometimes the person who leaves disappointed is not rejecting the Church. They are grieving the Church they read about and never found.

A Family, Not a Business

Here is what I believe is at the root of it. In today's church culture there is an epidemic rooted in a skewed view of what a healthy family should be. Somewhere along the way, we started measuring the house of God by the scorecard of the marketplace.

The enemy takes advantage of a simple fact the prophet Hosea warned about long ago.

> *My people are being destroyed because they don't know me.*
>
> **Hosea 4:6**

He doesn't have to destroy the Church from the outside. He only has to reshape our ideas of love and success until we no longer recognize what family is supposed to look like. If he can do that, he can quietly weaken the Church's role and purpose on the earth, because the true Church looks more like a healthy family than a successful business.

A business asks, "How many came?" A family asks, "Who's missing?"

A business measures attendance. A family measures presence.

A business can run well on Sunday and never see you again until next Sunday. A family notices when you didn't eat.

I spent a lot of years in locker rooms, from college through the NFL. I know what it is to be part of a team that would bleed for each other. I know what it feels like when the man next to you has your back on every snap, and I know what it feels like when he doesn't. A locker room can tell the difference between a team and a group of guys who wear the same uniform. So can a young man who just walked out of a gang.

Jesus didn't die to build a crowd. He died to bring many sons and daughters home.

"I Like Your Christ"

There is a line that has followed the Church for about a hundred years. It is attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, and it goes like this: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians."

As the story is usually told, Gandhi read the Gospels and was deeply moved by Jesus, by His compassion, His humility, and His truth. But when he looked at the people who carried Jesus' name, he too often saw hypocrisy and exclusion. Whether or not he said those exact words, the sentence has lasted because it stings. It names a real wound: admiration for Christ, and disappointment with His Church.

Jesus told us exactly what the world would recognize us by.

> *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*
>
> **John 13:34–35 (NKJV)**

Not by our buildings. Not by our numbers. By our love for one another.

Now be honest. What is the Body of Christ known for in our generation? Ask the man at the gas station or the woman in the

next cubicle. You will hear things like these:

- megachurches
- political positions
- the size of our buildings
- signs and wonders
- the size of the congregation

Some of those things are not wrong in themselves. God moves in signs and wonders. Large churches can be full of real love. But notice what is missing from the list. Love is the one thing Jesus said would mark us, and it is usually the last thing anyone mentions.

Love is what the Church was supposed to be known for. Everything else was meant to follow it.

Where It Starts

So where does a family like that begin? This is the heart of this book.

The Church will never look like a family to the world until our families look like the Kingdom to the Church. You can't build a healthy house of God out of broken houses that no one is willing to talk about. If the young man in that hallway had found husbands who loved their wives the way Christ loves the Church, and fathers whose hearts had turned toward their children, he would have found the loyalty he was looking for. He would have

found it at our dinner tables before he ever found it in our programs.

That is why this book is about marriage, about purity, and about the lies we have believed about love. Those things are not side topics to revival. They are the foundations. And when the foundations crack, the whole house shifts.

> *If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?*
>
> **Psalm 11:3 (NKJV)**

The answer is that the righteous rebuild them. That is what the rest of these pages are for.

I'm not writing as a man who has it all figured out. I'm writing as a man who has had to be corrected by the Lord more than once, some of it in the very areas I'll be teaching on. So eat the chicken and throw away the bone. But please, don't throw away the question that young man asked in the hallway. It may be the Holy Spirit asking it.

For the Road

1. Think of someone who left your church disappointed. Was it only a wound in them, or was there also something true in what they saw?
2. If a stranger watched your church for a month, what would they say it is known for? What would you want them to

say?

3. Where does your own home look more like a business than a family, and what is one step you could take this week to change that?

The world is not waiting for a bigger church. It is waiting for a family worth joining.

Chapter 2

Sons of Wrath

> *Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives. His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse.*
>
> **Malachi 4:5–6**

There is an African proverb that has stayed with me for years: “The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth.”

Read that again, slowly. It doesn’t excuse the fire. It explains it.

Look around at our generation. Look at the anger in the streets and in the comment sections, the young men who seem to have nothing to lose, the young women who have learned not to trust anyone. We call them rebellious, and some of that is true. But underneath a great deal of that rebellion is a child who was never embraced. A son who never heard his father say, “I’m proud of you.” A daughter who never felt safe in her father’s arms. So they reach for warmth any way they can find it, even if it burns everything down.

A generation that was never held will eventually try to hold the whole world hostage.

Where the Breakdown Starts

In the last chapter I said the true Church looks more like a healthy family than a successful business. So we have to ask the hard question: what happened to the family?

Scripture is honest about where the problem starts. It starts with men. Weak, compromised men, distracted by lust and by the world's value system. When men walk away from their God-given purpose, the curse Malachi warned about falls on the land: fatherlessness.

God has given husbands and fathers four simple assignments. We are called to:

- **protect** our families,
- **provide** for them,
- **pray** over them, and
- give them **prophetic vision**, a sense of who they are and where God is taking them.

When men turn from true worship, those four things go undone. We start chasing the fleeting pleasures of life and a counterfeit identity, built on money, status, performance or the next conquest, instead of the presence of God. The house may still have a man living in it. But it has lost its father.

Every man has something he is tempted to build his name on: a title, a paycheck, a reputation, a body, a highlight reel. None of those things are evil in themselves. But none of them can carry the weight of an identity. Only the Father can tell a man who he is.

When a man trades the presence of God for a counterfeit identity, his whole family pays the bill.

What It Does to Our Wives and Daughters

This shift has destroyed marriages. It has left women feeling unsafe, unloved and undervalued.

I want to be very careful here, because this is not a chapter that blames women. It is the opposite. When men abandon their post, women are left holding a wall that was never meant to rest on them alone. Many have responded the only way they could: by seeking their worth and identity in worldly achievement, because no one at home was affirming it. They learned to protect themselves, because no one else would.

And the wound goes deeper than the marriage. A husband is meant to reflect God's image and character on the earth. So when he fails, a woman's distrust doesn't stop with him. It reaches all the way to God. If the man who promised to love her like Christ loves the Church walked away, why would Christ be any different?

Popular culture has given voice to that cynicism. Tina Turner's 1984 hit famously asked what love has to do with it, and treated the heart as something too easily broken to risk. Millions of people sang along because they knew the feeling.

Here is where the enemy sets his trap. When the present doesn't match the promise, we are tempted to change the promise.

When the present doesn't match the promise, we will be tempted to lower our theology to match our pain.

We decide marriage must not be what God said it was. We decide covenant is a fairy tale. We decide fathers are optional. And the next generation inherits not only our wounds but our lowered theology.

Our Fathers and Our View of God

One of the most striking studies I have come across on this comes from Paul Vitz, a psychologist at New York University. Vitz examined the lives of more than twenty well-known atheists and noticed a pattern he called "the defective father hypothesis."

He started with Sigmund Freud's claim that belief in God is just a projection of having a good father. Vitz turned the argument around. If people believe in God because they had fathers, then by the same logic, many who reject God may do so because they lost theirs, or never had one worth trusting. And he found that pattern again and again in the lives of history's best-known atheists.

- Friedrich Nietzsche's father, a Lutheran pastor, died a few months before Nietzsche's fifth birthday. Nietzsche later wrote with great sadness about that day. As a man, he famously declared, "God is dead."
- David Hume lost his father when he was two.
- Bertrand Russell, author of the essay *Why I Am Not a Christian*, lost his father before he turned four.
- Jean-Paul Sartre's father died when Sartre was fifteen months old.
- Albert Camus's father was killed in World War I when Albert was an infant, and Camus later wrote about his own search for a father.

John Sowers tells this story in his book *Fatherless Generation*, and he is careful to say that he doesn't believe Freud was right. He is living proof that a fatherless boy can come to faith. But he makes the point that matters most: **"Our fathers powerfully shape our perception of God."** He compares a father to a projector, throwing images onto the screen of a child's mind. Some fathers project trust and security, and faith grows easily. Others project rejection, isolation and abandonment, and God looks like one more man who left.

That's why the prophet Malachi didn't end the Old Testament with a promise about buildings or kingdoms. He ended it with fathers and children. Then heaven went silent for four hundred years.

The last word of the Old Testament was a warning about fathers. The first move of the New Testament was a promise to turn their hearts back.

Children of Wrath, or Sons and Daughters?

Paul describes what all of us were before Christ found us.

> *Among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.*
>
> **Ephesians 2:3 (NKJV)**

Children of wrath. Sons of wrath. That is what a fatherless generation becomes when no one interrupts the pattern. But the gospel interrupts it.

> *Father to the fatherless, defender of widows—this is God, whose dwelling is holy. God places the lonely in families; he sets the prisoners free and gives them joy.*
>
> **Psalm 68:5–6**

God's answer to fatherlessness is not a program. It is a family. He places the lonely in families. That is His design for the Church, and it is His design for your home.

And He gives earthly fathers a clear charge.

> *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that come from the Lord.*
>
> **Ephesians 6:4**

Notice the connection. Children are provoked to wrath by the way they are treated. The cure for a generation of angry sons and wounded daughters begins with fathers who come home, in every sense of the word.

The Prescription

Malachi doesn't only diagnose the curse. He gives the cure: the spirit of Elijah, turning the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

Did you notice the order? Fathers first. Revival doesn't wait for the children to straighten up. It starts when fathers turn.

In the next chapter we'll look at the first man in the New Testament who came in that spirit of Elijah, and at the surprising issue that cost him his life. But before we go there, let this land on you. If you are a father, the most powerful thing you can do for revival may not happen on a platform. It may happen when you walk through your front door tonight.

And if you are a son or daughter who never had that kind of father, hear me: you are not a child of wrath anymore. You have a Father who never leaves.

So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father."

Romans 8:15

For the Road

1. Which of the four assignments (protect, provide, pray, give prophetic vision) comes most naturally to you, and which have you neglected?
2. How has your earthly father, present or absent, shaped the way you see God?
3. Where have you been tempted to lower your theology to match your pain?

Revival begins when the hearts of the fathers turn. Let it start with yours.

CHAPTER 3

The Prophet Who Lost His Head

> *Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*
>
> **Matthew 11:11 (ESV)**

Jesus once gave a man the highest compliment anyone in Scripture ever received. Of everyone born of a woman up to that point, He said, no one was greater than John the Baptist.

Think about who that list includes. Abraham. Moses. David. Elijah. Daniel.

Now think about what John actually did. He never performed a recorded miracle. He never amassed wealth. He never held political power. He lived in the wilderness, wore camel's hair, ate locusts and wild honey, and preached repentance. And in the end, he was put to death because he would not stay quiet about one man's marriage.

The greatest man born of a woman lost his head defending the covenant of marriage.

The First Man in the Spirit of Elijah

In the last chapter, we saw that the Old Testament closes with a promise: God would send Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children. Four hundred silent years later, an angel appeared to an old priest named Zechariah in the Temple and told him his barren wife would have a son.

> *He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.*
>
> **Luke 1:17**

John was the first man in the New Testament to come in the spirit of Elijah. So it is worth asking: what did that spirit look like when it showed up? How did John carry the blueprint of Elijah?

He fearlessly confronted the religious leaders of his day. He called out the deceit, hypocrisy and wickedness of the Pharisees and Sadducees and told them to repent. They didn't like him, but they couldn't stop him.

Then he turned to the king.

John the Baptist
didn't just
lose his head
for preaching
the Gospel—

He lost it for CONFRONTING
a king who violated
God's covenant
for marriage.

John and Herod

> *For Herod had sent soldiers to arrest and imprison John as a favor to Herodias. She had been his brother Philip's wife, but Herod had married her. John had been telling Herod, "It is against God's law for you to marry your brother's wife."*
>
> **Mark 6:17–18**

Herod had taken his brother's wife. Everybody knew. Most of the religious establishment kept their mouths shut. John didn't.

What fascinates me is that Mark tells us Herod actually respected John. He knew John was a good and holy man. He was disturbed every time John spoke, and yet he liked to listen to him. Herod could handle a preacher who made him uncomfortable. What he could not handle was a preacher who put his finger on his marriage.

Herodias waited for her chance. It came at Herod's birthday party. Her daughter danced for the king and his guests, and Herod, pleased and showing off, swore an oath to give her whatever she asked, up to half his kingdom. The girl went to her mother and asked what she should request. Herodias didn't hesitate: the head of John the Baptist, on a platter. The king regretted it, but because he had made the vow in front of his guests, he gave the order.

Many of us can embrace a prophetic voice that calls us toward righteousness, right up until it shipwrecks our pursuit of personal

happiness. Herod loved listening to John. He just didn't want John anywhere near his bedroom.

Many people love a prophet until he talks about their marriage.

The Pharisees' Question

John's death tells us something about how seriously heaven takes the marriage covenant. A short time later, the Pharisees brought the same issue to Jesus.

> *Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for just any reason?"*
>
> **Matthew 19:3**

How would you define a Pharisee? Most of us would say someone legalistic and hypocritical, someone who loads burdens on other people and won't lift a finger to help. We don't usually picture a Pharisee as someone who is soft on divorce. But that is exactly what this question reveals. In Jesus' day, one popular school of teaching allowed a man to divorce his wife for almost any reason at all. The legalists had found a loophole for their own convenience.

Jesus didn't take the bait. He took them back to the beginning.

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.… Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.

Matthew 19:5–6, 8–9 (NIV)

The Poles and the Equator

In Kingdom principles, truth often lives between two opposing extremes.

Think about the North and South Poles. Both are too cold for fruitful growth. But at the equator, where the climate is balanced, life explodes. Many spiritual truths work the same way. They thrive in the tension between two things that are both true.

Marriage has two poles, and the Church has frozen on both of them.

At one pole is **casual divorce**. It teaches our children that when love gets hard, you leave. It tells them it’s fine to harbor resentment and bitterness, and then walk away from your vows the moment you feel justified.

At the other pole is **“stay married at all costs.”** It tells a spouse to remain in a marriage no matter what, even through a pattern of unrepentant infidelity. That sounds holy, but it can end up accepting and coddling sexual sin, and teaching our children that covenant means silence.

We have to choose wisely the legacy we leave our children. Will it be built on biblical truth, or on carnal compromise?

Here is the equator. The God who says, “I hate divorce” (Malachi 2:16) is the same God who divorced unfaithful Israel.

> *She saw that I divorced faithless Israel and sent her away because of her adultery.*
>
> **Jeremiah 3:8**

Both truths are necessary. God feels the pain of broken covenant more deeply than any of us. And God also responds righteously to persistent, unrepentant unfaithfulness. Sin calls for accountability. Grace covers genuine, repentant failure.

So we must never treat sexual sin as trivial. Doing so feeds unrighteous appetites and makes immorality normal. But we must also learn to tell the difference between a moment of failure that leads to repentance and restoration, and a lifestyle of rebellion that hardens the heart and erodes the holiness of the marriage.

Truth without grace freezes a marriage. Grace without truth melts it. The equator is where marriages grow.

A Prophet, or for Profit?

Here's where this gets personal for those of us in ministry.

If you place more importance on building your ministry or your net worth than on nurturing your marriage, you are missing the true substance of revival. Ministry, money and marriage all demand sacrifice and endurance, and all three will bring criticism. But there is a difference. Ministry and money bring public recognition. Marriage requires private surrender.

John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah and lost his head for standing up for the covenant of marriage. He didn't lay down his life to grow his ministry or his income. He laid it down for a marriage covenant that wasn't even his own.

Ministry and money get applause in public. Marriage is won or lost in private.

The Epidemic of Ministry over Marriage

The prophet Malachi spoke to people who were crying at the altar because God wasn't answering them. Listen to God's response.

Here is another thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, weeping and groaning because he pays no attention to your offerings and doesn't accept them with pleasure. You cry out, "Why doesn't the LORD accept my worship?" I'll tell you why! Because the LORD witnessed the vows you and your wife made when you were young. But you have been unfaithful to her, though she remained your faithful partner, the wife of your marriage vows. Didn't the LORD make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his. And what does he want? Godly children from your union. So guard your heart; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. "For I hate divorce!" says the LORD, the God of Israel. "To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. "So guard your heart; do not be unfaithful to your wife."

Malachi 2:13–16

Don't miss it. Their worship was being rejected because of how they were treating their marriages. The altar and the home are connected. You cannot weep at one and wound at the other and expect heaven to respond.

The late pastor Jack Hayford saw this epidemic in his own generation of leaders. Without naming names, he described one highly visible leader who remarried a week after his divorce was finalized, explaining, "God didn't call me to marriage. He called me to ministry." Hayford also mentioned a former so-called

charismatic leader in the Atlanta area who was spreading the false doctrine that immorality is impossible within the Kingdom of God.

Hayford put his finger on the root of it.

> *"Our society lauds and pays its athletes, entertainers and persuasive leaders just as long as they 'keep the show on the road,' but that's not the measure God calls the church to apply. Character, not merely charisma, is the mark of a spiritual leader."*
>
> **Jack Hayford**

As a former athlete, I can tell you he is right about how the world works. As long as you produce, people will overlook almost anything. But the Kingdom doesn't run on highlights. It runs on character.

I know of a church that was known for its loose, unbiblical teaching on divorce. Nine months later, it came out that the pastor had been having an affair with his wife's best friend. What we teach about marriage usually reveals what we are protecting in ourselves.

Truth with a Tender Heart

I'll be honest. It is hard to communicate the seriousness of the one-flesh covenant without sounding like I'm condemning people who have had sex outside of marriage or who have gone through a divorce. That is not my heart, and it isn't God's heart either.

But giving people permission to be promiscuous, or refusing to protect the marriage covenant, is not an option. John the Baptist didn't have that option, and neither do we.

This message is not about being critical of anyone's mistakes in purity or marriage. Every one of us needs grace. It is about understanding why marriage is such a target of the enemy, and how Satan has quietly created a new definition of love. That's where we're going next.

For the Road

1. Which pole are you more naturally drawn to: casual divorce or "stay married at all costs"? What would the equator look like in your situation?
2. Where are you tempted to value public recognition in ministry, work or money over private surrender at home?
3. Is there anything God might be saying about your marriage that you have been happy to listen to but unwilling to obey?

John lost his head for the covenant. The least we can do is give it our hearts.

CHAPTER 4

Why the Enemy Hates Marriage

> *The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.*
>
> **John 10:10**

Read the first chapters of Genesis and notice who is missing.

On the first day, God creates light. Then the sky, the seas and the dry land. Plants and trees. The sun, moon and stars. Fish and birds. Cattle, wild animals and every creeping thing. Then He forms man from the dust and breathes life into him. Day after day, everything is good, and there is no sign of the enemy anywhere.

Then God says something is not good: it is not good for the man to be alone. He forms the woman, brings her to the man, and the first marriage begins.

> *"At last!" the man exclaimed. "This one is bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh! She will be called 'woman,' because she was taken from 'man.'" This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.*
>
> **Genesis 2:23–24**

The very next scene opens with a serpent.

The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the LORD God had made.

Genesis 3:1

I see a picture in that order. The enemy is not mentioned while God is making oceans and galaxies. He shows up after there is a covenant between a man and a woman. Marriage was the first thing he targeted, and it has been on his list ever since.

The enemy is more afraid of a healthy marriage than an influential ministry.

No Pastors, but a Marriage

Here is something else worth noticing. In the Garden there were no pastors, apostles, prophets, preachers or worship leaders. There was no church building and no ministry budget.

But there was a marriage.

Before God established a single office in His Church, He established a home. Marriage is not a side topic to God's Kingdom. It was His first picture of it.

That is why the enemy works so hard to tear it down. If he can break the picture, he can blur the message. And the message is the gospel.

> *As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.*
>
> **Ephesians 5:31–32**

Every marriage is preaching something about Christ and His Church, whether the couple knows it or not. A faithful marriage says, "Christ is faithful." A marriage thrown away at the first sign of trouble says something very different.

Your marriage is a sermon the world reads before it ever hears one from a pulpit.

The Kingdom Looks Like Family

Jesus taught us to pray this way:

> *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*
>
> **Matthew 6:10 (ESV)**

So what does the Kingdom look like in heaven? Look at the scene Scripture gives us. There is a Father on the throne. Beside Him sits His Son, who is also a Bridegroom, coming back for His Bride. And the Father is waiting for His adopted children to come home.

Father. Son. Bride. Children.

The Kingdom of heaven looks like a family. So when we pray for it to come on earth as it is in heaven, we are praying for something that starts in our homes.

Covenant, Not Convenience

You don't have to look far to see how our culture thinks about marriage now. Take Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith. In 2023, they revealed that they had been living separate lives since 2016 while remaining legally married. Their story played out in headlines and interviews for everyone to discuss.

I don't bring them up to pile on. I bring them up because their story raises a deeper question that every one of us has to answer: what is the marriage covenant, as Scripture defines it?

> *What God has joined together, let no one separate.*
>
> **Matthew 19:6 (NIV)**

Malachi 2:16 is often summarized as "God hates divorce." Why? Not because God lacks compassion for broken people. He hates it because divorce carries collateral damage. It wounds families. It affects children. It fractures trust. It breaks the very thing that was meant to show the world what covenant faithfulness looks like.

Marriage was never meant to be treated casually. When covenant becomes disposable, the value of marriage drops for everyone. And when we reshape our theology to match our pain instead of letting God heal our pain, we lower the standard of covenant to fit our wounds.

God cares deeply about the person who has been betrayed, abandoned, abused or broken. He is near to the wounded. But His compassion for our pain does not mean He lowers the holiness of covenant.

The answer is not condemnation. The answer is repentance, healing, truth, accountability, and a return to honoring what God calls sacred.

God's compassion for our pain never lowers His standard for our covenant.

A New Definition of Love

Here is the question underneath this whole book. Have we traded the God of the Scriptures for a new definition of love?

Jesus defined love this way:

> *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.*
>
> **John 15:13–14 (ESV)**

Notice the "if." Jesus' love lays down its life, and it also calls us to obey. Our culture's definition of love keeps the warm feeling and throws away both the cross and the commandments.

Scripture says that God is love (1 John 4:8). But somewhere along the way we flipped it around and made love our god.

Whatever feels like love must be right. Whatever my heart wants must be God's will.

God is love, but love is not a god.

When love becomes a god, it can justify anything: leaving a spouse, breaking a vow, abandoning children, all in the name of following your heart.

Critical Relationship Theory

Let me give you a picture of how the enemy pulls this off.

In recent years, America has had a fierce national argument about its own beginning. The 1619 Project, published by *The New York Times* in 2019, argued that the country's true founding should be dated to 1619, when the first enslaved Africans arrived in the English colonies, and that slavery and oppression sit at the center of the American story. Others answered with "1776," insisting that the nation was founded on the principles of the Declaration of Independence, principles many of them see as rooted in a Christian, biblical worldview.

Whatever conclusions you draw about that debate, it shows a powerful tactic. Change the story of how something began, and you change how people value it. If you can convince people that a foundation was rotten from the start, they will stop trying to repair the house.

I believe the enemy uses the same tactic against marriage. Call it Critical Relationship Theory.

He goes back to the genesis of your marriage and starts rewriting the story. You hear it in your own head:

- “You were too young.”
- “You only got married because of pressure.”
- “God never really put you two together.”
- “You married the wrong person.”

If the enemy can convince you of a story that leaves out God’s sovereignty and questions what God declared over your marriage, “What God has joined together, let no one separate,” he can make you doubt the true genesis of your marriage. And once you doubt where it came from, it becomes much easier to walk away from where it is going.

Jesus handled this the opposite way. When the Pharisees questioned marriage, He went straight back to the beginning: “But it was not this way from the beginning.” The enemy rewrites origins. Jesus restores them.

Whoever controls the story of your marriage’s beginning will try to control its ending.

We will come back to that lie, “I married the wrong person,” in Part Three. For now, settle this: the enemy targets marriage because marriage threatens him. A husband and wife who stay faithful, who keep choosing each other, who raise children in the

fear of the Lord, are a living picture of the gospel he is trying to erase.

> *Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.*
>
> **1 Peter 5:8**

For the Road

1. Why do you think the enemy targeted marriage before anything else? What does that tell you about the value of your own?
2. What would people learn about Christ and His Church if they studied your marriage, or the marriages in your church?
3. What story has the enemy tried to tell you about the beginning of your marriage or your relationships? What does God say instead?

The enemy targets what threatens him most. Guard your marriage like it matters to heaven, because it does.

PART TWO

Sex Was God's Idea

Is purity a gift to give or a thing to lose?

CHAPTER 5

A Gift to Give

> *Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground."*
>
> **Genesis 1:28**

Before we talk about the lies we've believed about love, we have to settle something. A lot of believers have grown up with the quiet impression that sex is dirty, or at best a necessary evil that God tolerates as long as you're married. The world, meanwhile, treats it as a toy, a right and a recreation.

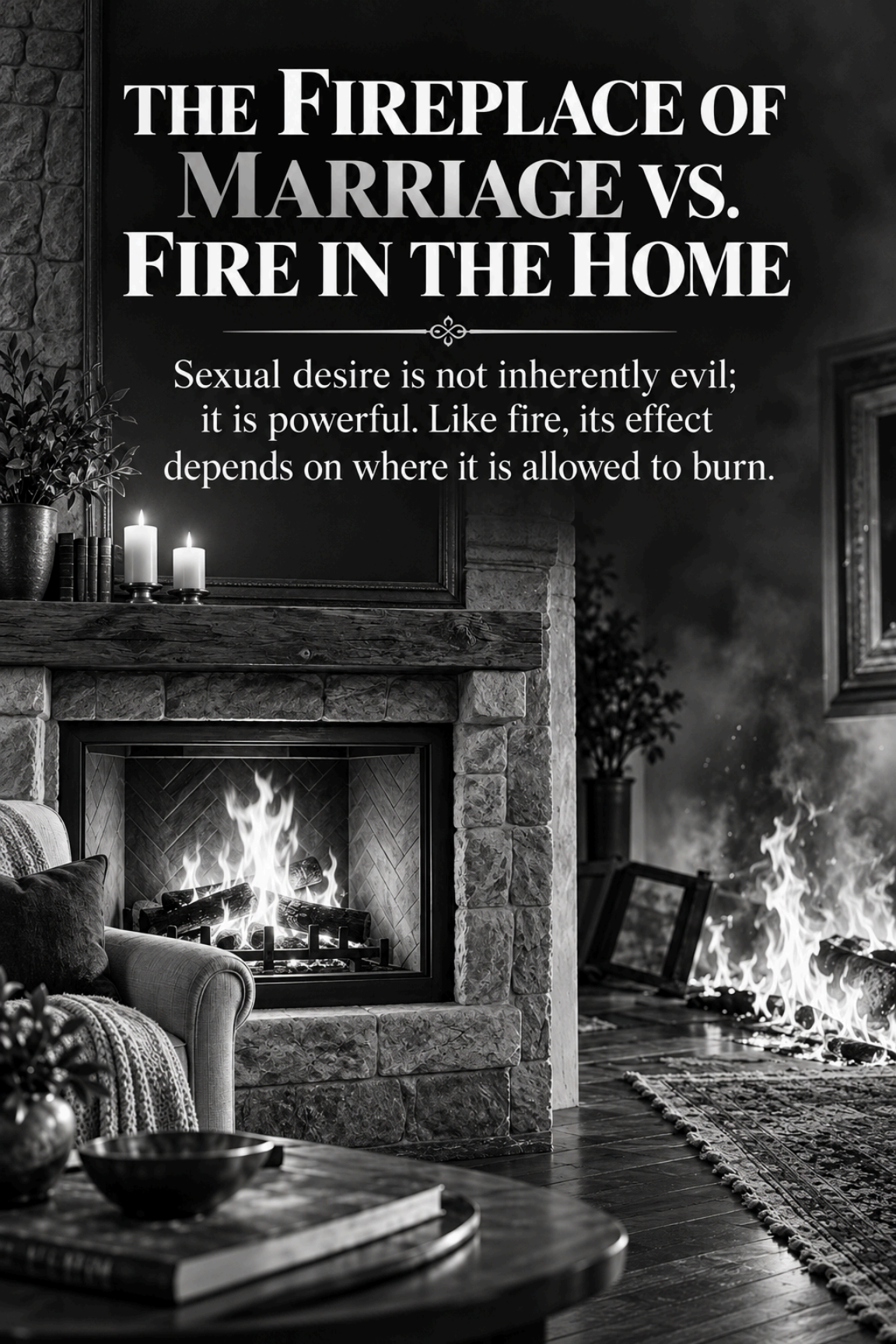
Both are wrong. Look at the very first blessing God ever spoke over a husband and wife: be fruitful and multiply. Before there was a single sin in the world, God gave the first couple the gift of physical union and called it good.

Sex was God's idea, not man's and not the enemy's.

The enemy can't create anything. He can only counterfeit and corrupt what God made. And the more valuable something is to God, the harder the enemy works to twist it.

The Fireplace of Marriage vs. Fire in the Home

Sexual desire is not inherently evil; it is powerful. Like fire, its effect depends on where it is allowed to burn.



Given, Not Lost

Picture a high school girl. Let's call her Adelaide. She's confident and thoughtful, and she has decided to save herself for marriage because of her faith and what she believes about the biblical model of love.

One day her friends start teasing her about it. "So you're still a virgin?" one of them asks, half laughing.

Adelaide doesn't get defensive. She simply says that she doesn't see her virginity as something she's going to lose someday. She sees it as something she is going to give, to her husband, on the day she makes a covenant with him.

The room gets quiet. Nobody had ever put it that way before.

Later, a few of those same friends come back and ask her why it matters so much. She tells them that the Bible treats sex as a cherished gift, meant to be opened in the safety of marriage, and that it involves far more than bodies. By waiting, she is honoring herself, her future husband and her God.

I tell that story as a picture, but the truth in it holds. When a young person stops talking about purity as a rule and starts talking about it as a gift, people listen. Some of them start asking what the Bible really says.

You don't lose a gift. You give it. And you get to decide who is worthy to receive it.

Your Body Makes a Promise

There is a scene in the 2001 film *Vanilla Sky* where a young woman confronts the man who has been treating their relationship casually. She asks him whether he knows that when you sleep with someone, your body makes a promise whether you do or not.

Hollywood stumbled onto a biblical reality there. Sexual intimacy is not just pleasure. It is not a handshake. It creates a bond, whether or not your heart meant to make one. That bond was designed for marriage alone.

Paul wrote to believers in Corinth, a city where sexual freedom was celebrated, and he made the same point.

> *And don't you realize that if a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her? For the Scriptures say, "The two are united into one." But the person who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 6:16–17**

Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, the marriage verse, and applies it to a one-night encounter with a prostitute. In other words, there is no such thing as casual sex in God's economy. The act itself speaks the language of covenant, even when the people involved are not in one.

Your body keeps promises your heart never meant to make.

How We Become One

Jesus understood this. Remember His conversation with the woman at the well.

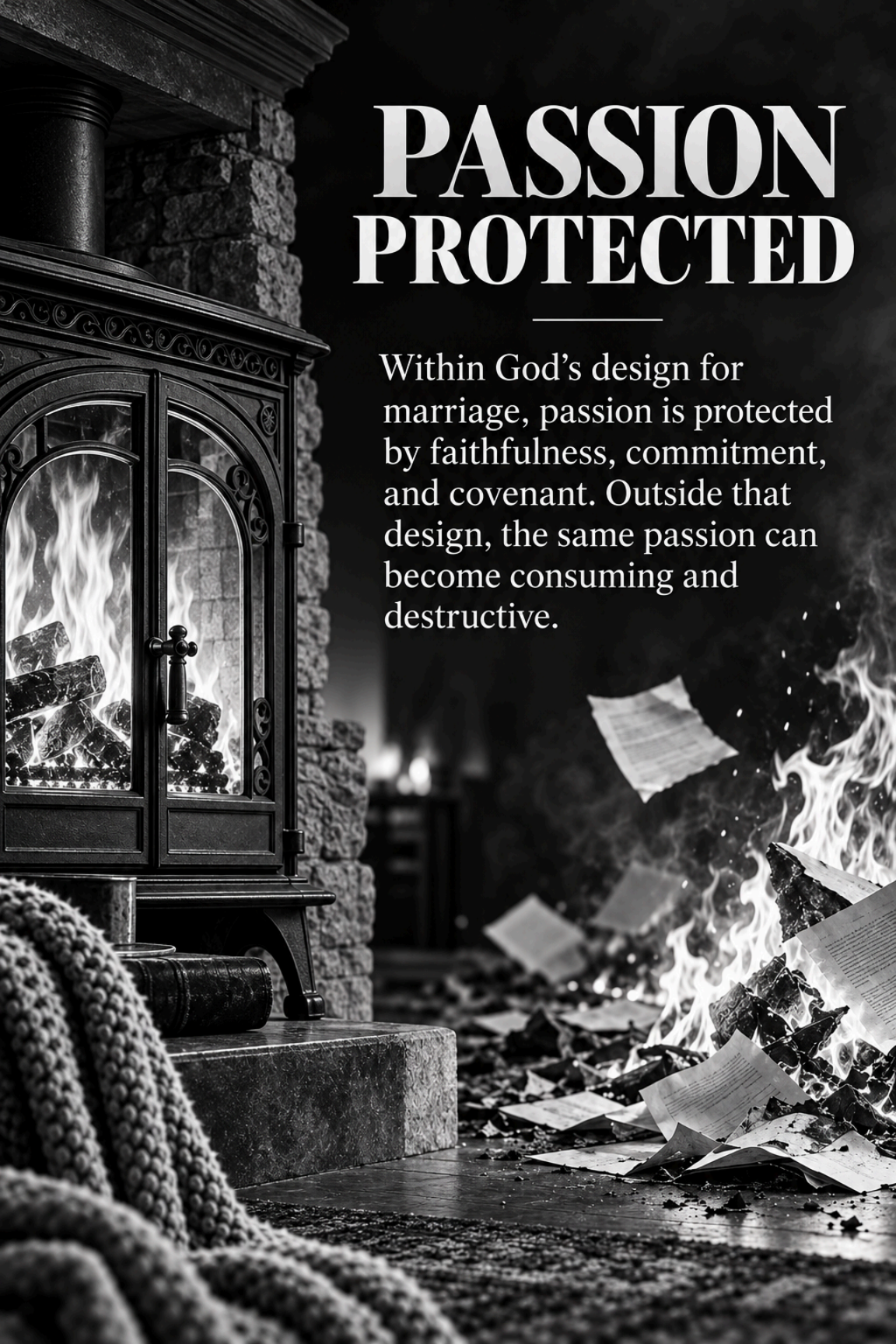
> *"Go and get your husband," Jesus told her. "I don't have a husband," the woman replied. Jesus said, "You're right! You don't have a husband—for you have had five husbands, and you aren't even married to the man you're living with now. You certainly spoke the truth!"*
>
> **John 4:16–18**

Notice how Jesus counted. Five men He called husbands. And one man she was living with, whom He did not call her husband. Whatever the details of her story, Jesus did not treat living together as the same thing as marriage. Covenant mattered to Him.

That leads to something I want every young couple to hear.

Sex isn't just something we do after we get married. In God's eyes, it is one of the vital ways two people become one.

God designed the marriage covenant to be sealed with vows before Him and witnesses, and consummated in the marriage bed. That is why sex outside of covenant does so much damage. It is the language of becoming one, spoken by two people who have not promised to stay one.


PASSION
PROTECTED
Within God's design for marriage, passion is protected by faithfulness, commitment, and covenant. Outside that design, the same passion can become consuming and destructive.

And before anyone reading this starts to feel the weight of condemnation, read this verse slowly:

> *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*
>
> **Romans 3:23**

All. Not some. That includes the preacher, the youth pastor, the worship leader and the man writing this book. So let me tell you a story about what God does with our failures.

The Bride and the White Sheet

In ancient Israel, after a wedding, the bride and groom would go into the wedding chamber to consummate the marriage. Afterward, the sheet from that first night could be kept as evidence of the bride's virginity. Deuteronomy 22:13–21 refers to this kind of evidence. Many have taught that God designed the first union of a husband and wife to be sealed in blood, a picture of covenant written into the body itself.

There is a story often told about a young woman from that culture. She had lost her virginity at sixteen. Years later she met the man she would marry, and she was terrified to tell him. Every day she promised herself she would tell him the truth. Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months. Before she knew it, she was standing at the altar, and he still didn't know.

After the vows, they entered the wedding tent. She fell to the ground weeping. "I'm sorry I didn't stay pure for you," she cried. "I have no right to be your wife. Please forgive me."

Her husband knelt down beside her and said, “I know.”

Then he picked up a sharp stone, cut his own forearm, and let his blood fall onto the white sheet. He walked outside and hung that sheet in front of the tent for everyone to see.

He gave his bride a new testimony.

Whether that story happened exactly that way or not, it is a picture of the gospel. Jesus shed His own blood so that we could stand before Him as a pure and spotless Bride. He didn’t pretend our past didn’t exist. He covered it with His own blood and gave us a new story.

> *Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.”*
>
> **Revelation 21:5 (NKJV)**

Where the world sees a stained sheet, Jesus sees a Bride He has made new.

If you have fallen short in this area, that story is for you. Your past is real, but it does not get the last word. The blood of Jesus does.

> *But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.*
>
> **1 John 1:9**

Grace Is Not a License

Now here is the other side of the equator.

Many of us fell short of purity before marriage and failed to honor God's vision for a healthy union. Thankfully, God offers regeneration. He makes all things new. But we must never use God's grace as an excuse to lower the biblical standard for marriage and sexuality.

Paul anticipated that very argument.

> *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!*
>
> **Romans 6:1–2 (NIV)**

The old King James renders it, "God forbid." Paul's answer is a resounding no.

A gospel that emphasizes the power of Jesus' blood to cancel sin, but neglects its power to transform the sinner, presents a distorted view of grace. The same blood that forgives the woman at the well also sends her back into town a changed woman, telling everyone about the Man who knew everything about her.

Grace that never changes you is not the grace Jesus bled for.

The Sins We Enable

Here is something that troubles me.

The Church is often eager to confront the world's sins. We speak out about abortion, same-sex marriage and gender confusion, and we should speak the truth with compassion on all of those. But we are strangely quiet about what we lack inside our own walls when it comes to purity and consecration.

Pornography. Fornication. Adultery. Unbiblical divorce.

These are the sins we currently enable in the Body of Christ. We enable them when we never preach on them. We enable them when we treat a hidden porn habit as a small struggle rather than a spiritual emergency. We enable them when a couple living together is welcomed onto the platform without anyone ever lovingly asking about it. We enable them when divorce is handled with a shrug.

I'm not calling for a witch hunt. I'm calling for a Church that applies the same truth to itself that it preaches to the world, and the same grace to the world that it hopes for itself.

> *For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin with God's household.*
>
> **1 Peter 4:17**

Revival won't come to a Church that preaches against the world's sins while protecting its own.

If you're reading this with a past you regret, hear the whole message. Sex was God's idea, purity is a gift worth giving, and

the blood of Jesus can give you a new testimony. You are not damaged goods. You are a Bride being made new.

For the Road

1. Did you grow up seeing sex as dirty, as recreation, or as a gift? How has that shaped you?
2. What would change if you saw purity as a gift to give rather than a rule to keep?
3. Which of the “sins we enable” does your church, or your own life, need to stop tolerating?

Purity is a gift to give, and grace is the power to give it, no matter where you’ve been.

PART THREE

Seven Lies About Love

What would you tell your twenty-four-year-old self?

CHAPTER 6

Love Is a Feeling

> *Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions.*
>
> **1 John 3:18**

If I could go back in time and sit down with my twenty-four-year-old self before the wedding, what would I want him to know about love and marriage?

I've asked myself that question many times. The answer always comes back the same way. I'd want him to know the lies he believed about love, and the truth that would have saved him a lot of pain. The next eight chapters are that conversation. Seven lies, seven truths. And the first one is the root of all the others.

The lie: Love is a feeling. The truth: Love is a choice.

The goal of this lie is simple. It wants you to make a permanent decision based on a temporary emotion.

Salt and Sugar

Don't trust everything you feel. Love and lust can feel the same, just like salt can look like sugar and sugar can look like salt. Set

two bowls side by side on the counter and you may not be able to tell them apart by looking. You have to taste.

That's why Scripture says:

> *Taste and see that the LORD is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him!*
>
> **Psalm 34:8**

If all you have ever tasted is salt, you will never know when you've tasted sugar. One leaves you salty. The other is always sweet. A lot of people have grown up on the salt of lust, conditional affection and broken homes, and they call it love because it's the only thing they've known.

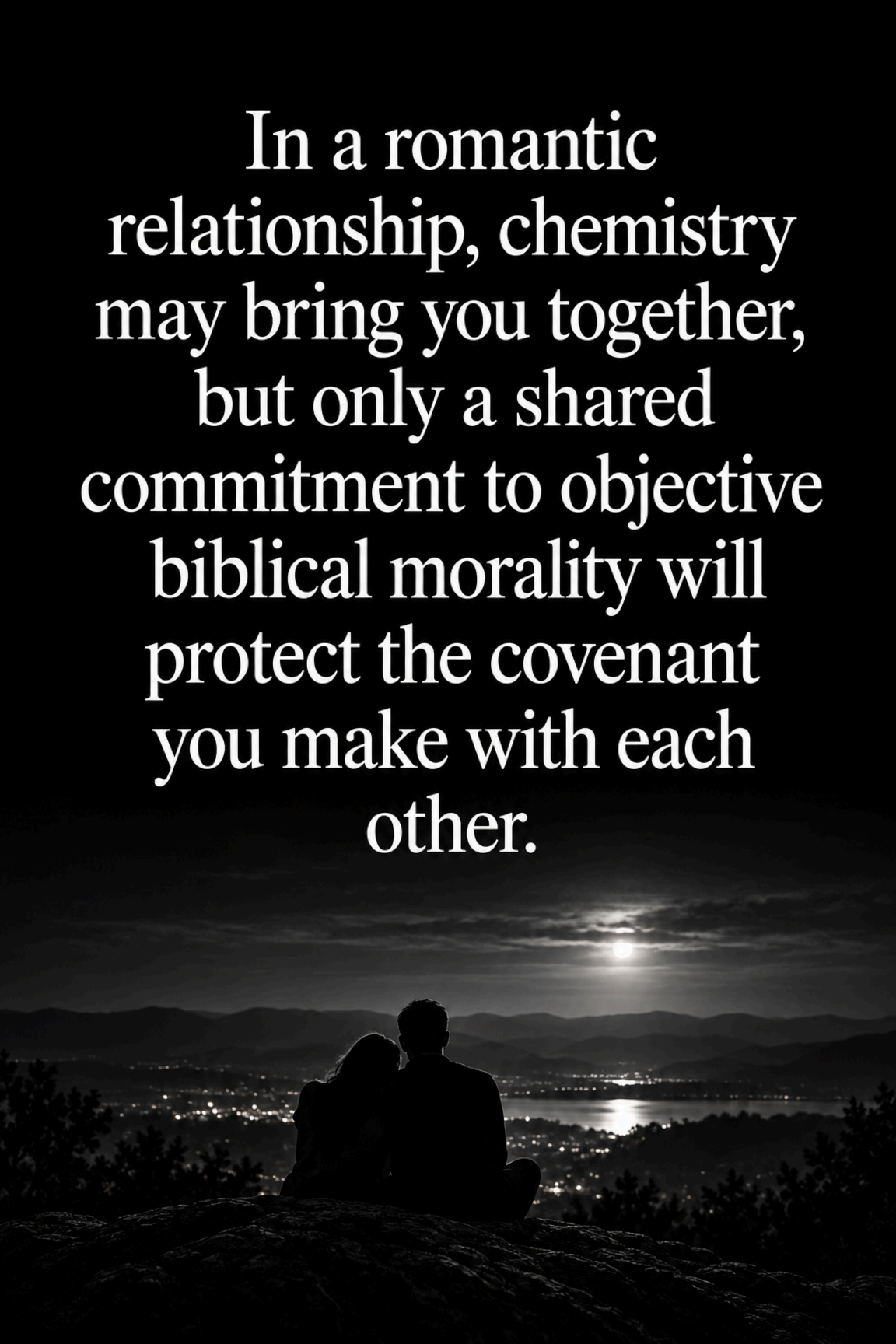
You will never recognize real love until you've tasted the One who is love.

Don't Marry the Person You Fell For

Kris Vallotton has a piece of advice that sounds shocking until you think about it: don't marry the person you fall in love with. His point is that a fall is an accident, not a choice. If you fell once, you can fall again, for someone else. A great marriage is never an accident. As he puts it, **"that which begins with an accident can only be maintained by choice."**

So if you fell in love, good. Now choose love. Because what began with feelings can only last by covenant.

In a romantic relationship, chemistry may bring you together, but only a shared commitment to objective biblical morality will protect the covenant you make with each other.



Think of love as a tree. Feelings are the leaves. They're real and they're beautiful, but they flutter and fall with the seasons. The trunk of the tree is choice. When winter comes and the leaves are gone, the trunk is still standing. Nobody looks at an oak tree in January and decides it's dead because it has no leaves.

At the core of love, feelings are the lowest level and actions are the highest. Love can include emotions, but emotions are not the foundation or the strength of unconditional love.

Peter Vescovi says it this way:

> *"Couples don't fall out of love; they lose sight of love. Remember, love is a commitment we make every day, and our feelings will follow our commitments."*
>
> **Peter Vescovi**

Feelings follow commitments. Not the other way around.

Did Jesus Feel Like Going to the Cross?

If love is a feeling, then the greatest act of love in history was a failure. Because Jesus did not feel like going to the cross.

> *Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."*
>
> **Matthew 26:38–39 (ESV)**

His soul was sorrowful to the point of death. He asked if there was another way. And then He chose. “Not as I will, but as you will.”

The greatest act of love in history was made with His face on the ground, not with butterflies in His stomach.

Unconditional love has always been about a choice. It goes all the way back to the Garden. God put two trees in front of Adam and Eve, and through them He was saying, “Choose Me.” He didn’t force them. Love that can’t say no can’t really say yes either. Moses ended his life with the same invitation to Israel:

> *Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!*
>
> **Deuteronomy 30:19**

Listen to how Paul describes love. Count how many of these are feelings and how many are choices.

> *Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 13:4–7**

Every single one is something you do. Not one of them is something that simply happens to you.

Peter Vescovi has another line I love:

You cannot fall in and out of love, but you can fall in and out of lust.

Where Did This Lie Come From?

If love is a choice, how did we end up so convinced it's a feeling? Let me give you a picture from the prophet Ezekiel.

> *This message came to me from the LORD: "Son of man, once there were two sisters who were daughters of the same mother. They became prostitutes in Egypt. Even as young girls, they allowed men to fondle their breasts."*
>
> **Ezekiel 23:1–3**

In Ezekiel, these two sisters represent Samaria and Jerusalem, two cities that gave their hearts away to other lovers. I see in them a picture of two movements that have given our culture's heart away when it comes to love.

The first sister is **Romanticism**. It rose in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and it lifted emotion and personal gratification above family and covenant. Left unchecked, this carnal romanticism replaces covenant trust and unconditional love with intuition and fleeting feelings. It hijacks biblical love. "Follow your heart" became the creed.

The second sister is the **Sexual Revolution**, which swept through the United States from roughly the 1960s through the 1980s. It rejected traditional sexual norms and pushed for acceptance of sex outside of marriage, contraception (especially the birth control pill), LGBTQ+ identities and a wide range of sexual practices, along with the legalization of abortion. It also tore down taboos around pornography, masturbation and public nudity.

The first sister taught us to follow our hearts. The second taught us to follow our bodies.

Look at the fruit. From 1867 to 1879, the annual divorce rate in the United States was about 0.3 divorces per 1,000 people. By 1999, it was 4.1 per 1,000. That's an increase of more than 1,200 percent. Today, estimates of how many marriages end in divorce are commonly cited at 40 to 50 percent.

When the heart is the only guide, the marriage has no map.

Mountaintops and Valleys

The influence of these two sisters has seeped into church culture too. It has brought unrealistic expectations into Christian marriages. Instead of biblical love, many of us have drifted into a consumer kind of love.

We've become fixated on the mountaintops of love, the emotional highs, while despising the valleys where love is tested. But

nobody grows much on a mountaintop. The air is thin and there's very little soil. Things grow in the valleys.

We have been trained to value the experience a person gives us more than the person, made in the image of God. We fall in love with how someone makes us feel, rather than with who they truly are. So when they stop producing the feelings we want, we take our love back and call it "falling out of love."

That's consumer love. We keep the product as long as it performs.

John Piper puts the true purpose of marriage beautifully:

> *"Marriage is a parable of covenantal faithfulness, not covenantal bliss. Marriage is the prophetic declaration of the truth of God's covenant-keeping promise to His Bride."*
>
> **John Piper**

Your marriage is telling a story about God. When you stay faithful through a valley, you are preaching that God stays faithful to His Bride.

Marriage is less about being fulfilled and more about being refined by learning what love really is.

Being "in love," in the biblical sense, is more about submitting yourself to the lifelong school of unconditional love than about chasing the feeling of being in love that pop culture sells. Mature love is a choice, not a feeling.

A Filling, Not a Feeling

So where does real love come from, if not from our emotions? It comes from His presence.

> *You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy.*
>
> **Psalm 16:11 (ESV)**

When you are filled with the love of God, you have something to give your spouse even on the days you don't feel anything at all.

Love is a filling, not a feeling.

Let me leave you with one more word from Peter Vescovi, because it's the heart of this whole lie:

> *"When a temporary emotion leads to a permanent decision, you open yourself up to a lifetime of regret. You will not always feel how you feel, but you will always remember the choices you make."*
>
> **Peter Vescovi**

For the Road

1. Where have you made, or been tempted to make, a permanent decision based on a temporary emotion?
2. Look again at 1 Corinthians 13:4–7. Which choice of love is hardest for you right now?

3. Are you valuing your spouse, or the experience your spouse gives you? How would you know the difference?

Feelings make wonderful passengers, but they were never meant to drive.

CHAPTER 7

You Complete Me

> *So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.*
>
> **Colossians 2:10**

In the 1996 movie *Jerry Maguire*, there is a scene that became one of the most quoted moments in film. A man stands in front of the woman he loves and tells her, “You complete me.”

People cried in theaters. Couples wrote it in wedding cards. It sounded like the most romantic thing a person could say.

It’s also one of the most dangerous lies a married couple can believe.

The lie: You complete me. The truth: You complement me.

The goal of this lie is to get you to look to your spouse to complete you instead of complement you. When you put the cart in front of the horse, you end up with an idol instead of a spouse.

A Helper Suitable

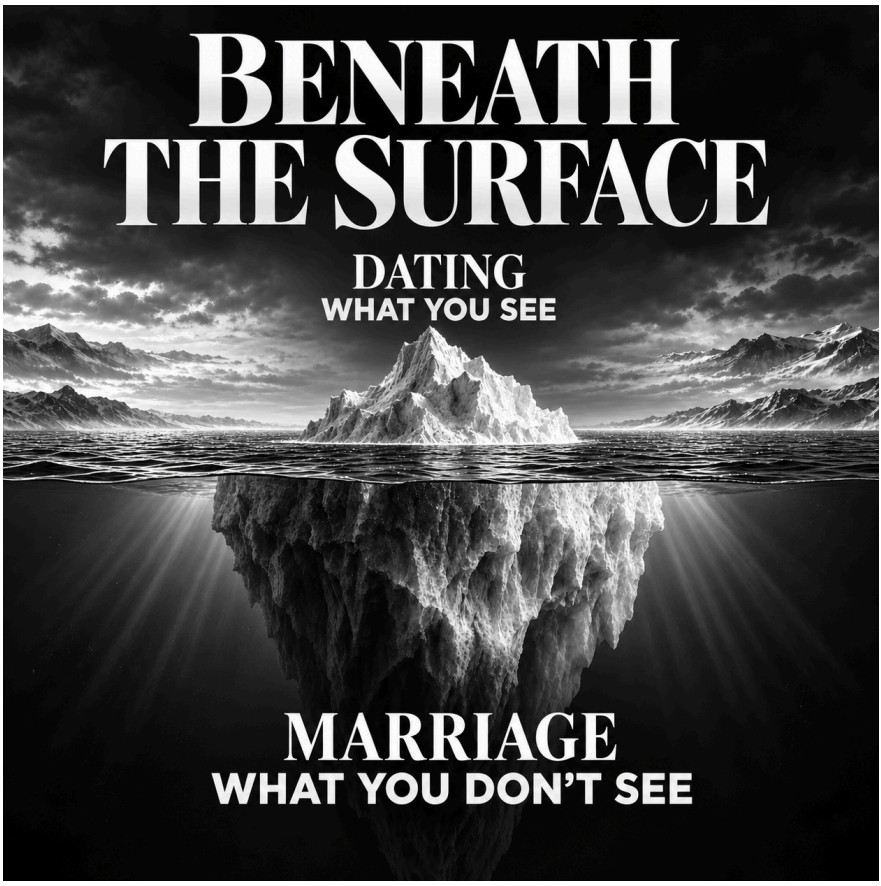
Go back to the Garden.

> *Now the Lord God said, It is not good (sufficient, satisfactory) that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper meet (suitable, adapted, complementary) for him.*
>
> **Genesis 2:18 (AMPC)**

Look at that word in the Amplified: complementary. God didn't make Eve to fill a hole in Adam that God Himself couldn't fill. Adam walked with God in the cool of the day. He wasn't empty. He was alone. God created Eve to stand beside him, suited to him and different from him, so that together they could carry out what God had called them to do.

Think about two instruments playing in harmony. Neither one is half an instrument. Each is whole, and each sounds better because of the other.

When you ask a person to complete you, you've handed them a job only God can do.



Savior or Refiner?

Marriage is not meant to be your savior. Marriage is meant to be your refiner.

A savior rescues you from your problems. A refiner exposes them. If you go into marriage expecting your spouse to rescue you from loneliness, insecurity or a lack of purpose, you will be disappointed every day. They can't do it. And eventually you'll start to resent them for failing at a job they were never given.

But if you go into marriage expecting God to use it to refine you, every conflict becomes an opportunity.

> *As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend.*
>
> **Proverbs 27:17**

Iron sharpening iron throws sparks. That's not a sign something is wrong. It's a sign something is getting sharper.

There's a reason Scripture warns us so plainly:

> *Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.*
>
> **1 John 5:21**

A spouse can take God's place in your heart faster than almost anything else. And when they do, they make a wonderful partner and a terrible god.

Your spouse makes a wonderful partner and a terrible god.

The Pursuit of Happiness or the Pursuit of Righteousness?

"Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Those words from the Declaration of Independence are some of the most famous in American history. Here's a question worth asking: are they biblical, or American?

Jesus gave us a different pursuit.

MARRIAGE

WAS NEVER MEANT TO SIMPLY MAKE US COMFORTABLE.

IT WAS MEANT TO **REFINE US, SHARPEN US,** AND HELP **SHAPE US** INTO WHO GOD HAS CALLED US TO BECOME.

> *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*
>
> **Matthew 6:33 (ESV)**

Happiness isn't evil. God gives joy freely. But happiness was never meant to be the goal. When it becomes the goal of a marriage, the marriage only lasts as long as both people stay happy.

Don't ever let happiness be your goal.

Some people are happy, but they are not righteous. Some people are unhappy, but they are righteous. Happiness is a feeling, but righteousness is a choice. Don't let the feelings of your circumstances determine the position of your character.

David Platt has written about how differently the gospel and the American Dream begin. The American Dream starts with self. It tells you that you are basically good and that you have what it takes, so work hard and make much of yourself. The gospel starts with God. As Platt puts it, we were created **"to exalt his name to the ends of the earth."**

So, does God want us to be happy or holy?

> *But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy."*
>
> **1 Peter 1:15–16**

Holiness doesn't cancel joy. It's the only place lasting joy can grow. But it does change the question we ask in our marriages, from "Am I happy?" to "Am I becoming like Jesus?"

Whole in Christ

Here's where this lie does the most damage. If marriage is the only way for a man and woman to be complete and fulfilled, then your destiny is tied to a person instead of to the God of the Scriptures. And what happens if that person leaves? Or dies? Or never comes?

Meet Anna.

> *Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.*
>
> **Luke 2:36–38**

Anna had seven years of marriage and then decades as a widow. If her husband had completed her, his death would have left her half a person. Instead, she became one of the first people in

history to recognize the Messiah and tell others about Him. Her destiny was never buried with her husband.

There's a story often told about a woman named Nancy. Soon after she married, her husband died, and she was left heartbroken and angry at God. She stopped praying. She stopped hoping. One day she reluctantly went to a small church gathering where a man was playing the keyboard. He suddenly stopped, pointed at her, and said, "God sees your pain. You will rise again." The man was Kim Clement, a prophetic minister known for that kind of spontaneous word.

Those words stuck with her. Slowly, Nancy began to heal. She found a strength she didn't know she had, and she began helping others walk through their grief. Years later, she realized the word hadn't worked like magic. It had reminded her to keep living. Her life had never been complete because of a husband. It was complete in God.

He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds.

Psalm 147:3

No person can complete you, and no loss can cancel you.

Offended at God

Many people who believed "you complete me" end up offended. Not just at their spouse, but at God. They feel He let them down.

He was supposed to give them the person who would make them whole.

Jesus speaks a blessing over the person who refuses that offense.

> *And blessed [joyful, favored by God] is he who does not take offense at Me [accepting Me as the Messiah and trusting confidently in My message of salvation].*
>
> **Matthew 11:6 (AMP)**

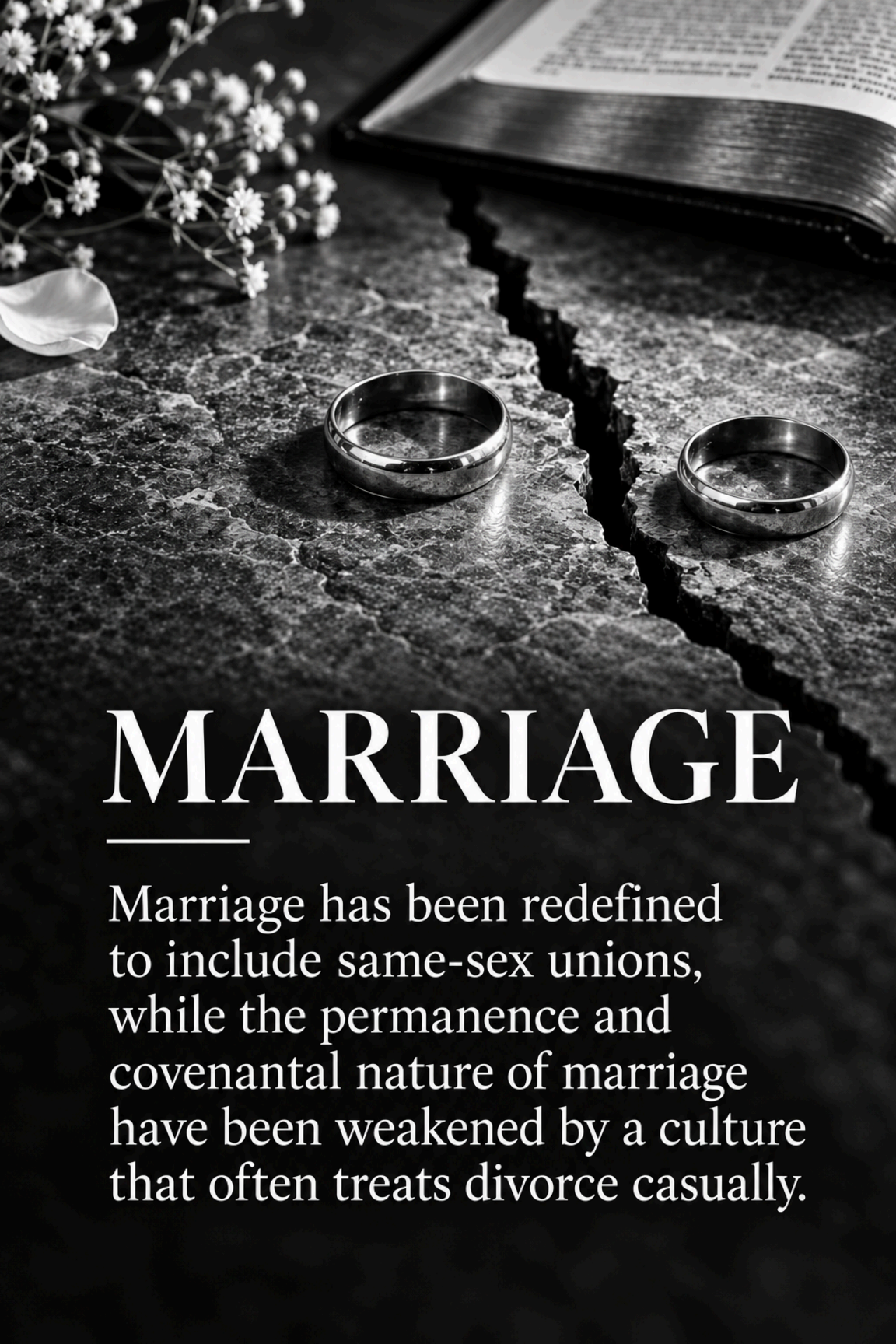
Jesus said that to John the Baptist when John was sitting in prison, wondering why things hadn't turned out the way he expected. If you're in a season where your marriage hasn't turned out the way you expected, or where you're still waiting for a spouse, this blessing is for you too. Don't let disappointment with a person turn into offense with God.

Come to your marriage whole in Christ. Then you can give your spouse what they need most: not a hole to fill, but a whole person to walk beside them.

For the Road

1. In what ways have you expected your spouse, or a future spouse, to complete you?
2. Is happiness or righteousness steering your decisions right now? How can you tell?
3. Where do you need to let go of an offense with God over how your relationships have turned out?

Come to your marriage whole in Christ, and you'll have something to give instead of something to take.



MARRIAGE

Marriage has been redefined to include same-sex unions, while the permanence and covenantal nature of marriage have been weakened by a culture that often treats divorce casually.

CHAPTER 8

Marriage Is a Contract

Yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

Malachi 2:14 (NKJV)

We live in a contract world. Phones, cars, apartments, jobs, gym memberships. You sign, you get something, you give something, and if the other side doesn't hold up their end, there is a clause that lets you out.

We've learned to think about almost every relationship that way. So it's no surprise that many of us walk into marriage with a contract mindset, even if we'd never say it out loud.

The lie: Marriage is a contract. The truth: Marriage is a covenant.

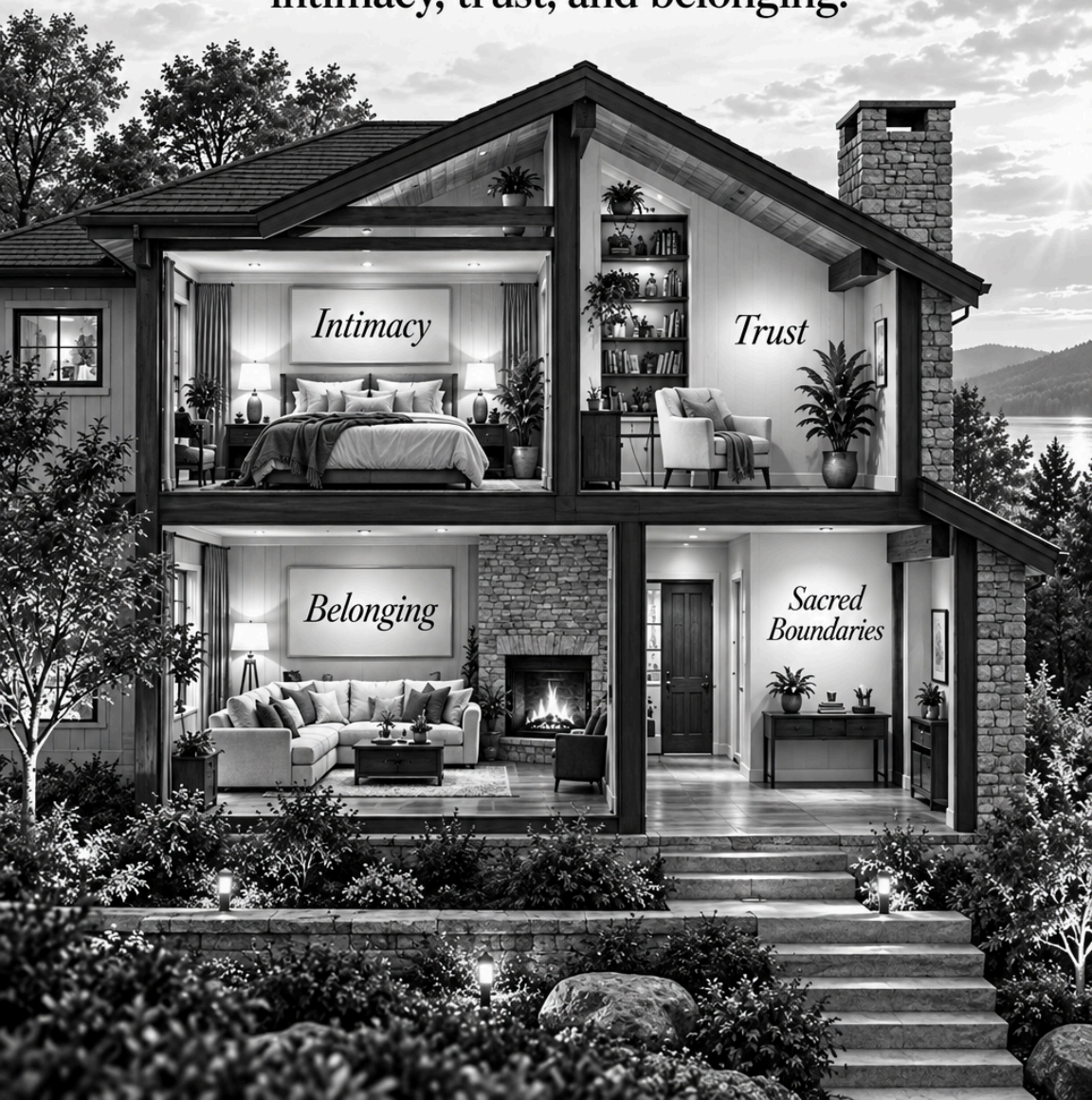
The goal of this lie is to get you to treat your marriage like a business deal rather than a blood-covenant promise made before God.

Contract or Covenant?

Here's the simplest way I know to explain the difference.

A CUSTOM-BUILT COVENANT

Marriage is like a custom-built home—
created with sacred boundaries,
intimacy, trust, and belonging.



Contract: “I’ll take a bullet for you.” Covenant: “I’ll take a bullet from you.”

A contract says, “I’ll protect you as long as you’re on my side.” A covenant says, “I’ll stay even when you’re the one who hurt me.”

A contract is built around what each side gets. A covenant is built around what each side gives. A contract protects my interests. A covenant lays them down.

Contracts prepare you for the divorce. Covenants prepare you to endure the promise you made before God and man.

That’s why prenuptial agreements strike so many believers as offensive. A prenup can have practical reasons behind it, but at its heart it plans for the marriage to fail. It prepares you for failure, not forgiveness. And the thing you plan for has a way of becoming the thing you expect.

God doesn’t relate to us by contract. If He did, we would have been out a long time ago. He relates to us by covenant, sealed in the blood of His Son. Every time we take communion, we remember a covenant that kept its promise when we didn’t keep ours.

Are There Grounds for Divorce?

Now I have to be honest with you, because a covenant is not a prison sentence for the innocent. Are there biblical grounds for

divorce? Yes, there are.

Remember the poles and the equator from Chapter 3. At one pole, casual divorce teaches our children to harbor bitterness and walk away. At the other, “stay married at all costs” can end up coddling sexual sin and protecting abuse. The truth lives at the equator.

God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). Yet He gave unfaithful Israel a certificate of divorce (Jeremiah 3:8). He holds justice and mercy together. Marriage vows are sacred, and sexual sin, so trivialized today, corrodes holiness. Grace covers human failure when there is repentance (1 John 1:9), but grace is never a license to keep sinning (Romans 6:1–2), and persistent rebellion hardens hearts and breaks down families.

So the Church has to model both truth and grace. We reject complacency toward sin. We restore repentant hearts. We teach covenant commitment. We uphold marriage, not by excusing sin, but by resisting it, practicing forgiveness and accountability with reverence for God’s design.

An Outlier or an Outlaw?

Let me give you a picture that has helped many people think through the hardest question in marriage: do I stay, or do I go?

Picture two married people who have each had an affair.

The first is an **outlier**. This person has generally lived by biblical principles. They welcome accountability. They have a real walk with God. But in a moment of weakness, they fell. Their affair is

an anomaly, not a pattern. It goes against everything else in their life.

The second is an **outlaw**. This person consistently rebels against biblical teaching. They reject accountability. They disregard spiritual counsel. Their affair is not a surprise. It's the predictable fruit of the choices they have been making for years.

Here's the question. Which of those two would you be more willing to give another chance?

These two pictures show that discernment in marriage is rooted in wisdom, not rigid formulas. The outlier shows that even people who are committed to their faith can face moments of weakness. The outlaw shows what happens when someone keeps choosing rebellion against biblical truth. Every person's story and choices are unique, and working through them takes understanding and wisdom from God. That same wisdom guides us in how we respond to our own failures and to the failures of others.

A fall invites restoration. A lifestyle of rebellion invites consequences.

Adultery, Abandonment and Abuse

Scripture points to three situations where the covenant has been broken so deeply that divorce may be permitted.

Before we look at them, consider something the book *Delivered from Evil* points out. In Jeremiah 3:8, God gives Israel a

certificate of divorce. Was it God's fault that the marriage failed? Certainly not. He was the most perfect husband who ever lived, and it still didn't work, because the other party kept choosing unfaithfulness. God hates divorce and it should be resisted with everything we have. But there came a point when even God went through one. The book goes so far as to say that, until He receives His estranged Bride back at the end, **"presently God is a divorcee."**

If that's true of God, then a person who did everything they could and still saw their marriage end is not automatically a failure. Sometimes the other person makes choices you cannot make for them.

Adultery. Jesus Himself made the exception.

> *And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.*
>
> **Matthew 19:9 (ESV)**

Abandonment. Paul addresses a believer married to an unbeliever who leaves.

> *For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 7:14–15 (NIV)**

Abuse. The Amplified Bible's rendering of Malachi 2:16 shows that God hates not only divorce but the one who "covers his garment [his wife] with violence." We will spend the whole next chapter on this, because the Church has too often used holy words to keep people in harm's way.

A Right to Be Safe, or a Right to Remarry?

Here's something most couples never think about until it's too late.

In our legal system, it is often easier to end a marriage than to get out of a non-compete agreement. A non-compete is a contract that keeps an employee from working for a competitor, or starting a competing business, for a set period after they leave a company.

Scripture treats divorce that does not involve adultery or abandonment by an unbeliever in a similar way. You may have the right to be safe. You may even need to separate. But Paul is clear about what comes next.

> *But for those who are married, I have a command that comes not from me, but from the Lord. A wife must not leave her husband. But if she does leave him, let her remain single or else be reconciled to him. And the husband must not leave his wife.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 7:10–11**

In other words, the vow "till death do us part" carries weight even after the papers are signed. If more people understood this before the wedding, how many would take the covenant more seriously? How many would wait, pray and choose more carefully?

Expectations, Not Escape Hatches

Someone once said that McDonald's isn't really selling quality. It's selling expectations. Whether you are in China or Texas, you know exactly how those fries are going to taste.

God has set a standard for love so that we can have healthy expectations, not so that we can find an escape hatch from the responsibilities of love.

An expectation not communicated is a wish, not a responsibility. A boundary breached without consequences is passive permission for abuse, not accountability.

These biblical standards give couples clear expectations for a healthy marriage. But I have to warn you about how they can be

misused. The same standards that protect a marriage can also become a hunting license. Some people start searching for a reason to leave instead of reaching for hope and a reason to stay.

So ask yourself honestly: are you studying the grounds for divorce to protect yourself, or to justify yourself?

Hosea, and Christ

Here's a question for you. Of those three conditions, adultery, abandonment and abuse, how many did the prophet Hosea live through?

Gomer was unfaithful. She left. She sold herself into a life that dragged Hosea's name through the mud. Hosea carried the full weight of a covenant broken from the other side.

And what about Christ? His Bride was unfaithful. She ran after other lovers. She abandoned Him in His darkest hour. And she nailed Him to a cross.

He had every ground there is. And He still came back for her.

That doesn't mean every hurting spouse is required to stay. Hosea's story is a prophetic picture, not a rule book for the abused. But it does show us the heart of the God who keeps covenant. Before you reach for a contract clause, look at the cross.

For the Road

1. In what ways have you treated your marriage more like a contract than a covenant?
2. Think of the outlier and the outlaw. How does that picture change the way you see a failure in your own marriage or someone else's?
3. Are there expectations in your marriage you've never actually communicated? What would it look like to say them clearly and kindly this week?

A contract asks, "What do I get?" A covenant asks, "What will I keep?"

CHAPTER 9

When Holy Words Hide Harm

> *For the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I hate divorce and marital separation and him who covers his garment [his wife] with violence. Therefore keep a watch upon your spirit [that it may be controlled by My Spirit], that you deal not treacherously and faithlessly [with your marriage mate].*
>
> **Malachi 2:16 (AMPC)**

In the television series *Breaking Bad*, a high school chemistry teacher named Walter White becomes a methamphetamine kingpin. His wife, Skyler, slowly discovers what he is doing. And she makes a decision that seems noble at first: she will keep the family together.

That decision becomes a trap. Her loyalty to Walter's lies, dressed up as protecting their children, slowly eats away at her integrity. Before long she is laundering drug money, deceiving the authorities and helping cover for the destruction her husband is causing. She tells herself she's doing it for the family. But the family she's protecting is already being destroyed from the inside.

Skyler's story is a warning. When family unity is lifted above truth, the family becomes an idol.

Preserving a relationship at all costs often means sacrificing the very things that make it worth preserving.

When Family Becomes an Idol

Jesus said something that still shocks people.

> *Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household." Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*
>
> **Matthew 10:34–37 (NIV)**

Luke records Jesus saying the same thing in even stronger terms: He came to bring fire and division, so that households would be divided three against two and two against three (Luke 12:49–53).

Jesus is not against families. He is the One who designed them. But He knows something we forget: a family can take His place. When we worship the idea of a "whole family" more than we worship Him, we will tolerate almost anything to keep up appearances.

Family commitment turns toxic when it is cut off from God's higher call to righteousness. The true cost of discipleship takes

the courage to pick up the sword of truth, even when it divides. Sometimes loving your family well means refusing to let them destroy themselves through compromise.

There's a balance here, and I want to say it plainly:

When you put ministry before family, you shelter selfish ambition. When you put your own family before God's family, you build a monument to yourself and worship your own image.

What Honor Is, and What It Isn't

Abuse in marriage often hides behind holy words. "Honor." "Loyalty." "Covering." "Submission."

But Scripture never defines any of those words as silence in the face of harm.

Biblical honor does not protect sin. It protects truth, dignity and righteousness. Loyalty is not allegiance to abuse or secrecy. It is faithfulness to God first.

Throughout history, control, abuse, dehumanization and oppression have often been defended the same way: by twisting Scripture, redefining submission and order and loyalty, all to keep people in bondage. When holy words are cut off from God's character, they become tools of control.

The Bible doesn't call concealment honor. It calls darkness into the light.

Look again at the epigraph of this chapter. In the Amplified Bible, Malachi 2:16 puts two things side by side. God hates divorce, and God hates the man who covers his wife with violence. You don't get to quote the first half to a battered wife and leave out the second.

And look at what Paul actually commands husbands:

> *In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church.*
>
> **Ephesians 5:28–29**

A husband is called to feed and care for his wife the way Christ cares for the Church. Christ has never once laid a violent hand on His Bride.

Spiritual authority is never a license for harm.

Maria's Story

Picture a woman I'll call Maria. She has been taught to submit. When her husband's anger turns into hitting, she searches the Bible for a verse that would allow her to leave. But her family and her pastor keep quoting submission verses and telling her to stay. Over time she comes to believe she has no choice but to endure.

Then a friend, Odessa, sits with her and listens. After a while, Odessa gently says, “Remember how slaveholders twisted Scripture to justify slavery? The same thing is being done to you.”

Odessa reminds her that Scripture calls husbands to sacrificial love, not domination. Pulling a few marriage verses out of the Bible while ignoring everything it says about justice, honor and the image of God in every person is not faithfulness to the Word. It is a perversion of it.

She helps Maria see that she doesn’t need a single “leave now” verse to deserve safety, dignity and protection. Together they make a plan: reach out to a pastor who will protect her, call a domestic violence hotline, and involve the authorities if needed. Odessa stays beside her through those first steps.

Maria’s story shows how Scripture can be twisted to justify abuse, and how faithful friends, a whole-Bible approach and practical action can break the cycle.

> *Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.*
>
> **Isaiah 1:17**

When a Pastor Gets It Wrong

Now picture a small-town pastor I’ll call Pastor Hollis. He is known for his unwavering commitment to the sanctity of

marriage, and he loves the story of Hosea. He believes love and faith can overcome anything.

A woman in his church, Delphine, has been silently enduring years of emotional and physical abuse. She often goes home bruised and crushed in spirit. Because of Pastor Hollis's teaching, she believes she must save her marriage at any cost.

One Sunday she finally tells him what's happening. He urges her to endure and pray, and he points to Hosea's faithfulness to Gomer.

She goes home and keeps suffering, until a trusted friend steps in, encourages her to get to safety, and shows her the many scriptures about justice and protection for the oppressed. Eventually, Delphine leaves and finds safety and healing.

When Pastor Hollis is confronted with what happened, he goes back to the Scriptures. He realizes that while Hosea's story is a beautiful picture of redemption, it was never meant to be used to keep someone in harm's way. He comes to a more balanced view, one that honors the sanctity of marriage while putting safety and well-being first. Delphine's courage changes how a whole church understands marriage and faith.

Hosea is a picture of God's love, not a prescription for staying in danger.

Long-Suffering or Habitual Sin?

So how do we tell the difference between a hard marriage that calls for patience and a destructive one that calls for protection? Here are a few distinctions I've found helpful.

- **Long-suffering** is patience and endurance through the ordinary challenges of marriage, while staying committed in love. It is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23).
- **Habitual sin** is ongoing, unrepentant behavior, such as continued infidelity or abuse, that harms the marriage. It has to be confronted, and it can only be healed through real repentance (1 John 1:9).
- **Abuse** contradicts everything Scripture says about love and respect in marriage (Ephesians 5:21–33). Separation may be necessary for safety.
- **Divorce** is permitted in cases such as adultery (Matthew 19:9), and many believe it also applies to ongoing harm and danger from abuse.
- **Separation** can be a step toward healing and reconciliation. Its purpose is safety and resolving the conflict, with the door left open to restoring the marriage if there is true repentance.

Jesus gave the Church a process for dealing with unrepentant sin. It starts privately, then brings in witnesses, then the church. And it ends here:

> *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*
>
> **Matthew 18:17 (ESV)**

There is a point where an unrepentant person has to be treated as what they have chosen to become.

Sometimes staying in a marriage that falls far below God's standard does more damage than leaving it. Often it's because a spouse has become an idol, and that idol needs to come crashing down.

Scripture is clear about a husband's responsibility to his household.

> *But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*
>
> **1 Timothy 5:8 (ESV)**

A man who terrorizes his household instead of providing for it has walked away from the faith, no matter how often he quotes it.

If This Is Your Story

If you are living in a home where you are afraid, I want to speak directly to you. It's not your fault. You are not failing God by protecting yourself or your children. Getting safe is not a betrayal

of your covenant. Your spouse broke the covenant when they turned their hands or their words into weapons.

Please reach out. Tell someone you trust. Find a pastor or counselor who will take you seriously. In the United States, you can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233. If you're in immediate danger, call 911.

> *The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.*
>
> **Psalm 34:18**

God sees you. He is near to you. He is the Defender of the oppressed, and He has not asked you to suffer in silence to prove your faithfulness.

And if you are a pastor or leader, the next person who sits in your office and tells you their story is trusting you with their life. Don't hand them half a verse. Give them the whole counsel of God.

For the Road

1. Have you ever seen holy words like "honor," "submission" or "covering" used to hide harm? How should Scripture have been applied instead?
2. What's the difference in your own words between long-suffering and enabling habitual sin?
3. If someone came to you today with a story like Maria's, what would you do in the first twenty-four hours?

God hates divorce, and God hates violence against a spouse. Never quote the first without the second.

CHAPTER 10

Marriage Will Fix My Lust

> *I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust at a young woman.*
>
> **Job 31:1**

There is a quiet hope that lives in a lot of single Christian men. Some of them would never say it out loud, but it sounds like this: "Once I'm married, this struggle will go away. I'll have a wife. I won't need the screen anymore."

I understand that hope. But I have to tell you the truth, because the hope is built on a lie.

The lie: Marriage will fix my lust and pornography problem. The truth: Marriage will expose my lust and pornography issues.

Marriage doesn't cure a heart problem. It puts a spotlight on it. Whatever you bring to the altar, you bring into the bedroom.

The Real Epidemic

In 2016, the well-known evangelist Josh McDowell told CBN News that, from all he knew, pornography was probably the greatest threat to the cause of Christ in the history of the world.

That's a strong statement. But look at the scale of it. By some estimates, the global pornography industry earns tens of billions of dollars every year, more than the major American professional sports leagues combined. And by some measures, pornography sites draw more traffic than some of the biggest names on the internet. The exact numbers are debated. The direction isn't.

The real epidemic in the Church isn't a virus. It's sexual immorality.

And it isn't just "out there." It is in our pews, our youth groups, our worship teams and our pulpits. It's on the phones in our pockets during the sermon.

Jesus raised the standard far above where most of us set it.

> *You have heard the commandment that says, "You must not commit adultery." But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*
>
> **Matthew 5:27–28**

By that standard, pornography isn't a harmless private habit. It is adultery of the heart, repeated as often as the screen lights up.

The Religious Spirit's Blind Spot

Here's something that troubles me about our church culture.

The religious spirit will make you more afraid of being cursed for missing church or not tithing than of being defiled by sexual images and pornography.

We preach the curse of not bringing the whole tithe into the storehouse. We don't often preach the curse that sexual immorality brings on our families.

I wonder where church culture would be today if Malachi 2 were preached as often as Malachi 3. Malachi 3 is where we get the tithe message, and it's true. But Malachi 2 is where God tells His people that He won't accept their worship because they've been unfaithful to the wives of their youth. We love the blessing of chapter 3. We skip the warning of chapter 2.

We guard the offering plate more carefully than we guard the marriage bed.

What Porn Does to a Marriage

Some will say this is exaggerated. "Is it really that serious? Who's even watching?"

The research keeps pointing in the same direction. Pornography use has been linked to higher rates of infidelity; one figure often cited is that it raises the likelihood of an affair by as much as 300 percent. Even if the exact number is debated, the pattern is not. Studies consistently connect pornography to lower satisfaction in marriage, and it is frequently named as one of the leading causes of sexless marriages.

Porn doesn't prepare you for marriage. Porn will shipwreck your marriage.

Here are ten things pornography does:

1. Porn breaks trust in marriage.
2. Porn keeps you from real intimacy.
3. Porn causes self-esteem issues in both spouses.
4. Porn is selfish and lazy.
5. Porn causes performance problems in your sex life.
6. Porn breeds dissatisfaction in marriage.
7. Porn is linked to a sharp rise in the risk of infidelity.
8. Porn is linked to depression, stress and anxiety.
9. Porn rewires your brain.
10. Porn is demeaning to everyone involved.

Notice that every one of those affects two people, not one. There is no such thing as a private sin in a one-flesh covenant. When a husband looks at pornography, his wife carries the wound, whether she knows about it yet or not.

> *Can a man scoop a flame into his lap and not have his clothes catch on fire?*
>
> **Proverbs 6:27**

How Desire Grows

James gives us the life cycle of sin.

> *Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.*
>
> **James 1:14–15**

Desire. Action. Growth. Death. Pornography follows that cycle exactly. It starts with a glance. Then it becomes a habit. Then the habit needs more and more to give the same rush. And eventually something dies: trust, intimacy, a marriage, a ministry.

That's why marriage can't fix it. Your wife was never meant to be a cure for a craving that pornography created. Asking her to be one puts an impossible weight on her and turns her into a product to be consumed instead of a person to be loved.

Your wife is not a methadone clinic for your porn habit. She is a daughter of the King to be honored.

Free to Choose, Not Free to Be Enslaved

Paul wrote to believers who were using their freedom as an excuse.

> *It's true that our freedom allows us to do anything, but that doesn't mean that everything we do is good for us. I'm free to do as I choose, but I choose to never be enslaved to anything. Some have said, "I eat to live and I live to eat!" But God will do away with it all. The body was not created for illicit sex, but to serve and worship our Lord Jesus, who can fill the body with himself.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 6:12–13 (TPT)**

Your body was not created for illicit sex. It was created to be filled with Jesus Himself. That's the real answer to lust. Not just white-knuckling your way to fewer failures, but being filled with something better.

If you are struggling, here is where freedom begins.

Bring it into the light. Shame grows in secret. Freedom grows in confession.

> *Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*
>
> **James 5:16**

Make a covenant with your eyes, as Job did. Decide ahead of time what you will and won't look at, and put real guardrails on your devices.

Get accountability that has teeth. Not a friend who shrugs and says, "Me too." A brother who will ask the hard question and keep asking.

If you're engaged, deal with it now. Don't carry this into your marriage hoping it will disappear. It won't. Tell the truth, get help, and walk in freedom before the wedding.

If you're married, don't hide it. It will come out. Get help, get counsel, and let your wife see a man who is fighting for her instead of hiding from her.

And hear the hope at the end of all of this.

> *So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free.*
>
> **John 8:36**

Not managed. Not mostly free. Truly free.

For the Road

1. Have you, or someone you love, believed that marriage would fix lust? What actually happened?
2. Why do you think the Church talks so much more about tithing than about sexual purity?
3. What is one guardrail and one accountability step you need to put in place this week?

Marriage won't cure what you won't confess. But Jesus can set you truly free.

CHAPTER 11

Love Is the Reward

> *But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*
>
> **Romans 5:8**

There's a quiet math that runs underneath a lot of marriages. If I'm faithful, she'll be faithful. If I serve, he'll serve. If I put in enough love, I'll get enough love back. Do the right things, and the marriage is guaranteed.

That math sounds reasonable. It even sounds spiritual. But it isn't how love works.

The lie: Love is the reward for passion and commitment in marriage. The truth: Love is a risk. It makes you vulnerable, including to heartbreak, no matter how much effort and passion you put in.

When we treat love as a transaction, a prize for good behavior, we grow resentful the moment marriage doesn't pay out the way we expected. Biblical love takes courage. It gives freely, without guarantees.

Garrison

I once had a teammate I'll call Garrison. If you wanted a picture of a devoted husband, he was it. He poured his heart into his marriage. He went the extra mile again and again, through kindness and unwavering support.

Over the years, friends and family raised concerns. They whispered doubts about his wife's loyalty. Garrison brushed them off. He believed his passion and effort would protect their love. True devotion, he thought, would shield them from betrayal.

He was the kind of husband who remembered anniversaries, planned surprise dates and listened after a long day. He believed those things would hold his marriage together.

Then his world shattered. He discovered his wife had been unfaithful.

The heartbreak hit him like a freight train. All his effort suddenly felt worthless. The foundation of what he believed about love crumbled. Without realizing it, he had treated love like a transaction. He had been convinced that his good deeds would earn loyalty in return.

But love is not a guarantee. It's a risk that leaves you open to vulnerability and disappointment.

As Garrison healed, he learned a crucial lesson. Love can't be earned, and it can't be possessed. It has to be given freely, without any guarantee that it will come back. He came out of that season

scarred, but stronger, ready to love again, this time understanding what love really is.

There's a line often attributed to C.S. Lewis that says it well: "If you love deeply, you're going to get hurt badly, but it's still worth it."

Love that is only given when it's guaranteed isn't love.
It's an investment.

God Took the Risk First

Here is the most amazing thing about God's love. It is perfect, and it still doesn't control the outcome.

> *We love each other because he loved us first.*
>
> **1 John 4:19**

God loved first. He loved Adam and Eve perfectly. He gave them a garden with everything they needed and walked with them in the cool of the day. And He still gave them a choice. They used that freedom to rebel.

Did that mean God's love failed? No. It means real love always risks rejection. God could have made robots who obeyed Him without a choice. Instead, He made sons and daughters who could say no, because only someone who can say no can truly say yes.

Then He took the greatest risk of all. He sent His Son.

He came to his own people, and even they rejected him.

John 1:11

If anyone ever deserved love as a reward, it was Jesus. He was perfect. He healed, served and loved without fault. And He was rejected anyway.

So when Paul tells husbands how to love their wives, he doesn't point to a transaction. He points to the cross.

For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her.

Ephesians 5:25

Christ loved a Bride who wasn't yet faithful. He gave Himself before she gave anything back.

God didn't love us because we were safe. He loved us knowing we would wound Him.

Hosea and Gomer

There's no clearer picture of love as a risk than the prophet Hosea.

> *Then the LORD said to me, "Go and love your wife again, even though she commits adultery with another lover. This will illustrate that the LORD still loves Israel, even though the people have turned to other gods and love to worship them."*
>
> **Hosea 3:1**

Hosea's marriage to Gomer was a living sermon. She betrayed him. She ran after other lovers. And God told Hosea to go and love her again, because that is exactly what God was doing for Israel.

Hosea pursued reconciliation. He mirrored God's relentless love for His people. That love wasn't a reward for Gomer's faithfulness. It came in spite of her unfaithfulness.

Listen to how God describes His own pursuit:

> *But then I will win her back once again. I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her there.*
>
> **Hosea 2:14**

I want to be careful here, as I was in Chapter 9. Hosea's story is a prophetic picture of God's heart. It is not a command that every betrayed or endangered spouse must stay. But it does show us what love is made of. It is not a wage. It's a gift.

Love Without Guarantees

Paul describes the kind of love that can survive a world without guarantees.

> *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 13:7 (ESV)**

That kind of love doesn't keep score. It doesn't stand at the door of the marriage with a clipboard, checking whether it got back what it put in.

If God, whose love is flawless, endures hatred and rejection, how much more should we expect to face uncertainty in our marriages? True love doesn't control the outcome. It chooses to trust, to forgive and to keep going, anchored in God's grace instead of in our own effort.

And here's the freedom in that. When your love is anchored in God instead of in your spouse's response, their failure can wound you, but it can't destroy you. You were never loving in order to get paid. You were loving because you were loved first.

> *Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear.*
>
> **1 John 4:18**

If you're in a season like Garrison's, where you gave everything and it still came apart, hear me. Your love was not wasted. God saw every anniversary you remembered and every late-night

conversation you sat through. None of it was foolish. Love is always a risk. But it is never a loss in God's economy.

For the Road

1. Where have you been treating love as a transaction, expecting a certain return for what you give?
2. What makes it hard for you to love without guarantees?
3. How does knowing that God loved you first, while you were still a sinner, change the way you love your spouse?

Love is not a reward you earn. It's a risk you take, because Christ took it first.

CHAPTER 12

Love Can’t Wait

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

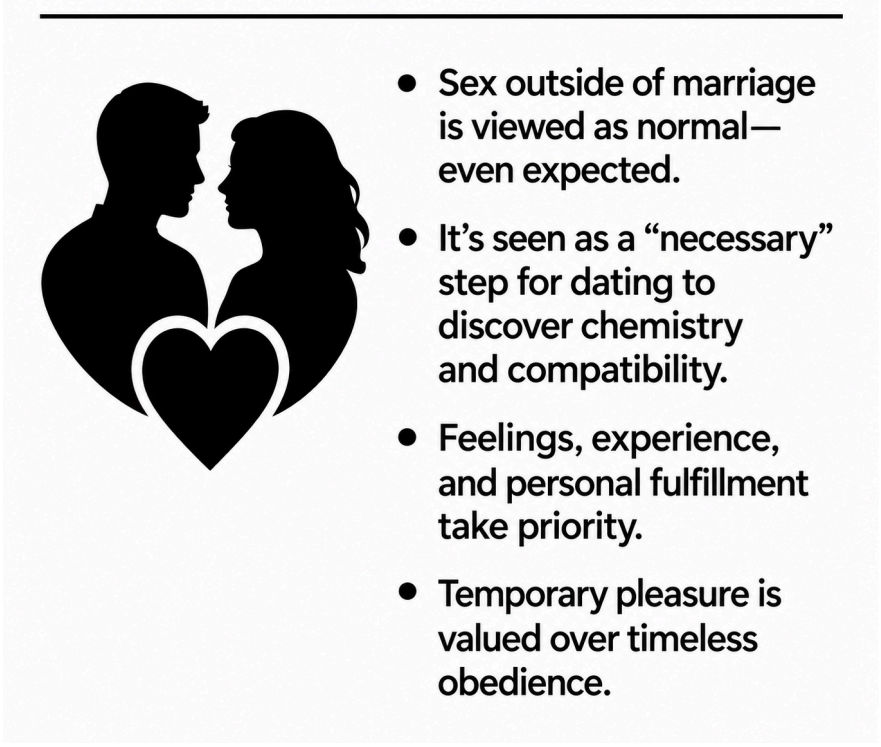
Genesis 29:20 (ESV)

Our culture has a word for a relationship that waits for sex until marriage: unrealistic. The assumption is that real passion can’t wait, and that if you’re really in love, you’ll want to prove it with your body right away.

Scripture tells the opposite story.

The lie: Love can’t wait for sexual intimacy. The truth: Love is patient; lust is always in a hurry.

The Cultural Script About Love



Pursued or Hunted?

Many women struggle to tell the difference between being pursued and being hunted. From the outside, the two can look almost the same. There is passion in both. There is attention in both. A man seeking his beloved and a man trying to acquire a trophy can both seem intense, flattering and determined.

But the motive always shows up in the tempo.

Love is patient. Lust is always in a hurry.

Love is willing to labor and to prove itself. It protects without pressure or jealous possessiveness. Lust disguises urgency as passion. It demands quick access before trust has had time to be earned.

So here's a simple test. If he's in a hurry to isolate you, in a hurry to escalate the relationship, in a hurry to secure you before his character has been proven, you may not be pursued as the beloved. You may be hunted as a trophy, to be hung on the wall among his other "kills."

And men, this chapter is for us first. Purity starts with men leading. A woman should never have to be the only one guarding the line. If you love her, you'll be the one who protects her from your own hurry.

A man who truly loves you will protect you from himself before he ever asks you to give yourself to him.

Seven Years That Felt Like a Few Days

Look at Jacob. He met Rachel at a well and loved her. Her father, Laban, agreed to give her to him in marriage, but only after seven years of work.

Seven years. Most relationships today don't make it seven months without demanding everything. And Scripture says those years

seemed to Jacob like a few days, because of the love he had for her.

That's what love does. It makes waiting feel like a privilege instead of a prison. Lust makes every day of waiting feel like an injustice. Love makes every day of waiting feel like an investment.

Now look at the opposite picture in the same Bible. King David's son Amnon became obsessed with his half-sister Tamar. He schemed to get her alone, and when she begged him to do things the right way, he refused to listen and forced himself on her. Then listen to what Scripture says came next.

> *Then suddenly Amnon's love turned to hate, and he hated her even more than he had loved her.*
>
> **2 Samuel 13:15**

That's what lust does when it gets what it wanted. It doesn't become love. It turns cold. Tamar was the victim, and Scripture never blames her. The whole tragedy came from a man who would not wait and would not take no for an answer.

Lust wants what it wants now. Love wants what's best, even if it has to wait.

Body First or Heart First?

Here's another way to tell them apart.

Lust needs to touch the body before it gets to know the heart. Love needs to touch the heart before it has permission to touch the body.

Lust craves attention. Love seeks to give affirmation.

When God has not granted permission to touch the body through the covenant of marriage, a person's body, soul and spirit are left feeling violated and condemned, even when they said yes at the time. That's because you can't give someone sexual access to your body unless that permission has been granted from above, from the Father of lights.

> *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*
>
> **James 1:17 (NKJV)**

Sex is one of those good and perfect gifts. And a gift can only be given by the one who owns it. Paul tells us who that is.

> *Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 6:18–20 (NKJV)**

You are not your own. You were bought at a price. That means you can't give away something that doesn't belong to you. Your body belongs to the One who bought it with His blood. Only He can give the permission, and He gives it through covenant.

You can't give away what doesn't belong to you. Your body was bought with blood.

Don't Awaken Love Too Soon

The Song of Songs is the most passionate book in the Bible. It celebrates romantic and physical love without embarrassment. And three times it repeats the same warning.

> *Promise me, O women of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and wild deer, not to awaken love until the time is right.*
>
> **Song of Songs 2:7**

Even in the Bible's great love song, there is a "not yet." Love has a right time. Awakened too soon, it burns what it was meant to warm.

So consider the relationship you're in, or the one you hope for. Is it building trust, mutual respect and long-term commitment? Or is it rushing toward isolation and physical control?

Choose someone who values emotional intimacy and character before sex. Choose someone who honors your personal and spiritual boundaries without making you defend them. True love waits, and it protects the whole person: body, soul and spirit.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor.

1 Thessalonians 4:3–4 (NKJV)

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

Hebrews 13:4 (NIV)

If you've already moved too fast, it's not too late to slow down. Grace doesn't only forgive the past. It gives you power to choose differently starting today. A relationship that can't survive a commitment to purity was never going to survive marriage either.

For the Road

1. Looking at your past or present relationships, where have you seen urgency disguised as passion?
2. What does it look like, in practical terms, for a man to lead in purity in a dating relationship?
3. If waiting feels like a prison right now, what would help it feel like an investment instead?

Love has time. Lust is in a hurry. Let love set the pace.

Chapter 13

I Married the Wrong Person

> *But at the beginning of creation God "made them male and female." "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*
>
> **Mark 10:6–9 (NIV)**

Sooner or later, in almost every hard marriage, a thought shows up. It usually comes late at night, after another argument, or on a lonely morning when the distance between two people feels wider than ever.

"I married the wrong person."

It feels like an insight. It feels like the explanation for everything. It's actually one of the enemy's most effective lies.

The lie: I married the wrong person. The truth: What God has joined together, let no one separate.

The Pastor and His “Burden”

Bill Hamon, in his book *Prophetic Pitfalls*, tells about a pastor who was struggling in his marriage. He had come to believe that his wife was holding back his ministry. She didn’t share his zeal for the work, and he was convinced she was keeping him from fulfilling his calling. He even quoted Hebrews 12:1, about laying aside every weight that slows us down, to justify divorcing her.

When he sought counsel, he was told plainly that such a divorce would be against God’s will, and that he needed to love his wife the way Christ loves the Church.

Later, in prayer, he pleaded with God to free him from his marriage so he could focus on the Church. And God answered him with a question: **“Do you really think I’m going to entrust My Bride to you when you can’t even take care of your own bride?”**

That word turned him around. He went back to work on his marriage, understanding that he had to care for his own household before he could care for God’s.

> *For if a man cannot manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church?*
>
> **1 Timothy 3:5**

Jesus didn’t give up on His Bride. Why should we give up on ours?

God won’t trust you with His Bride if you won’t take care of your own.

Jacob, Leah and Rachel

No one in the Bible believed this lie more than Jacob.

Jacob loved Rachel. He worked seven years for her, as we saw in the last chapter. But on the wedding night, his father-in-law switched the brides, and Jacob woke up married to Leah, Rachel’s older sister. Jacob believed he had married the wrong woman. And he tried to fix it in his own strength. He agreed to work seven more years so he could marry Rachel too, and for the rest of his life it was clear which wife he loved.

Leah knew it. Listen to the names she gave her first sons.

When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he enabled her to have children, but Rachel could not conceive. So Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "The LORD has noticed my misery, and now my husband will love me." She soon became pregnant again and gave birth to another son. She named him Simeon, for she said, "The LORD heard that I was unloved and has given me another son." Then she became pregnant a third time and gave birth to another son. He was named Levi, for she said, "Surely this time my husband will feel affection for me, since I have given him three sons!" Once again Leah became pregnant and gave birth to another son. She named him Judah, for she said, "Now I will praise the LORD!"

Genesis 29:31–35

Do you see what happened? Leah's first three sons were named after her longing for Jacob's love. Her fourth was named after her praise for God. Jacob's rejection drew her closer to the Lord. And God co-labored with Leah to bring about His eternal purposes. From Levi came the priesthood. From Judah came King David, and from David's line came Jesus the Messiah.

Now look at how Jacob's story ends. As he was dying, he gave his sons instructions about where to bury him.

> *Then Jacob instructed them, "Soon I will die and join my ancestors. Bury me with my father and grandfather in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite. This is the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a permanent burial site. There Abraham and his wife Sarah are buried. There Isaac and his wife, Rebekah, are buried. And there I buried Leah."*
>
> **Genesis 49:29–31**

Rachel was buried by the road to Bethlehem. But Jacob chose to be laid to rest beside Leah, in the family tomb, with Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah. At the end of his life, the woman he thought was the wrong wife was the one he chose to lie beside.

While Jacob saw Rachel, God saw Leah.

I see in this story a picture of something many believers need to hear.

- Jacob wanted Rachel, but Jacob needed Leah.
- Rachel was Jacob's choice, but Leah was God's choice.
- God will use a Rachel, but God will co-labor with a Leah.
- Rachel might cherish you, but Leah will challenge you into your divine destiny.
- Rachel may be your type, but Leah is God's preference.
- Rachel will touch your desire, but Leah will activate your godly destiny.

- Rachel can birth earthly happiness, but Leah will birth Kingdom holiness.

Many believers have been seduced by Hollywood's romantic version of a love story instead of the ancient paths of the gospel. Rather than embracing the challenges, pain and refinement that marriage brings, they look for a fantasy that serves their own pleasure and comfort. Instead of seeing that God designed marriage to produce personal holiness, they chase man's version of marriage for the sake of personal happiness.

The Enemy's Strategy

The enemy's strategy is to erode the foundation of a marriage by sowing doubt about where it came from. We saw this in Chapter 4. If the devil can convince you that God never really put you together, he can magnify every circumstantial incompatibility until it looks like proof. He wants your eyes on your differences instead of on God's command: "What God has joined together, let no one separate."

Marriage is ordained by God.

> *The man who finds a wife finds a treasure, and he receives favor from the LORD.*
>
> **Proverbs 18:22**

It doesn't thrive on volatile feelings. It thrives on daily surrender to His truth. So when the thought "I married the wrong person" comes, don't entertain it. Take it captive.

We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:5

Rebuke the lie of incompatibility. Choose covenant commitment over circumstantial grievances. The devil's "circumstantial evidence" against your marriage is a distraction. Victory comes from holding on to God's Word and stewarding your union as a sacred, lasting calling, not a conditional contract subject to human weakness.

The enemy builds his case against your marriage with circumstantial evidence. God's verdict is already in.

"Then Why Did Mine End in Divorce?"

Some of you are reading this with a different question. "If it wasn't a mistake that I married that person, then why did it end in divorce?"

That's an honest question, and I want to answer it honestly. Look at King Saul.

Saul was called and anointed by God to lead Israel (1 Samuel 10:1). But he didn't steward that calling with righteousness and obedience. He trusted himself instead of obeying God, and he offered a sacrifice he had no right to offer.

> *But now your kingdom must end, for the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart.*
>
> **1 Samuel 13:14**

Later Samuel told him the heart of the problem.

> *Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams.*
>
> **1 Samuel 15:22**

Saul was truly anointed. God really did call him. But answering the call wasn't enough. He had to steward it, and he didn't. David, a man after God's own heart, shows the posture God is looking for: not just a "yes," but whole-hearted obedience every day after the yes.

The same is true in marriage. A marriage ending in divorce doesn't automatically mean God never called you to marry that person. The children born from that union are evidence that you truly became one flesh. A thriving marriage takes two committed people. When one spouse neglects their vows, there is collateral damage, and the other spouse can't carry the covenant alone.

Saying "I do" is only the first step. A thriving marriage takes daily servanthood, dying to self, and walking in righteousness and justice.

Saul's Kingship and a Broken Marriage

Here is how the two stories line up.

Saul's kingship - **Divine appointment.** Saul was anointed by God to lead Israel (1 Samuel 10:1). - **Failure.** He chose self-reliance over obedience, dishonoring God's authority (1 Samuel 13:8–14; 15:22–23). - **Consequence.** God tore the kingdom from him (1 Samuel 15:26–28) and gave it to a man after His own heart.

A marriage God joined together - **Divine design.** Marriage is a covenant ordained by God (Matthew 19:6). - **Failure.** Like Saul, a spouse can neglect the calling to steward the covenant with humility, love and faithfulness (Ephesians 5:21–33). - **Consequence.** Unrepentant sin such as abuse, adultery or abandonment can fracture the union, even though God was in its beginning (Malachi 2:16).

Where they meet - **Stewardship over calling.** Saul was called to lead Israel for God but ruled for himself. Couples are called to love for God but often act for themselves. Both reject the heart posture a divine assignment requires. - **Covenant over convenience.** Saul abandoned God's commands because he feared the people (1 Samuel 15:24). Spouses may abandon their vows out of selfish desire, fear or pride (Proverbs 16:18). God's institutions are holy, but they depend on human obedience. - **Grace and judgment.** Saul's rebellion led to loss (1 Samuel 28:18–19). Persistent sin in marriage, like unrepentant adultery or abuse, can lead to separation or divorce (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15). God allows consequences for hardened sin, and He still offers redemption.

A failed marriage, like Saul's failed kingship, doesn't cancel God's original design. It exposes human weakness. Both stories warn us that a divine calling requires daily surrender.

God hates divorce, yet He permits it as a concession to human brokenness, because of hard hearts (Matthew 19:8). That concession isn't there to excuse sin. It's there to limit the damage sin causes.

And for leaders and spouses alike, the hope is the same: repentance, the posture David took in Psalm 51, and dependence on the grace that restores what sin has broken.

> *The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.*
>
> **Psalm 51:17**

You may not have married the wrong person. You may have married a person you are called to steward. Start there.

For the Road

1. Has the thought "I married the wrong person" ever visited you? What circumstantial evidence did the enemy use?
2. In what ways might your spouse be a Leah, someone God is using to challenge you into your destiny?
3. Where do you need to move from simply answering the call of marriage to stewarding it every day?

Stop asking whether you married the right person.
Start asking whether you're becoming the right one.

PART FOUR

Restoring the Foundations

What does a marriage-centered home look like?

CHAPTER 14

A Marriage-Centered Home

> *This is what the LORD says: "Stop at the crossroads and look around. Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it. Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls."*
>
> **Jeremiah 6:16**

A man from Africa once told a story about his culture that I have never forgotten. In his part of the world, polygamy had become a normalized stronghold. A man might have several wives, and each wife would have her own children.

He said it was always easy to tell which wife was the husband's favorite. You didn't have to ask. You could see it in the confidence of her children.

Think about that. The children of the loved wife carried themselves differently. The way their father loved their mother was written all over them.

You don't raise healthy kids by dipping them in gold. You raise healthy, confident kids by letting them see unconditional, healthy love between their parents.

> **Children don't just need to be loved. They need to see love lived out between the two people they came from.**

Husbands, Love Your Wives

Paul gives husbands their marching orders.

> *And to the husbands, you are to demonstrate love for your wives with the same tender devotion that Christ demonstrated to us, his bride. For he died for us, sacrificing himself to make us holy and pure, cleansing us through the showering of the pure water of the Word of God. All that he does in us is designed to make us a mature church for his pleasure, until we become a source of praise to him—glorious and radiant, beautiful and holy, without fault or flaw.*
>
> **Ephesians 5:25–27 (TPT)**

Notice what that verse says, and what it doesn't. It says, "Husbands, love your wives." It doesn't say, "Husbands, love your children," in this verse.

That isn't because husbands aren't called to love their children. Of course they are. It's because God needed to declare a priority. Our flesh naturally puts the children first. God puts the marriage first, and the children flourish under it.

A child-centered home produces entitled children. A marriage-centered home models servanthood and unconditional love.

Sociologist Brad Wilcox has pointed to the same pattern in research on divorce. In an interview with Fox News, he noted an

uptick in divorce among Baby Boomers, a generation that came of age in the late 1960s and 1970s, the era writer Tom Wolfe famously called “the Me Decade.” Wilcox observed that couples who pour their time, energy and attention into their kids at the expense of each other often struggle to keep their marriage alive. Then, when the children leave home, many conclude they’ve done their duty as parents and now it’s time to go looking for romance again, at fifty-eight, sixty-five, even seventy-two.

If your children are the glue holding your marriage together, your marriage will come apart the day they leave.

The best thing you can give your children is not another activity or a bigger allowance. It’s a mother and father who visibly choose each other.

A Word over the Me Generation

There is a word I hold onto about this generation, and I want to share it with you because it gives me hope:

The largest, most broken, self-centered, narcissistic generation in human history is rising up right now on the earth: the “Me Generation.” But in this broken, narcissistic, self-consumed generation, the Lord is going to do a miracle of transformation. This is the group He is going to use in the billion-soul harvest, and they are going to walk in humility beyond any generation in history. The transformation will be dramatic.

I want to be a part of it. And I believe one of the main ways God will bring that transformation is through marriage. The prescription for a narcissistic generation is biblical marriage, because nothing confronts selfishness like a covenant.

God is more concerned about the covenant and crucible of marriage than the comfort and convenience of marriage.

A crucible is the vessel where metal is melted so the impurities can rise to the surface and be removed. Marriage is a crucible. It brings the selfishness up so God can take it out.

The Five Stages of a Relationship

Many counselors describe relationships moving through five stages. Knowing them can keep you from quitting in the middle.

1. **Romance (infatuation).** Intense attraction, idealization and emotional highs. The couple focuses on what they have in common and enjoys a honeymoon season, often overlooking each other's flaws.
2. **Power struggle (conflict).** Reality sets in. Differences surface. Conflict comes, and each person may try to change the other. This stage tests the relationship and requires learning to work through disagreement. Some counselors estimate that most couples never make it past this stage.
3. **Stability (acceptance).** The couple moves past conflict into deeper understanding. They accept their differences.

Communication improves and trust grows.

4. **Commitment (decision).** Both partners consciously choose to stay together for the long haul, putting the relationship above short-term issues. Shared values and goals strengthen the bond.
5. **Co-creation (collaboration).** The relationship becomes a purposeful partnership. The couple focuses on shared work, whether family, ministry, projects or growth, building a legacy and an enduring unity.

Here's what I want you to see. Stage two is not a sign that you married the wrong person. It's a sign that you're normal. The couples who reach stages four and five are not the ones who never fought. They are the ones who didn't quit in stage two.

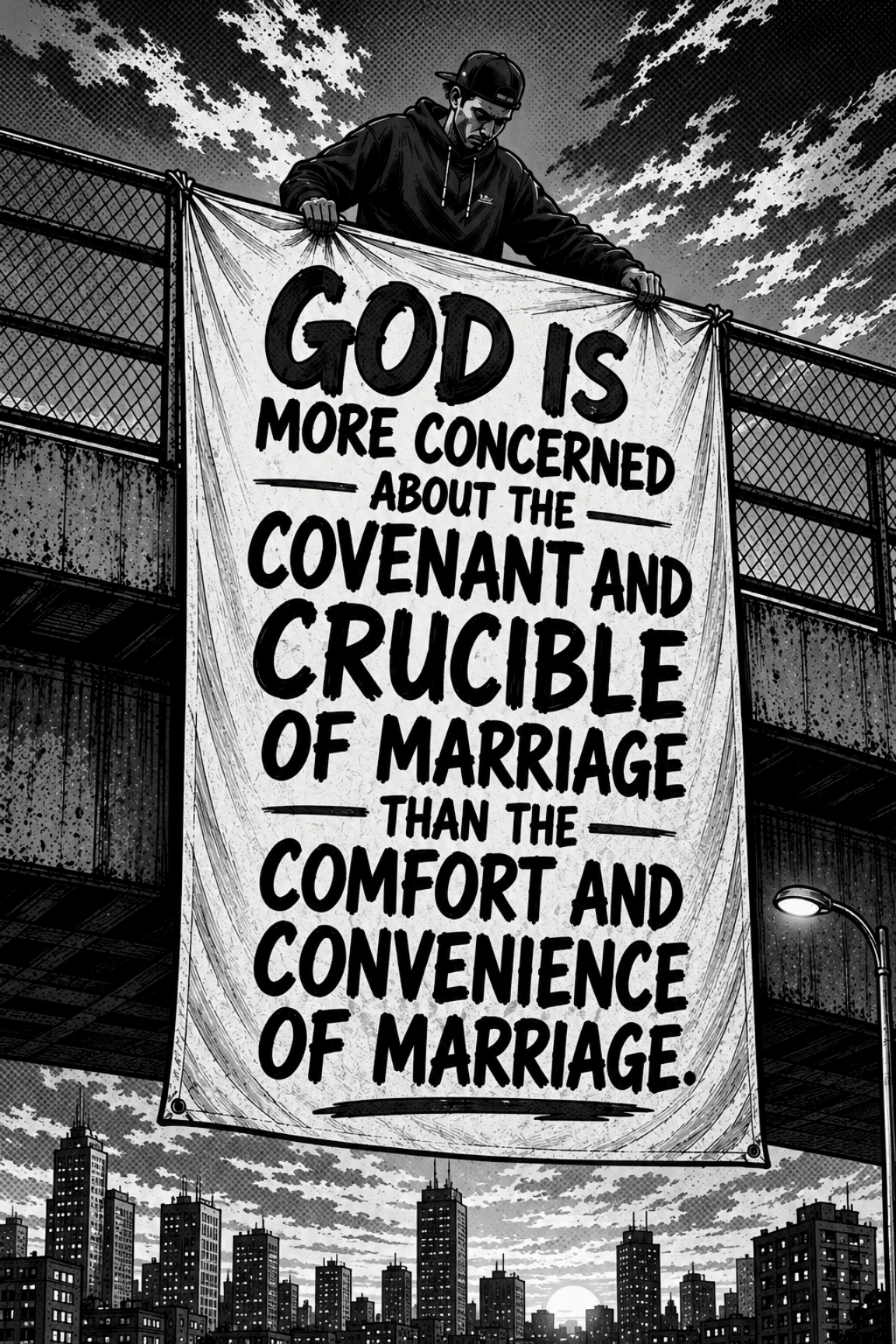
> *A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.*
>
> **Ecclesiastes 4:12**

"You Know What Your Problem Is?"

A couple of months after I retired from football, God whispered something to me that I didn't expect.

"You know what your problem is?"

He showed me that He appreciated how I had taken the blueprint of what made me successful in the NFL and was applying it to


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our home church. His problem with me was not my love for the truth. It was not my focus or my commitment to His Word.

It was my lack of patience. I wasn't honoring people's process.

That conversation has stayed with me, because I've since seen the same kind of idealism act like a cancer in many marriages. It puts heavy burdens on a spouse and doesn't give them time to grow into maturity. We hold our husband or wife to the finished picture of who they will be, and we get angry that they aren't there yet.

> *And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.*
>
> **Philippians 1:6**

God is patient with the process in us. He is asking us to be patient with the process in each other.

Honor your spouse's process the way God honors yours.

The Idealism That Kills Marriage

The book *Delivered from Evil* makes a sobering observation: many effective teachers, counselors and authors who champion Christian marriage end up divorced themselves. One reason, the book suggests, is the destructive force of human idealism. It sets unrealistic expectations, and when the marriage falls short, discouragement and frustration set in. Pursuing God's ideal for

marriage is noble. But **“the devil’s strategy against marriage often exploits these unrealistic ideals.”**

There are valuable books on marriage that can help couples build strong foundations or repair broken ones. But some, rooted in idealism, can do more harm than good.

The book points to Coach Bill McCartney, whose story shows it took him forty years to become the husband his wife had dreamed of. Forty years. Marriage is a lifetime of growth. Expecting perfection can undermine even a marriage that had the potential to be great.

Listen again to how Paul describes love, in a translation that brings out its tenderness.

> *Love is large and incredibly patient. Love is gentle and consistently kind to all. It refuses to be jealous when blessing comes to someone else. Love does not brag about one’s achievements nor inflate its own importance. Love does not traffic in shame and disrespect, nor selfishly seek its own honor. Love is not easily irritated or quick to take offense. Love joyfully celebrates honesty and finds no delight in what is wrong. Love is a safe place of shelter, for it never stops believing the best for others. Love never takes failure as defeat, for it never gives up.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 13:4–7 (TPT)**

Love is large and incredibly patient. That’s the first thing it says. Before love is passionate, it is patient.

Happily Ever After?

The dictionary defines “happily ever after” as an imagined period, never ending, in which a loving couple lives an untroubled, happy life together.

That idea has placed our hope in a circumstance rather than in the person of Jesus Christ. The American gospel promises the pursuit of happiness. The gospel of Scripture promises something else.

> *Then you will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because you are my followers.*
>
> **Matthew 24:9**

Jesus never promised us an untroubled life. He promised us Himself in the middle of the trouble.

Happily ever after is a fairy tale. Faithfully ever after is a covenant.

Easy Street or the Ancient Paths?

There’s a story often told about a young newlywed who was ready to quit at the first real struggle in his marriage. “If it’s not easy,” he told his mentor, “it can’t be love.”

His mentor looked at him and asked, “Was becoming an athlete easy? Building a business? Raising a child? You’ve worked through pain for everything that ever mattered to you.”

The young man realized that hardship doesn't prove something is wrong with God or with the relationship. Sometimes it proves the relationship is worth fighting for.

That's the choice in front of every couple: Easy Street or the ancient paths. Easy Street promises comfort and delivers emptiness. The ancient paths ask for sacrifice and lead to rest for your soul.

A marriage-centered home isn't a perfect home. It's a home where two imperfect people keep choosing each other, keep honoring each other's process, and keep putting their covenant above their comfort. Children raised in that kind of home learn what love looks like before they can define it. And a Church built from homes like that will look like a family again.

Neglecting covenant and protecting wrongdoing contradict the revival we pray for. Let our homes reflect the faithfulness we proclaim.

For the Road

1. Is your home more child-centered or marriage-centered? What would one change toward a marriage-centered home look like this month?
2. Which of the five stages is your relationship in right now? What would it take to move to the next one?
3. Where have you been impatient with your spouse's process? How has God been patient with yours?

Love your spouse first, and you'll give your children the best gift they could ever receive.



EPILOGUE

The Bridegroom Is Coming

> *Let us be glad and rejoice, and let us give honor to him.*
> *For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb,*
> *and his bride has prepared herself.*
>
> **Revelation 19:7**

Somewhere in this book you may have felt a question rise up in you. Maybe it came while you read about covenant, or about the spouse who walked away, or about the years you gave to someone who did not give them back. It goes something like this: "What about what I deserve?"

It is an honest question. Let me answer it with two more.

Do we really want what we deserve? Every one of us, left to what we have earned, would be separated from God forever.

And did Jesus get what He deserved?

The Best Husband with No Wife

Think about the life of Jesus.

He was the best husband who ever lived, and He had no wife. He was the best father, and He had no children. He was the best rabbi, and He had no synagogue. He was the best businessman,

and He had no company. He was the only truly good man who ever walked this earth, and He died for sinners.

He did not get what He deserved. We did not get what we deserved. That is the gospel.

> *But he was pierced for our rebellions, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed.*
>
> **Isaiah 53:5**

The cross isn't about getting what you think you deserve. The cross is about pressing through your pain so someone you love gets their promise.

That is what Jesus did for His Bride. He looked past the shame of the cross to the joy on the other side of it.

> *Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.*
>
> **Hebrews 12:2**

The joy set before Him was us. He is the Bridegroom who did not give up on His Bride, and He is coming back for her.

Ten Lamps at Midnight

Jesus told a story about a wedding. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five were wise and

brought extra oil. Five were foolish and did not. The bridegroom was delayed, and they all fell asleep.

> *At midnight they were roused by the shout, "Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and meet him!"*
>
> **Matthew 25:6**

All ten woke up. All ten trimmed their lamps. But only five had oil.

> *Then the five foolish ones asked the others, "Please give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out." But the others replied, "We don't have enough for all of us. Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves."*
>
> **Matthew 25:8–9**

That answer sounds harsh until you understand what oil is. Oil is intimacy with God. It is the private history you have with Him: the prayers no one heard, the repentance no one saw, the faithfulness you kept when no one was clapping. Nobody can lend you that. Not your pastor, not your parents, not your spouse.

I see in this parable a picture of everything this book has been about. Marriage, like the oil in a lamp, is built in private. Ministry and money get public recognition. Marriage asks for private surrender. The covenant is kept, or broken, in a thousand small moments at home that no one else will ever know about. When the cry goes out at midnight, what will matter is what you did in the dark.

You can borrow a sermon. You can't borrow oil.

Why Revival Tarries

Why does revival tarry? I hope this book has helped you consider that question. Revival tarries when the Bride is distracted. When we chase the feeling of love instead of the covenant of love. When we want a spouse to complete us instead of letting Christ refine us. When we excuse in the Church what we preach against in the world. When fathers' hearts are turned away from their children.

And revival comes when the Bride makes herself ready. When husbands love their wives as Christ loves the Church. When purity is a gift again. When the wounded are protected and the repentant are restored. When families look like the Kingdom, and the Church looks like a family again.

The Bridegroom is coming. He is coming for a Bride without spot or wrinkle, and He has already paid with His own blood to make

her that way. Our part is to stay awake, keep our vows, guard our homes and keep oil in our lamps.

So be driven by eternity, not by your circumstances. Choose love when you don't feel it. Keep covenant when it costs you. And when the night feels long, remember who is coming.

For the Road

1. Where have you been asking, "What about what I deserve?" How does the cross answer that question for you?
2. What is the oil in your marriage or your walk with God right now? Where is your lamp running low?
3. What is one private act of faithfulness you will choose this week that no one but God will see?

The Bridegroom is coming. Keep your lamp burning.