



NAKED

Reclaiming **Sexual Intimacy** in Marriage

tim+anne evans

May the God who is both great and good make your marriage stronger and your hearts braver. May He create not only a willingness to die for your marriage but also a passion to live for it. What people are saying about ...

NAKED: RECLAIMING SEXUAL INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE

+ “As the title *NAKED* suggests, Tim and Anne Evans strip away the usual boring distractions to reveal the beating heart of intimacy as God intended. The Evans are not tucked away in some ivory tower but in the trenches with the rest of us, battling each day for truth and grace in marriage. Their treatment of sensitive cultural sexual issues is a refreshing blend of tact and honesty rooted in Scripture and desperately needed in the Church.”

John D. Blase, poet and author of *Know When to Hold 'Em: The High Stakes Game of Fatherhood*

+ “If you’re looking for an average marriage, don’t pick this book up! Tim and Anne Evans are the real deal, and their teachings will introduce a level of intimacy and vulnerability into your marriage that is unbelievable! Laura and I HIGHLY recommend *NAKED*.”

Ryan and Laura Dobson, founders/ hosts REBEL Parenting

+ “It is so much fun to journey with Tim and Anne as they enfold us in their arms and love us into sexual wholeness. They have lived ‘*it*’ for forty years, seeking God at every step, so they have much to share. Yes, they really do cover the important subjects people want to know about. Thank you, Tim and Anne, for going where others have feared to tread. You have summarized years of marital intimacy as you have lived out oneness, side by side.”

Dr. Chester and Betsy Kylstra, founders Restoring the Foundations International + “Tim+Anne Evans’ passion for gender equality, mutuality, and sound biblical interpretation makes them trustworthy teachers to learn from on the vulnerable subject of sexual intimacy in marriage. *NAKED* is an honest, relatable, and practical guide with a redemptive and hopeful narrative!”

Jory Micah, Breaking the Glass Steeple

+ “Not for the faint of heart, *NAKED* dives deep into real issues affecting sexual intimacy in marriage. In a genre that tends to rely on simplistic gender stereotypes, Tim and Anne set themselves apart by offering practical advice based on real-life experience, training, wisdom, and Scripture.”

Kate Wallace Nunneley, The Junia Project

+ “God has blessed Tim and Anne with a unique Priscilla-and-Aquilalike anointing. Their biblical perspectives, real-life stories, and practical wisdom from years of counseling will benefit every married couple. For over three decades I have watched Tim and Anne passionately live out their lives, marriage, parenting, leading, teaching, and writing— together ... side by side.”

Marty O’Connor, Leadership Team, NorthRidge Church, Plymouth, Michigan

+ “Biblical, relevant, and very straight forward! Tim and Anne Evans have written an extraordinary book about intimacy in marriage. Their unique insights and practical approach to great sex and intimacy will breathe life into any marriage. This book deserves to be one of the key books in the library of any husband and wife who want to enjoy a deeply fulfilling relationship.”

Jack and Rebecca Sytsema , Lake Effect Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Cofounders of Children of Destiny



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The authors have added italics to Scripture quotations for emphasis.

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DEDICATION

We dedicate *NAKED* to couples who don't settle for an average, or even a good, marriage. Instead, they commit to living out God's "very good"—*naked without shame*— marriage principles of Paradise.

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NOTES TO READERS

+ *The stories in this book are based on decades of ministry, counseling, and real-life experiences. Names and details regarding many individuals whose stories are told in this book have been changed to protect their privacy. Editorial liberties have been taken to combine certain people, stories, and circumstances for the purpose of clarity and illustration.*

+ *Tim + Anne (we) write from a traditional, Judeo-Christian, orthodox marriage perspective. Our desire is to offer for your consideration marriage views based on forty years of marriage, decades of counseling experiences, and a number of Bible passages as we currently understand them. However, we recognize and respect that people have a wide range of beliefs, opinions, and feelings—especially surrounding marriage, intimacy, and sexuality.*

+ *One caution: As counselors, parents, and grandparents, we want to inform readers that this book, and the accompanying NAKED Companion Journal, contain sensitive sexual information and many intimate real-life stories. Therefore, it is not suitable reading for children.*

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+ *A note to unmarried readers, this book is primarily for Christian married couples. However, we believe unmarried readers will also benefit as they grow in understanding God's purposes for marriage, emotional intimacy, and sexual intimacy. Single men and women often describe how they feel left out in the marriage-centric church culture. They may feel that way because most church leaders are married. And with the many responsibilities of leading a church, often leaders do not have the time to truly be champions for singles. As a result, limited resources are invested in singles ministries.*

In addition, our culture and churches often portray getting married and having children as ends themselves. God created every person (single and married) in His image. He gave every man and woman legitimate longings

for intimacy and the desire to live life with passion. And these longings can be fully experienced apart from being married. In fact, the apostle Paul, who wrote the majority of the New Testament, described the benefits of singleness and celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:32-35).

Keep in mind that Jesus, the apostle Paul, and Mary Magdalene—who faithfully followed Jesus, was the first person to see the risen Christ and proclaim to the disciples that “Jesus is alive”—all were unmarried and led pretty amazing lives. All that is to say, although our primary focus is on married couples, we welcome single readers. We bless you and want you to know that we are grateful for the selfless ways you humbly demonstrate your love for God and others.

FOREWORD

During my long career as a college professor, I have been asked to perform scores of weddings. In each case, I took pains to conduct sessions of prenuptial counseling that included a session or two about the sexual side of married life. To help reinforce my discussion of the matter, I asked the future spouses to read a sex manual from a list that I gave them. Most of the books, if not all, were disappointingly vapid and hollow of substance, as if they had been written to avoid dealing with the very subject they claimed to be treating.

Obviously, the constraint was the conceptual abyss that separates the idolatrous definitions of sexuality that pervade our Western culture from the traditional view of sex espoused by the evangelical authors. On one hand, our children are exposed daily to relativistic theories of morality and to the spectacle of open practices of sexual activity by their schoolmates. On the other, many of our churches impose upon their youth standards of sexual behavior that are even more harsh and arbitrary than the rules that were imposed upon their unsuspecting constituencies by their puritanical and pietistic forebears.

No wonder that confusion prevails in Christian homes and churches as pertains to sexual matters. If a neo-pagan society has elevated sex to the level of the ultimate good, Christians have glorified sex as the ultimate sin. In any evangelical congregation, the mention of “sexual purity” from the pulpit casts a pall of hushed tension into the pews as if financial,

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verbal, relational forms of purity were not as biblically important according to Scriptures.

When I read *NAKED*, I was stunned to discover how effectively the authors had boldly and honestly taken stock of the whole spectrum of contemporary sexual practices to evaluate them in the light of relevant biblical themes. One of my sons and his fiancée have asked me to counsel them in view of

their forthcoming marriage. I am eager to put this book confidently into their hands for them to discover an authentically biblical treatment of the naked truth about sex.

Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, cofounder of Willow Creek Community Church and professor emeritus at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois

NAKED +XVI

INTRODUCTION

WHY SHOULD YOU INVEST IN READING THIS BOOK?

Let's be real. The truth is, countless marriage books and resources are available. Working with husbands and wives for decades, we've observed that couples don't long for another "how-to" book, more marriage "dos and don'ts," or the latest marriage "tips-tools-techniques." Couples don't need an author's guaranteed promises of "a trouble-free marriage, increased intimacy, and an epic sex life." What we believe couples *do* need is to include God in everything, be kind and gracious to each other, and embrace God's original marriage design—*together*.

Our desire for every reader is to:

- + Understand your true identity: you are a beloved son or daughter made in the image of the triune God.
- + Begin your decision-making through a process we call **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*). We give a detailed explanation of **I.O.T.L.** in Appendix A.
- + Better understand God's purposes for intimacy and sexuality.
- + Recognize how emotional intimacy connects to sexual intimacy.
- + Process your sexual history as you deal with any negative sexual imprinting.

+1

- + Demystify a number of sensitive sexual issues. + Reach unity by implementing the **Traffic Light Principle**

(See Appendix B).

- + Take ownership and responsibility for your part in marriage.
- + Enjoy reading *NAKED*, apply the things you learn, and celebrate that *God is pro-sex!*

Life is lived in a story

anne

In the summer after my fifth-grade year, my mom decided it was time for the “sex talk.” At age eleven, I had no doubt overheard conversations or whispering between friends about the subject on the playground. This particular evening with my mom, however, is my first real memory of an “official” talk about sex.

I remember sitting in the back of the living room, where our family had gathered that evening to watch TV. I felt a tap on my shoulder. Turning around, I saw my mom motioning me to follow her down the hallway that led to her bedroom. Since I grew up in a large family, I didn’t often get to spend time alone with my mom, so this felt like a special moment. I still remember climbing up on her bed as she closed and locked the door behind her. She reached inside the drawer of her bedside table and pulled out a pamphlet she had received in the mail from Kotex. It was titled something like “What Every Daughter Needs to Know about Sex.”

As a sensitive child, I couldn’t help but notice my mom’s discomfort as she began to read to me. It felt more like story time than a conversation. I don’t remember having any interest in learning about sex at age eleven. In fact, I wasn’t quite sure why I had to leave my TV program for that. There seemed to be absolutely no connection between the pamphlet my mom was reading and my own life.

As my mom flipped through the pages, I noticed pictures of some birds in a flower garden, some bees pollinating the flowers ... and then suddenly there was a diagram of a female body with the uterus highlighted. It looked to me like a big baked potato with wings sprouting off each side. My mom nervously talked about the production of eggs and sperm. Then we advanced to the monthly “shedding” of the uterine wall. To be honest, the whole thing was a little hard to follow. I was much more aware of my mom’s awkwardness than what she was trying to explain me.

As we approached the part explaining how the sperm actually gets to the egg, my curiosity was piqued. That was probably the only part of the entire booklet that interested me. At that point, I sat up straight and tuned in to every word. As I waited for my mom to turn the page, I noticed something strange. She had taped the next few pages together, and she skipped to the end of the pamphlet. I thought to myself, *Wait a minute! How am I ever going to find out how the sperm gets to the egg?* The story came to an abrupt end with a happy couple holding their new baby.

My mom always referred to the story of reproduction as a “beautiful story,” but after that night I often thought to myself, *if it’s such a beautiful story, then why did you tape the pages together and completely skip the part about how the sperm meets the egg?* I grew up feeling as if I was missing vital information. Surely it was hidden inside those taped pages!

Life is lived in a story

tim

I vividly remember the day my dad said, “Timmy, I need to see you in the bedroom.” At the time, I was in the sixth grade, and those words usually meant that discipline was coming my way. In most cases, the discipline involved two things: my dad’s belt and my butt. I walked into the bedroom and sat on my parents’ bed. My dad closed the door and lit a cigarette. I noticed he didn’t have his usual expression normally preceding my punishment. I sensed that something was about to happen, but I had no idea what.

My dad paced back and forth for a few minutes. Then he stood still and said, “Timmy, I have to talk to you about a *stepping-stone*.”

I felt an immediate sense of relief. *Stepping-stone* was a familiar term in my family, a way of referring to little life lessons that my parents thought were important. For example, when my grandma died, my brothers and I were pretty young and none of us wanted to be pallbearers for fear we might drop the coffin. Dad called us together and said, “Boys, this is a stepping-stone. It’s an honor for you to carry Grandma to her grave.” Stepping-stones were such a big part of our family life that years later when Dad died we engraved his headstone with these words: My Final Stepping-Stone.

My dad never had trouble saying what he thought. He was a good athlete, a Golden Gloves boxer, a decorated World War II veteran, and a hardworking, union-card-carrying milkman. Yet here he was pacing across the bedroom, seemingly flustered about talking to me about a stepping-stone. He stopped pacing, took a long drag on his cigarette, and said, “Timmy, one of my jobs as your dad is to talk to you about sex.” When I heard the word sex, I wanted to burst out laughing, but quickly realizing *that* would have been unwise, I decided to just listen.

Dad returned to his nervous pacing until he stopped and looked me straight in the eyes. Finally, he paused and said, “Timmy, if you ever have any

questions about sex ... ask your mother!” Then he opened the door and walked out.

I sat on the bed for a few moments and wondered, *What just happened?* My older brother Billy was in our bedroom across the hall. When he saw me walk out, he asked if I got whacked. Confused over what had happened, I told him, “I think Dad just had a sex talk with me.” Billy burst out laughing and said, “Let me guess. Dad told you if you have any questions, ask Mom.” When I nodded, he said, “That’s the same talk he gave to me last year.” We both laughed about Dad’s attempt at the sex stepping-stone.

Sadly, beyond that “talk,” I don’t recall the subject of sex ever seriously discussed in our home. One parenting responsibility is to give children life stepping-stones. Unfortunately, in my family of origin I didn’t hear about emotional or sexual intimacy from my parents. Instead, I heard about sex from my older brother, in the school locker room, on the ball field, and eventually at the firehouse. Let’s just say that what I learned had absolutely *nothing* to do with God’s design for emotional or sexual intimacy.

Think back to your growing-up years. Were you ever taught God’s purposes for sex? If not, then what *did* you learn? We have discovered that most people received little if any sexual intimacy training in their families of origin. Furthermore, for the most part Christian communities have been reluctant to passionately teach that *God is pro-sex*. Instead of sex being celebrated, the church culture passes along shame and fear. It’s important to remember that God created intimacy and sexual pleasure: *everything* God created was good. In marriage, God invites a husband and wife to fully enjoy the miracle and mystery of two becoming “one flesh.”¹

Unfortunately, the non-Christian culture offers a growing number of opinions surrounding emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and marriage. The media, educational institutions, and what Hollywood produces pretty much mock anything even close to God’s purposes for emotional and sexual intimacy in marriage. With so many opinions swirling around, it’s easy to *never* learn what God designed marriage to be.

However, from the beginning God had a plan and purpose in mind.

WE LOVE BEING MARRIED

We love being married. We went to kindergarten together, had a crush on each other in middle school, got married at twenty-one, and have been married forty years. And we believe *life is lived in a story*. Therefore, we would like to begin our author-reader journey by telling you a little bit about who we are ... *Who are tim+anne evans?*

First, we are followers of Jesus Christ. We are a real-life couple—a retired fire chief and a nurse—who are parents, grandparents, spiritual parents, authors, and pastoral counselors. We live in Colorado and co-lead REAL LIFE Ministries full time. Our ministry's focus is to help men and women grow in loving God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and in loving others (starting with a spouse) as they love themselves.² The *why* that drives REAL LIFE is ***Marriage Transformation***.

MEET AND GREET

Whenever we receive a request for counseling, we offer a complimentary “meet and greet.” We believe finding the right counselors is an important step in the healing process. A client-ministry receiver should experience a measure of connection with their counselors. Therefore, at every meet and greet we give potential clients an opportunity to ask questions and share parts of their story. While they are interviewing us, we are interviewing them.

Pause for a moment and imagine sitting at a meet and greet in our office in the Old Colorado City section of Colorado Springs. After briefly sharing our stories, at some point we would read the following Bible passage out loud: “**Those who marry will face many troubles.**”³ Pause and repeat that passage out loud: “Those who marry will face many troubles.”

After being married four decades, having four children (three of whom are married now), five grandchildren, and many spiritual children, we understand that being married includes having troubles. We’ve experienced troubles in our marriage—*every* couple experiences troubles. Truth be told, we continue to experience troubles. When we do, we try to reframe our marriage troubles by viewing them as *opportunities* rather than *obstacles*.

Looking at our culture and listening to the media, you might think that marriage is dying and in need of CPR. However, we regularly meet husbands and wives who are revisiting and passionately embracing God’s original marriage design—a marriage built on love, equality, mutuality, unity, community, and servanthood. Throughout this book we will remind readers that marriage is God’s idea—He is pro-marriage, pro-intimacy, and pro-sex!



PART ONE

God Is Pro-Intimacy and Pro-Sex

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”

Genesis 2:24

CHAPTER 1

GOD'S PURPOSES FOR SEXUAL INTIMACY

God is pro-sex! We begin every teaching on intimacy and sexuality with these words. And we ask the audience to repeat them out loud—*God is pro-sex*. Of course, *sex* can be used to describe a person's gender. However, when our culture talks about *having sex* it typically refers to having sexual intercourse. Nevertheless, a foundational premise throughout *NAKED* is we believe *having sex* is much more than penis-vagina intercourse. We believe *having sex* includes steps of emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and intercourse experiences.

Intimacy is defined as “something of a personal or private nature.”¹ Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, cofounder of Willow Creek Community Church (with Bill Hybels), Wheaton College professor emeritus, and our spiritual father and mentor, defined intimacy as “to know and be fully known.”² The more you know someone, and the more you are known *by* someone—especially your spouse—the more you grow in intimacy.

Oneness, emotional intimacy, and sexual intimacy in marriage make up the super glue that bonds couples together within the lifelong covenant of marriage. Husbands and wives who demonstrate these are people who know their true identity and are comfortable in their own skin. They model

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love, humility, and kindness toward each other. They are good listeners, enjoy nonsexual touch, and they often laugh together. If you observe and listen closely, you will overhear these couples saying to each other: “Please ... thank you ... I'm sorry—I was wrong ... Will you forgive me? ... Help

me understand ... It concerns me when ... How can I be with you? ... I believe in you ... I want the best for you ... I love you.”

Increased emotional intimacy can be experienced in the everyday, *extraordinary-ordinary*³ moments in life. Simple moments that have the potential to stimulate the soul, awaken delight, and heighten a person’s senses. This begins by choosing to *live in the present* and celebrate the *now* moments in life. Shauna Niequist describes the benefits in choosing to be *present over perfect*. She writes:

This isn’t about working less or more, necessarily. This isn’t about homemade or takeout, or full time or part time, or the specific ways we choose to live out our days. It’s about rejecting the myth that every day is a new opportunity to prove our worth, and about the truth that our worth is inherent, given by God, not earned by our hustling.

It’s about learning to show up and let ourselves be seen just as we are, massively imperfect and weak and wild and flawed in a thousand ways, but still worth loving. It’s about realizing that what makes our lives meaningful is not what we accomplish, but how deeply and honestly we connect with the people in our lives, how wholly we give ourselves to the making of a better world, through kindness and courage.⁴

A person living in the present becomes keenly aware of the untapped potential available in everyday, *extraordinary-ordinary* moments. In marriage, these one-of-a-kind moments become invitations for couples to celebrate life and advance in intimacy with God—and with each other. After working with couples for many decades, we’ve observed that as husbands and wives look back over their lives, the small (*ordinary*) things were really the big (*extraordinary*) things.

IN THE BEGINNING

When we teach about marriage, we believe the best place to begin is to look at marriage *in the beginning*. Imagine what it was like in paradise for Adam and Eve before sin entered their world. The text reads, “The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”⁵ To be naked means “not covered by clothing,”⁶ and to be unashamed means “being without guilt, self-consciousness, or doubt.”⁷ Not long ago our grandson slipped away during a diaper change. Naked without shame, he ran around the house in his birthday suit—a picture of innocence, freedom, and joy.

In marriage, couples are invited to experience a taste of what it meant to be *naked without shame*.⁸ However, physical nakedness is the easy part. Couples who understand emotional intimacy are willing to take off more than their clothes. *In the beginning*—before sin entered the world—the man and woman enjoyed a life without shame, blame, fear, or control.⁹ The first married couple had no reason to fear, hide, or cover themselves. As the Bible declares, things were *very good*.¹⁰

Let’s look at God’s pattern for marriage a bit more carefully. Throughout most of recorded history when a woman married she left her family and spent her entire life obeying her husband and serving him and his family. It is interesting to note, however, that before sin, God commanded the *man* to leave his most significant relationships, his father and mother, and cleave to his wife. Cleaving involves a husband giving himself totally to his bride. In other words, they are bound together so tightly that no other relationship can get between them.

Reviewing the Creation story, God repeatedly described the things He created as “good.”¹¹ However, the first time God declared something “not good” was when He described the man’s “not-good” condition of aloneness. To remedy man’s not-good condition, God created woman—*ezer*.¹² The term *ezer* is often misinterpreted to mean the woman was created to be the man’s *helper*, similar to a worker being a *helper* to a boss.

However, *ezer* is a powerful term that does not mean inequality or female subordination. Throughout Scripture, *ezer* is used to describe *God* as a rescuer, strength, power, and military protector.¹³ It's interesting that the first recorded rescue in the Bible was the woman—*ezer*—rescuing the man from his not-good condition of aloneness.¹⁴ Remember, God created man and woman as functional equals. He commanded *both* of them to exercise dominion and extend community—be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it.¹⁵

Therefore, “leaving and cleaving” invites a couple to advance in emotional intimacy, which sets the stage for sexual intimacy—becoming “one flesh”—and celebrating being *naked without shame*. The good news is, God's naked-and-not-ashamed¹⁶ principles that the first married couple enjoyed are still available to married couples today.

In marriage, a husband and wife enter into covenant with God, their spouse, and *become one* in spirit, soul, and body. God commands every married couple to “become one flesh.” This command refers directly to sexual intercourse. There is so much symbolism in the sexual act in marriage. God created the husband in a unique way so that his reproductive organs are outside his body. His maleness leads out toward his wife, who is also created in a unique way. The wife's reproductive organs are inside her body, and her womb is an intimate, life-giving part of her femaleness. The wife's heart, mind, spirit, soul, and body provide the invitation, which leads to increased levels of excitement. And this excitement enables the husband to enter the wife's body and deposit his life-giving seed into her womb. To “become one flesh” involves the joining of two spirits, two souls, and two bodies.

GOD'S PURPOSES FOR SEXUAL INTIMACY

Pause for a moment and consider your answer to this question: “Why did God create marital sex?” We believe God designed marital sex for five primary purposes:

1. Marital Sex Is for Celebration.

The first thing we learn about humankind from the Creation story is that every man and woman is made in God’s image.¹⁷ Every human has both masculine and feminine characteristics. God’s original marriage design includes one man and one woman. God invites every husband and wife to walk in unity and mutuality as they celebrate the diversity of their creational design. All of this is to be experienced within the permanence and exclusivity of marriage. Living out a healthy marital sex life that includes experiencing emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and orgasm has limitless potential for spouses to grow in intimacy—in knowing and being fully known.

The Bible says, “Whatever you do in word or deed, do *all* in the name of the Lord Jesus.”¹⁸ *All* includes sexual intimacy. Therefore, for Christ followers, becoming reciprocal servants and celebrating emotional and sexual intimacy can become acts of worship toward God—the Creator of emotional and sexual intimacy.

Have you ever thought of sexual intimacy in marriage as an act of worship? If this is a new concept to you, please understand that we are not worshipping sexual intimacy, we are worshipping the God who created spiritual, emotional, and sexual intimacy. Bottom line, marital sex is an invitation for couples to love, serve, and enjoy each other—as *together*, they rejoice in being *naked without shame*.

2. Marital Sex Is for Procreation.

Beginning with the first married couple, God commanded the husband and wife to reproduce—to “be fruitful and multiply.”¹⁹ Every person has immeasurable value because he or she is made in God’s image. In marriage, having children provides opportunities to reproduce—to expand community—and teach children godly, life-giving values that can be passed on to future generations.

However, keep in mind that being fruitful and multiplying is not limited to having biological children. It also includes adoption, foster parenting, and spiritual parenting. Nevertheless, although fatherhood and motherhood are extremely important, a person’s highest calling (married or single) is to love God with all his or her heart, soul, mind, and strength.²⁰

3. Marital Sex Is for Pleasure.

Despite what you may have heard to the contrary, *God is pro-sex* and propleasure. His desire is for married couples to celebrate each other and enjoy a mutually satisfying sex life. Unfortunately, advancing in passion, longing, and intimacy—in knowing and being fully known—has become somewhat of a lost art in our self-focused, “we want it all and we want it now” culture.

Remember, advancing in marital intimacy, growing in desire and delight, includes an invitation to experience deep pleasure, emotionally and physically through sexual intimacy. In marriage, God invites a husband and wife to “eat ... drink and imbibe deeply.”²¹

4. Marital Sex Is for Comfort.

After the death of David and Bathsheba’s son, the Bible says, “Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her.”²² Life and marriage are difficult. We live in a season of history that includes inordinate amounts of stress, shame, fear, and anxiety. During difficult times in marriage, providing comfort through sexual expression can be a gift from God—through a husband or wife—to a spouse. Pain, loss, and

crises can become invitations for couples to step into the Larger Story, where *God* (not *self*) is the main character, and advance together in love and intimacy. Strengthening marital bonds by serving a spouse emotionally and sexually in difficult times can help to release negative energy, relieve stress, and bring comfort and healing.

5. Marital Sex Is for Protection.

Sexual intimacy creates a strong bond between a husband and wife, a bond that helps protect the marriage relationship. In our experience, couples who enjoy a healthy sexual relationship feel more connected spiritually, emotionally, and physically. In addition, they are more joyful and hopeful about their marriage. The apostle Paul wrote about how a healthy sexual relationship can help to resist Satan's temptation:

The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.²³

Loving and serving a spouse by fulfilling a sexual duty does not sound very romantic. After forty years of marriage, our position is that instead of viewing this command as an *obstacle*, we reframe it as an *opportunity*. It is an opportunity to model unconditional love and live in the Larger Story where *God* is the main character and "it's not about me." The couple leaves behind living in the smaller story where *self* is the main character and "it's all about me." As a wife and husband, we don't *have to* choose reciprocal servanthood and focus on each other's sexual needs and desires. Instead, by God's grace, we *get to*. (In chapter 14 we will explain more about spouses fulfilling their sexual duties.)

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God is pro-sex! He designed sex in marriage for **celebration, procreation, pleasure, comfort, and protection**. All of these aspects of marital sex are to be expressed in love and honor: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled.”²⁴ *Honor* includes “personal integrity; respect; dignity,”²⁵ while *defiled* means “to make something dirty or polluted.”²⁶

Unfortunately, the intimacy and sexual dimension in many marriages is far from what God intended. We have found that husbands and wives who focus most of their efforts solely on penis-vagina intercourse and orgasm miss all that God has intended for marriage. Certainly orgasms are important, but the key to a life-long, exhilarating sex life includes passionately pursuing a spouse’s spirit, heart, mind, soul, and body. As we have said, we love God’s description of the first married couple: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”²⁷ Oneness in marriage is multifaceted: SPIRIT oneness includes understanding your true identity—that you are a beloved daughter or son of a good God. Spiritual nakedness involves a choice to **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*) and include God in everything. SOUL oneness relates to emotional nakedness and includes a spouse removing emotional “fig leaves” from his or her heart, mind, and soul. This becomes the pathway for couples to celebrate BODY oneness—celebrating physical nakedness, sexual intimacy, and orgasm. SPIRIT–SOUL–BODY oneness is essential to walking out the miracle and mystery of a husband and wife *becoming one*, and *together* celebrating being *naked without shame*.

WHAT IF?

When a person begins a sentence with *What if?* it is usually linked to a fear-based thought. For example: *What if my marriage troubles are never resolved? What if we fall out of love like so many couples we know? What if we fail? What if ... ?*

Instead of approaching marriage from a *What if?* perspective based in fear, we challenge husbands and wives to consider *What if?* from a positive, life-giving standpoint. For example: *What if we as a couple understood the power and protection within the covenant of marriage? What if we learned how to passionately embrace and celebrate our differences? What if we lived in the Larger Story with God as the main character, and focused on unconditionally loving our spouse? What if we as husbands and wives viewed spiritual, emotional, and sexual intimacy as acts of worship and warfare?*

CHAPTER 2

PROCESSING THE PAST: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF SEXUAL HISTORIES

Life is lived in a story

anne

I counseled a young married woman who was experiencing sexual problems. She described how her mind often drifted to her “first love” while she was making love with her husband. We spent some time looking at her sexual history. She confessed:

This may sound crazy, but when I think about my first love, I can still get goose bumps. We met in high school, and the energy between us was almost electric. I was a good Christian girl who never thought of myself as overly romantic, but I felt like I totally fell in love. And after we said “I love you” to each other, our sexual intimacy progressed rapidly. In a matter of a few months, we went from holding hands and kissing to stimulating each other to orgasm and performing oral sex on each other. Looking back, I know this sounds crazy, but I truly sensed

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he was “the one” for me. And as Christians, we felt that as long as we did not have actual penis-vagina intercourse we’d still be virgins. When he broke up with me during my senior year, I was devastated, and that led me into all sorts of bad decisions and destructive relationships.

This impressionable young woman, who progressed very rapidly through steps of intimacy, was experiencing the negative effects of her unhealed and unprocessed sexual history. And this was negatively impacting her current relationship with her husband.

SEXUAL HISTORIES AND SEXUAL IMPRINTING

Every person has a sexual history and enters marriage with experiences that make up a sexual history. A person's sexual history often begins with their earliest sexual memory. For some people, that first sexual memory is hearing someone else talk about sex. Of course, hearing about sex from a parent you love and trust is much different from hearing about sex from friends at school. For others, that earliest sexual memory is rooted in a distorted view of sex that includes shame, blame, fear, control, rebellion, or rejection. Or they may have experienced a highly toxic religious environment, some form of abuse, or another experience that negatively impacted their understanding of God's design and purposes for sexual intimacy.

Every time a man or woman is impacted sexually by a person or experience—whether positively or negatively—it can have a lasting effect on what they believe about intimacy and sexuality. This involves a process called sexual imprinting. For example, a person experiences sexual imprinting when he or she initially hears about sex, gives/receives the first kiss, or has other sexual experiences. Further imprinting can occur through visual stimulation or negative sinful lust that often includes pornography, sinful masturbation, and experiencing orgasm. Sexual imprinting develops a pattern for what a person will often anticipate in future sexual experiences.

Remember, positive or negative sexual imprinting impacts individuals' lives and influences their attitudes and beliefs about sex. It becomes a part of their story and affects how they view God, themselves, a spouse, and others. Unprocessed, negative sexual imprinting from the past can dramatically affect a person's sexual perceptions and behaviors. For some, their memories are enjoyable. For others, their memories are so painful they have never talked about their sexual history with anyone—not even with their spouse.

TOXIC RELIGIOUS PURITY CULTURE

Working with couples for decades, we believe it would be wise for Christians to revisit what can often become a toxic religious purity culture. Instead of rejecting the concept of dating, we support giving dating a try. Dating couples can explore healthy steps of intimacy that include specific boundaries that couples' process together and agree to honor. Furthermore, it is important for couples who are dating not to confuse sexual excitement with true intimacy, covenant, and lifelong commitment.

Our challenge to parents is from an early age to initiate with their children healthy conversations about emotional and sexual intimacy from a place of *care*—rather than from *scare*. Young adults will make mistakes—everyone will. Therefore, it is wise to be more concerned about a person's heart than about his or her specific sexual decisions and behaviors. Every person should be taught that *God is pro-sex*. He designed marriage with specific purpose, because engaging in progressive steps of intimacy¹ imprints a person's spirit, soul, and body.

It is important to remind young adults that their true identities can be based on the truth that they are a beloved son or daughter of a good God, not on the unwise decisions that every person makes. Teach them that a part of growing up includes putting away childish things.² This involves taking ownership and responsibility and making life choices that involve giving up *other* life choices.

Young adults who have not guarded their hearts and bodies or who have engaged in advanced sexual experimentation including intercourse need to be reminded that they are much more than their virginity. Teach them the lifelong benefits of understanding forgiveness. This includes receiving forgiveness from God, forgiving others, and forgiving themselves. Explain the blessings and benefits in abstinence. Cast vision for what a great, married sex life looks like. And with regard to a person being “the one,” we believe when a husband and wife enter into covenant with God and each other, and say “I do,” the person they say those words to becomes “the one.”

Life is lived in a story

anne

I met with a woman who was filing for divorce after less than two years of marriage. She felt as if her world were collapsing. Her feelings about sex were so negative that she knew she needed help. At our first meeting, she confessed to being unwilling to engage in sex with her husband. Since sexual imprinting has an incredible impact on how a person views sex, I began by reviewing her sexual history. She said she was a virgin when she got married. As she relayed stories about her past, I noticed she placed a great deal of emphasis on her virginity.

As we continued to process her sexual history, it became obvious to me that she avoided talking about a certain season in her life. Over time, she revealed that as a young girl a family member had sexually abused her. Growing up in a strict Christian home, this negative sexual imprinting devastated her. She tried to minimize her pain by denying what happened. She learned to control her shame by becoming a peak performer and a perfectionist. Her physical and emotional boundaries were rigid and rooted in fear. Instead of providing her with freedom, these boundaries provided a false sense of security that allowed her to remain distant and self-protected. They also kept her from dealing with her unhealed trauma.

Once in her thirties, the desire to marry and begin a family became greater than her fear of intimacy. She got married and her unresolved pain soon began to surface. Engaging in sexual intimacy with her husband triggered her anxiety so deeply it became paralyzing. Her inability to fully participate in sex with the freedom and joy God intended only added to her shame. And this became an obstacle that ended up destroying her marriage.

This young woman began to understand how negative sexual imprinting had influenced every relationship in her life. As she opened her heart to healing, she began to better understand God's design for intimacy and sexuality. And over time she experienced levels of freedom she never imagined possible.

PROCESSING YOUR SEXUAL HISTORY

Obviously, sexual imprinting and sexual histories are not always negative. While we all live with the consequences of sin, countless people have experienced positive sexual imprinting. Many children were taught about God's design for marriage and the importance of honoring, respecting, and protecting their bodies, minds, and emotions from unhealthy emotional and sexual experiences. Many young adults experienced the joys in dating and relating to a boyfriend or girlfriend in healthy and Godhonorating ways. They learned to view others—males and females—not so much as sexual beings but as men and women made in God's image.

In our counseling ministry, we have worked with people who experienced positive sexual imprinting as well as others who were dealing with negative consequences of a sinful sexual past or sexual abuse. In our experience, if individuals' sexual histories are filled with shame or pain, they can repress or deny the impact this can have on their lives. In their mind they often attempt to avoid the reality of the past, and this can become a denial-like coping mechanism for something they believe is unredeemable.

People who have not processed their sexual histories often struggle with self-condemning thoughts that play over and over in their minds. Others wrestle with the destructive cycles of shame-blame-fear-control and control-rebellion-rejection. They often may secretly wonder: *What if someone knew the truth about who I believe I am? What if someone knew about my sexual past? What if someone knew about what's been done to me?*

One woman we counseled said:

Sometimes I feel like I am punishing myself for my past. I really believe God has forgiven me. The problem is I can't seem to forgive myself. At times, I hold back sexually and don't give myself permission to really enjoy sex; other times I control in all different ways. My condemning thoughts are

like a self-imposed form of penance—nothing seems to take away my shame.

Remember, sex is more than a physical act. It involves a person's spirit, soul, and body. Therefore, sexual imprinting and sexual histories will influence a person's perceptions, behaviors, and belief systems. Taking time to process how past experiences have shaped your expectations and perspectives about sex, as well as your spouse's, is essential to advancing in intimacy and fully enjoying God's design for sexual intimacy.

There is no detailed formula for processing one's sexual history. As much as people want "specific steps," we believe it is better to offer principles. Therefore, the wisest counsel we can give is to point people to God and encourage them to always first **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*). The Bible says, "True wisdom and power are found in God; counsel and understanding are his."³ Principles we suggest include:

Principle 1: Every person is unique.

Each person's sexual history and sexual imprinting will be different. And how people process those realities can vary from person to person. The reality is some people are more sensitive than others.

Principle 2: Trust is always built on truth.

In our experience, the Enemy uses a few similar strategies in his attempts to destroy God's design for intimacy and sexuality. For example, he tries to sway people who do not want to engage in sex before marriage by introducing deceiving thoughts, such as *Everyone is doing it ... you're in a committed relationship ... just go for it. Sinning sexually is only penis-vagina intercourse—everything else is okay ... come on, what's the big deal?* The good news is that once lies are uncovered they can be exchanged for God's truths. Processing your sexual history can be an opportunity to embrace truth and build trust with God and with your spouse.

Principle 3: Commitment is foundational to total honesty.

We live in a world where people tend to either share too much or choose to hide and never share their stories. We encourage people to carefully choose who they share their stories with, especially their sexual histories.

Remember, after the first sin, the man and woman sewed fig leaves to cover themselves. This was their attempt to create a layer between themselves and God, as well as between each other. Likewise, often with a well-intentioned desire to remove emotional “fig leaves,” people mistakenly conclude that complete disclosure will provide deep levels of acceptance and love from others. As a general principle, we agree with Psychologist Larry Crabb’s comment, “Total openness without total commitment is not the answer to the problem of layered relationships.”⁴ With an inordinate desire for increased intimacy, people often place a higher value on total openness instead of first focusing on total commitment.

Life is lived in a story

tim

When the two of us were in our early twenties, we decided to join a small group. We had never been in a Bible study before. In fact, we had never read the Bible. So we were feeling a bit uncertain as we walked into a couple's home for the first time one Sunday evening and joined a group of "born-again" Christians.

As the meeting started we noticed a folder in front of us. It contained a list of icebreaker questions: *Where do you live? Why did you decide to be a part of this group? Are you married? Do you have children? If so, how many? What are their names and ages? Who is the most important person in your life and why?* After the leader gave a brief introduction, we were asked to take turns introducing ourselves to the group by choosing a few of the questions and sharing our answers.

As this exercise began, we noticed that people were offering much more information than they originally had been asked to share. It was not long before we began hearing stories of abuse and struggles with addictions. We weren't used to hearing such personal information shared so openly in a room of total strangers. Being new to the group, I was confused by the direction the icebreakers were taking. People shared stories that I thought they should have taken to their grave. It felt as if Anne and I were trapped in a bad episode of *The Jerry Springer Show*. Instead of "breaking the ice," the exercise actually had the opposite effect. I could feel myself emotionally withdrawing. As a young newlywed I wondered, *What have I gotten into?* When it was my turn, I decided to stick with simple responses to the basic questions on the sheet. Looking back, our answers seemed to pale in comparison with what others shared.

We tell this story to illustrate a point. Growing in intimacy with God and others takes time. There are no shortcuts. In fact, the decision to prematurely disclose personal information without any commitment can often block intimacy with others. In processing your personal histories, first **I.O.T.L.** Next, make sure you and your spouse both have "green lights"

about sharing certain information. Then choose to share it with someone who is committed to you.

Follow the example of Jesus, who grounds every relationship in commitment. His life, death, and life-giving resurrection represent His commitment to you. His unselfish acts of love invite people to trust Him. Jesus never barges into a person's life, unrighteously judging, interrogating, or demanding a public confession. Instead, He creates an environment of safety and security where people can enter into relationship with Him. It is through relationship with God that we find unconditional love, grace, and forgiveness. And this opens the door to increased intimacy with God, yourself, your spouse, and others.

The Bible reminds believers, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it *flow* the springs of life."⁵ One way to guard your heart is by choosing godly, trustworthy people who are committed to walking with you as you process your sexual histories. For some, that person may be a professional Christian counselor. For others, it may be a wise and trusted pastor or friend who is a good listener. Remember, sharing the secrets and intimacies of the heart prematurely with the wrong people can lead to greater levels of pain and confusion.

We have witnessed God's healing during powerful public testimonies. However, we encourage people to begin the process of disclosing intimate details of their lives first with the Lord, then a counselor if necessary, next with their spouse, and finally with trusted friends—*before* they decide to go public.

MOVING TOWARD LOVE, FORGIVENESS, AND ACCEPTANCE

The Enemy knows the power of sexual intimacy. He knows that men and women are created as sexual beings. With this knowledge he strategically looks for ways to distort a person's understanding. Some of his strategies include misogyny, sexism, objectification of women, pornography, promiscuity, emotional and sexual pain, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), abortion, abuse, and other things that can leave a negative sexual imprint. These experiences affect a person physically, emotionally, and sexually. They can block men and women from celebrating the sexual freedom God intended for marriage. That is why it is important for couples to understand the importance of processing their sexual histories in healthy ways.

We want to emphasize that there is no detailed, step-by-step formula for processing sexual histories. Following godly principles and listening to the Holy Spirit are better than relying on programs or specific steps. Even the best counselors see only part of a person's story, but the Lord sees the heart.⁶ However, our experience is that incorporating the following principles can help you advance in love, forgiveness, and acceptance— first with God, then yourself, your spouse, and others.

- + Always begin with prayer (**I.O.T.L.**).
- + Invite and listen to the counsel of the Holy Spirit. “The

Holy Spirit ... He will teach you all things.”⁷

- + Study Scripture. Ask the Lord to teach you about His purposes for emotional and sexual intimacy.

- + Grow in understanding forgiveness. Those who have not received forgiveness from the Lord will find it difficult to forgive themselves or others.

- + Take time to process; don't rush—healing takes time. +Involve other

mature Christians, and if needed seek professional Christian counsel.

Furthermore, while it's important for couples to speak truth in love and to appropriately share their sexual histories, we do not recommend discussing specific details. In our experience, a spouse will not benefit from having this information. Instead, sexual details fill their mind with thoughts and images they inevitably regret having. Disclosure of specific actions can become an obstacle to advancing in emotional and sexual intimacy. Remember, the goal is not to wallow in any negativity of the past but to expose it to God's forgiveness and healing touch. We encourage you to move forward in processing your sexual histories and any negative sexual imprinting so that, rather than becoming a potential *obstacle* in your marriage, it can become an *opportunity* to grow in understanding your true identity—that you are God's beloved daughter or son—and experience the love, compassion, grace, and goodness of God. In the next chapter, we will look at specific ways to break free from negative connections to your sexual pasts.

CHAPTER 3

SOUL TIES: BREAKING UNGODLY BONDS

God designed people to live in community with others. He created men and women to enjoy a full spectrum of relationships, including the husband-wife relationship, the parent-child relationship, the relationship between friends, and God-centered relationships among members of the Church.¹ When guided by love and godly principles, these relationships are good. However, since the first sin, the Enemy has distorted God's original design for relationships by questioning God's goodness and then offering counterfeits.

Healthy relationships create attachments that can be referred to as *godly bonds* or *godly soul ties*. Sinful and unhealthy relationships can create attachments that can be called *ungodly bonds* or *ungodly soul ties*. These terms are not specifically found in the Bible; they are similar but different. For example, an individual can have a *soul tie* with someone who has a soul, and they can have a potential *ungodly bond* with an organization that does *not* have a soul, e.g., a college fraternity/sorority, professional/fraternal organizations or secret societies. These bonds can be sexual or nonsexual in nature.

Often 1 Corinthians 6:15-16 is used to describe the one-flesh principle involved when a person unites sexually with another person and this results in a *soul tie*. Dr. Chester and Betsy Kylstra define soul ties this way:

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Soul Ties are an ungodly covenant with another person, organization, or thing based on an unhealthy emotional and/or sexual relationships/attachment. This covenant binds the two people together or it

binds a person to an organization or thing. God honors, or recognizes, these covenants. He leaves each one of us free to decide when and if we will appropriate His provisions to break/cut the ties and release ourself from the attachment or the other person. The other person is also set free in the process.²

We are warned against ungodly relationships throughout the Scriptures. Ungodly soul ties and bonds can block intimacy with God, a spouse, and others. Here are a few ways the Enemy distorts God's original design for relationships:

- + Fornication—a sexual relationship between two people who are not married to each other or anyone else
- + Adultery—a sexual relationship between two people where at least one person is married to someone else
- + Physically, emotionally, and/or verbally abusive relationships
- + Unhealthy parent-child relationships—parents who do not release their children into adulthood in a healthy manner, parents who are overly involved in their adult child's life, parents who block a child from cleaving to his or her spouse, children who are unable to live independently from their parents, or any unhealthy, codependent parentchild attachments
- + Unhealthy counseling relationships—an inappropriate bond between a counselor and client, any behavior by a person in a position of trust that results in an unhealthy dependence or attachment
- + Unhealthy friendships—relationships where one or more participants exhibit control, manipulation, exploitive behavior, unnatural affection, guilt, envy, enmeshment, or codependence
- + Sexual abuse

HOPE FOR SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS

Tragically, the number of men and woman who have experienced sexual abuse is increasing each day. Recent statistics report that approximately every two minutes someone in the United States is sexually assaulted.³ What kind of impact do these assaults produce? Sexual-assault victims are three times more likely to suffer from depression, six times more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, thirteen times more likely to abuse alcohol, twenty-six times more likely to abuse drugs, and four times more likely to contemplate suicide.⁴

Sexual abuse is both a sin and a crime that can carry an almost immeasurable impact for the abused individual. As we have noted before, sexual activity not only touches a person's body but also leaves an imprint on the spirit and soul. Thus, any form of sexual abuse can significantly affect how a person views God, self, and others.

Dan B. Allender, PhD, has devoted years of practice to the study and healing of those recovering from the “soul-deadening” impact of abuse. His work with abuse survivors has given hope and help to countless people. He reassures victims that they can experience freedom from the shame of past abuse. Allender underscores this message by proclaiming, “What occurred is not your fault!”⁵ He goes on to observe, “The damage of past abuse sets in motion a complex scheme of self-protective defenses that operate largely outside of our awareness, guiding our interactions with others, determining the spouse we select, the jobs we pursue, the theologies we embrace, and the fabric of our entire lives.”⁶ So because of its far-reaching effects, sexual abuse—all abuse—is never to be dismissed, denied, or hyper-spiritualized.

Therefore, as we continue to explore the subject of soul ties, it is important to make a clear distinction: Unlike other ungodly soul ties, sexual abuse is a crime committed by a perpetrator—often a predator—against an innocent person who is no more responsible for that crime than any other crime. The

only person responsible for abusing another human being is the abuser—never the person abused. *This is why we do not consider sexual abuse soul ties to be the same as ungodly soul ties formed by individuals who have knowingly and willingly participated in sexual activities.* We absolutely do not want to project any shame on a person who was abused or imply that the abuse was in any way their fault.

In Christian circles, a person is sometimes encouraged to overcome the effects of abuse by simply deciding to put the past behind and move on. While this may appear to some to be noble, in our experience this approach can diminish the tragic reality of such crimes.

In the next few pages, we will discuss the process of breaking ungodly soul ties and bonds. This is an important step for anyone whose sexual history includes negative elements. However, it is only one part of a person's journey toward freedom and wholeness.

THE POWER OF SEXUAL BONDS

It is important to emphasize that sexual sin is not worse than other sins. Jesus had much stronger words for those who committed sins of pride, idolatry, lack of forgiveness, religiosity, and unrighteous judgment than He had for those who committed sexual sins. In fact, as we see in the stories of the woman caught in adultery, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the prostitute, Jesus confronted leaders who self-righteously judged a woman caught in sexual sin.⁷ He said, “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone.”⁸

However, Jesus never ignored, accepted, or condoned sexual sins. With love and grace, He spoke to a woman who sinned, saying, “I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.”⁹ So while sexual sins are not more corrupt than other sins, the consequences are often worse. This is why the Bible makes a distinction between sexual sins and every other sin. “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body.”¹⁰ Sexual sins can result in shame, sexually transmitted diseases, betrayal, unwanted pregnancy, children born out of wedlock, abortion, broken relationships, and broken hearts. These consequences often leave lasting wounds that lead to mistrust, shame, blame, fear, control, rejection, and rebellion.

Life is lived in a story

anne

A woman I counseled explained that she had no one she could talk with about the problems she was experiencing in her marriage. She was in her thirties and had been married about a year. What she loved about her relationship with her husband was their ability to be honest with each other. She said, “There isn’t anything we can’t talk about—except this.”

Prior to getting married, they had freely discussed their sexual histories. The woman told me that she and her husband had each had several sexual partners before they met and married. She continued, “Almost every time my husband and I make love, I have images in my mind of people other than him. Some are past sexual partners, others are just fantasy. My thought life feels like it’s out of my control. I love my husband very much, and I guess I am feeling like I’m being unfaithful to him with my thought life. But I can’t seem to control it.”

Couples often share about struggling with fantasies or sexual images of another person while they are having sex with their spouse. They describe their mind as a movie theater that plays the same films over and over. This distraction during lovemaking can block a person from bonding with his or her spouse. When we review sexual histories, they often reveal ungodly bonds with previous sexual partners or exposure to pornography.

We cannot emphasize enough that sexual intercourse is much more than a physical act. When a person sexually joins with another person, the two become part of each other. The Bible describes this bond as becoming “one flesh.” In marriage, a husband and wife are commanded to “become one flesh”; this results in a godly soul tie and a powerful bond. However, engaging in sexual activities outside of marriage, in all the ways we refer to these—heavy petting, masturbating a person to orgasm, oral stimulation, oral sex, anal sex, and intercourse—all involve a person’s spirit, soul, body—and can result in ungodly soul ties and bonds. God designed sexual activities, especially sexual intercourse, to be so powerful that those affect a person emotionally and physically. Sexual activities produce a connection

between two people. This strong attachment, or bond, is part of the glue that holds a marriage together.

The presence of ungodly soul ties and bonds can block couples from advancing in intimacy. The Bible is clear: “Those who marry will face troubles.”¹¹ Throughout decades of counseling, we have found that *every* couple experiences struggles within marriage. And when ungodly soul ties, bonds, and attachments are present, those often lead to guilt, shame, fear, control, rebellion, and regret. And these feelings can make it difficult for a couple to fully enjoy spirit, soul, and body oneness.

Life is lived in a story

anne

Some time ago, Tim and I were leading a REAL LIFE Marriage Advance seminar in the Midwest. The participants were primarily young professionals who had been married five to ten years, and most couples attending were new Christians. Knowing this, we had decided not to teach on soul ties, believing this concept might be too advanced for this audience. We agreed to place a stronger focus on communication and conflict management.

However, at every seminar Tim and I **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*), and invite the Holy Spirit to direct the focus of our teaching. As a result, we often deviate from our teaching notes. The weekend seminar was going great. The group was attentive and eager to learn. At some point during the sexuality session, I sensed the Holy Spirit wanted us to change direction and include the teaching on ungodly sexual soul ties and bonds.

I began to explain what the Bible says about two people becoming one when they engage in sex. We talked about the potential consequences of prior sexual relationships and how they can negatively affect a marriage. As the teaching ended, we encouraged the participants to go back to their rooms and spend some time with the Lord. We suggested they ask the Lord for forgiveness from any past sexual sins and break any ungodly soul ties and bonds. The couples left quietly.

The following day, everyone returned for our closing session, which is always one of our favorite parts of a REAL LIFE seminar. Each couple has an opportunity to restate their vows. As they exchange their wedding rings again, they ask each other, “Will you choose me again today to be your spouse?” Couples kiss as a symbol of their desire to breathe new life into one another. After the renewal of vows, we have a celebration that includes wedding cake.

During this time, we always open the microphone for personal testimonies. Couples are invited to come up and thank God for what He has done in their hearts and marriage throughout the weekend. We call this time a “Say-So,”

drawing on the words of Psalm 107, which reminds us to “let the redeemed of the Lord say so.”¹² Hearing men and women give God thanks and praise is a great way to end the weekend.

At this marriage gathering, Tim and I looked at each other in surprise as the first attendee approached the microphone. We recognized her as a woman who had been sitting in the front row. Throughout the weekend her arms were crossed and she gave very little eye contact.

Now, as this woman stood at the microphone, with her husband by her side, she seemed to be holding back tears. Her long, pregnant pause quieted the room. Then she spoke, “I really didn’t want to be here this weekend. I have been to so many marriage seminars. I didn’t think I was going to hear anything new. Many of you have known my husband, our children, and me for a long time. What you do not know is this is my second husband.”

She continued, “There is something else you do not know about me.” Here she paused and took a deep breath. “I was sexually abused by my father and grandfather from the age of three to fourteen. After graduating from high school, I left home. In fact, I ran away from home and into a marriage. I thought my husband would give me the love I was so desperately missing. But my sexual abuse had a toxic effect on my life. After I got married, sex was repulsive to me. After years of struggling, my husband finally just left. He said he couldn’t stay in a marriage where there was no sexual intimacy.”

She began to weep, and her husband put his arm around her. Composing herself, she continued:

A few years after my divorce, God brought this man into my life. He is my soul mate. He has stood by me. He has taken me to counselors and medical doctors. I’ve attended prayer meetings where they prayed over me. I’ve memorized Bible verses and have done whatever else I thought would help. But whatever I did, the visual images of my dad and grandfather continued to haunt me.

To be honest, I didn’t want to attend this Marriage Advance. I didn’t think I could hear one more thing about God’s wonderful design for sex. My sexuality was destroyed as a child, and I have never been able to recover it.

Until this weekend, I'd never heard teaching on soul ties and ungodly bonds. After yesterday's session ended, my husband and I went to our room and reviewed our notes. We knelt down together as I prayed a simple prayer. In faith, I asked God to forgive me for blaming myself and taking responsibility for what I had no control over. I asked God to break any ungodly soul ties or bonds that had formed between my father, my grandfather, and me. And only by the grace of God, I asked God to help me forgive my dad and my grandfather.

When my prayer ended there were no lights or sirens, but something seemed different. I felt a sense of freedom that I have never felt before. I'm not saying it's all better and I'm completely healed. I don't even pretend to understand it all. But I want to tell you that last night I made love with my husband without horrible memories of my father and grandfather. I thank God for leading me into greater freedom by teaching me how to break ungodly soul ties and bonds. I have hope ... and a renewed faith in God.

As she finished speaking, the room was completely silent. The presence of God was so evident. The couple quietly walked back to their seats and sat down. No one stirred, some were weeping quietly. Then another woman came to the microphone with a story of sexual abuse. Then another couple came forward, and then another. People began confessing their inability to forgive themselves and others.

No one wanted to leave the auditorium that night—we all lingered in the room together. Some were praying, some were huddled in small groups; others were sitting together and holding each other. We witnessed more healing and breakthroughs in two or three hours than we ever could have imagined. Only God could have orchestrated that night. He began by breaking through the heart of one brave woman and inviting her to trust Him. Somehow, He gave her the grace and strength to forgive her abusers. In faith, she asked the Lord to break any ungodly soul ties with her abusers and to replace them with an increased intimacy with God and with her husband.

As Tim and I headed home, this verse came to mind: "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."¹³ Outwardly, this group of men and women

looked so together. We thought the woman in the front row was bored with the teaching. We thought this group was too immature to learn about ungodly bonds and soul ties. And when we introduced the Say-So, we encouraged those in attendance to be cautious about sharing intimate parts of their stories with a large group since many were strangers. Fortunately, we weren't leading this seminar; the Holy Spirit was. And He redirected our teaching and invited many to trust Him. We drove home thanking the Holy Spirit.

ARE UNGODLY SOUL TIES AND BONDS FOR REAL?

We don't typically hear about soul ties or ungodly bonds in most churches. In fact, in our first twenty-plus years of ministry, we never heard the concept taught at any marriage conference. Yet we've found that many people struggle with this issue. A fellow counselor recently phoned to have a conversation about the benefits her clients were experiencing as they broke ungodly soul ties and bonds. Such feedback encourages us to continue sharing this practical teaching, with a desire that it helps men and women experience healing and freedom.

We recognize, however, that many people are skeptical about or question the existence of soul ties and ungodly bonds—and we understand. As Christ-followers, we spent decades loving God, praying, reading our Bibles, memorizing Scripture, and serving others. In fact, there was a time when we confidently, at times self-righteously, declared, “If it's not in my Bible, I don't believe it!” However, we no longer claim that. *Why?* Because the Bible does not address *everything* we encounter in our relationships with God and others. For example, “youth ministry” is not specifically mentioned in the Bible, yet the church in America has invested in youth ministry for decades. Furthermore, the term “Sunday worship” is not found in the Bible; even the words “Holy Bible” are not found in the Bible.

As we continue to be exposed to things we don't fully understand, we believe God cannot be kept in a box. As we listen to the Holy Spirit, hear people's stories, and witness the healing and breakthroughs people experience, we understand that there is much we do not know. The Bible affirms that conclusion: “We know in part.”¹⁴

As people continue to trust God more, however, they grow in their openness to receive new revelation, insights, and promptings from the Holy Spirit. Our real-life experience in following the Holy Spirit does not always make total sense to us, and we may not be able to connect every issue or situation to a specific Bible passage. However, we believe *the Holy Spirit will not*

lead us to do something that contradicts biblical principles. So in our ministry and personal lives, we continually ask, “Lord, does anything we are doing or are thinking about doing, go against the collective truths and principles in Your Word?”

As we minister, it is exciting for us to hear men and women describe the freedom, healing, and peace they experience as they break ungodly soul ties and bonds. And this encourages us to continue teaching these principles. All that is to say, if you are a pragmatic person who focuses on results, you may be asking questions like: *Does this really work? And, if so, what are the results?* We challenge you to talk to God right now—**I.O.T.L.**— and ask Him to show you if you have any soul ties (sexual or nonsexual) or ungodly bonds that need to be broken. If He invites you to take a step of faith, then prayerfully work through the next section on breaking any ungodly soul ties and bonds in your life—and see what happens.

HOW TO BREAK AN UNHEALTHY SOUL TIE OR BOND

Whether formed through sinful lust, sexual encounters (real or fantasy), unhealthy relationships, pornography, or entering an ungodly covenant with an organization, ungodly soul ties and bonds can undermine your efforts to advance in intimacy with your spouse until they are directly confronted and broken. How do you break them? Once again, there is no specific formula. If you are in relationship with God, **I.O.T.L.**, and simply talk to Him. Pour out your heart as David did in Psalm 142.

If ungodly soul ties and bonds are things you identify with, we encourage you to pray the following prayer:

Pray out loud: Father, in the Name of Jesus, I submit myself completely to You. I confess all of my emotional and sexual sins, as well as my ungodly Soul Ties. (*If your Soul Tie is with an ancestor, or if you see this sin and curse in your family line, also include: I confess my ancestor's sin of maintaining ungodly Soul Ties.*) I choose to forgive my ancestors and each person with whom I have an ungodly Soul Tie. I ask You, Lord, to forgive me for my sin that resulted in ungodly Soul Ties. Lord, I receive Your forgiveness. Thank You for forgiving me and cleansing me.

I choose to forgive myself for this involvement. I will no longer be angry at myself, hate myself, or punish myself.

Lord, I break my ungodly Soul Ties with _____. I release myself from him/her/it and I release him/her from me. As I do this, Lord, I pray that You would cause him/her to be all that You want him/her to be and that You would cause me to be all that You want me to be.

Lord, please cleanse my mind from all memories of ungodly unions so I am totally free to give myself to You and to my spouse.

I renounce and cancel the assignments of all evil spirits attempting to maintain these ungodly Soul Ties.

Lord, thank You for restoring my soul to wholeness. I choose to walk in holiness by Your grace. In the Name of Jesus Christ I pray. Amen.¹⁵

In regard to forgiveness, if you are an abuse survivor, you may want to pray, *Lord, I forgive myself for any ways that I have punished myself or believed that what happened to me was my fault; I receive Your forgiveness.* In addition, ask God for forgiveness if you were the abuser, perpetrator, or predator in any abusive sexual (or other) activity. If you violated any legal laws, involve the proper authorities. And remember to give thanks to God as you continue to walk in your true identity—the person God says you are. *“Thank You, Lord ... You are good ... and I believe that You are good to me.”*

Life is lived in a story

tim

A man approached us after a seminar saying, “I was in the military ... talk about ungodly soul ties. I can’t remember the number of women I’ve had sex with. Getting drunk and having sex was a way of life; it’s how I survived. How can I possibly break all those ungodly soul ties when I don’t even remember names?”

I reassured him that God not only knows names, He knows every detail of a person’s past. I encouraged this man to repent of all sexual sins, ask God to break any ungodly soul ties, and receive God’s forgiveness.

HONOR YOUR BODY

Sex is for celebration, procreation, pleasure, comfort, and protection. But the Enemy works nonstop trying to ruin healthy sexuality. He wants to destroy intimacy through sexual confusion, sexual sins, sinful lust, pornography, lies, and other distortions. If your sexual past feels like a heavy backpack, we bring good news. God is a good God, and He is much more powerful than the Enemy is. You can repent from past sins and begin a new chapter in your life.

Regardless of your sexual history, you can choose to take steps to grow in honoring your body. The Bible says, “Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”¹⁶ If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are the residence of an honored Guest—the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ Therefore, treat your body as a place of honor.

Honor includes respect, integrity, and strong moral character. Honor adheres to ethical principles. A person’s sexual reputation can be associated with honor. Therefore, how people treat themselves and others is an honor issue. In marriage, husbands and wives can make the choice to honor their own and their spouse’s bodies. Parents and spiritual moms and dads can model and teach children and the emerging generation the meaning and importance of healthy boundaries and honor in relationships. From an early age, children should be trained to honor their bodies. Honor is very important; it needs to be taught to men, women, married couples, families, churches, schools, and throughout our culture.

If you have honored your body by “guard[ing] your heart,”¹⁸ and you have taken ownership and responsibility by maintaining healthy boundaries, we thank God for the protection that has provided you. If you have dishonored your body in any way or if you are currently struggling with dishonoring your body, we encourage you to first **I.O.T.L.** The Holy Spirit may lead you—in His kindness—to repent.¹⁹ If necessary, break any ungodly soul ties and bonds, and turn away from unhealthy or sinful behaviors. Receive God’s forgiveness, forgive yourself, and then, if sin was involved, “go and

sin no more.”²⁰ And if you are a sexual abuse survivor, you have been sinned against—always remember that what happened to you was *not* your fault.

We have a word of encouragement for every reader: God is a God of restoration. He can make all things new. We have personally experienced His transforming power in our lives and have witnessed this in the hearts and lives of others.²¹ Be open to seeking professional Christian counsel to help you walk in deeper healing and wholeness. Do not settle for less than what God intended for you as His precious child. Growing in God’s love, grace, forgiveness, and in your true identity—who God says you are—brings healing and helps you advance in intimacy with God, your spouse, and others.

CHAPTER 4

PORNOGRAPHY

Our culture frequently offers counterfeit forms of intimacy to replace God’s original design, and one such imitation is pornography. Pornography can be defined as “the depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement.”¹ Obviously not all nudity is pornography. Museums exhibit great works of art with nudity. But when sexuality is displayed in unhealthy, immoral, or degrading ways, it can become destructive.

Engaging in pornography affects the heart, mind, and soul of a person. In a society that greatly emphasizes instant gratification and personal pleasure, pornography is an issue of growing concern. In a few decades, pornography has evolved from magazines and poorly made films to an industry that generates billions of dollars annually. “More money was spent on pornography in the United States last year than on tickets for all professional baseball, football, basketball, and hockey games combined.”² No longer must people endure the shame of patronizing adult bookstores. Instead, they can access pornography on mobile devices in the privacy of their homes and offices. Easy access and anonymity have enabled pornography to flourish—with what we believe are devastating results.

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The viewing of sexually explicit materials, especially in children, results in negative sexual imprinting.³ The images and physical experiences associated with pornography provide sexual stimulation that affects a person spiritually, emotionally, physically, and chemically. Through increased sexual excitement, stimulation, and orgasm, the body releases chemicals, creating a bond with the experience or image, which results in sexual imprinting.

We understand that some Christians (and non-Christians) believe that pornography in marriage is harmless as long as a couple mutually agrees. They claim it is a good way to spice up a boring sex life. And they contend that there is not a lot of credible scientific research that supports what, in their opinions, are often exaggerated, hyper-religious claims against pornography.

A popular Christian marriage blogger, Shelia Wray Gregoire, writes about pornography in her *To Love, Honor and Vacuum* blog. In “Top Ten Effects of Porn on Your Marriage and Sex Life,”⁴ she writes:

1. Porn reduces your desire for your spouse.⁵ 2. Porn wrecks your libido.⁶ 3. Porn makes you a lousy lover—because you want to

get right “to the act,” with no foreplay.⁷

4. Porn makes you feel more critical of your spouse and less “in love.”⁸

5. Porn makes you crave more extreme sexual acts—and keeps you from being tender.⁹

6. Porn increases instances of premature ejaculation.¹⁰ 7. Porn increases chances of erectile dysfunction.¹¹ 8. Porn restricts your view of what “attractive” is to apply

to very few actual women.¹²

9. Porn makes sex seem like too much work.¹³

10. Porn causes selfishness in other areas of your relationship, too.¹⁴

We encourage more liberal-leaning Christ-followers who tend to demand “scientific facts” relating to the alleged harm in pornography to visit Christian marriage/sexuality blogs and review the *Comments* section where many Christ-followers—rather than scientists-researchers-counselors-sexperts—comment about the effects of porn in their lives and marriages. We believe it is wise to **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*) and factor in real-life experiences before inviting porn into a life or marriage. As far as advancing in emotional and sexual intimacy, we wonder: *In a Christian marriage, how does pornography align with the principles of emotional and sexual intimacy as we have described them, as well as exclusivity in marriage where no other people, real or imagined, are included in the relationship?*

Nevertheless, some people enjoy vigorously debating different porn studies, statistics, data, and new “shades of grey.” That is why we strongly encourage people to invest in their own research. Remember, pornography is a multi-billion-dollar industry. Therefore, do your homework as you research information. It’s important when evaluating any research, data, and statistics to find out who is doing the research. This should include their biblical, moral, and theological positions. Also try to determine who might be benefiting, financially or otherwise, from the research conclusions that are presented.

Life is lived in a story

anne

A woman walked up to me after a REAL LIFE Marriage Advance. After introducing herself, she explained that our teaching had prompted her to talk about how pornography had affected her marriage.

“When my husband and I got married we had never been involved with any kind of pornography. About five years ago, we were struggling in our sex life. It’s not like we had major problems. I think we were just in a sexual slump. We were facing the normal pressures that accompany marriage and raising a family. My husband referred to our sex life as the ‘same-old-boring-sameness.’” She paused for a moment and asked, “Do you ever feel like life is running you instead of you running your life? Looking back, I think our sex life took a hit from all the stress we were facing. We had no time for each other, and we always put our sexual relationship last on the list. I guess our sexual relationship was at an all-time low.”

She continued:

My husband is a solution-based thinker. He’s the type of person who likes to fix things. I guess he was trying to fix our sex life. One day he brought home a pornographic movie. He said some guys at the office were talking about how porn spiced up their sex lives. He asked me if I wanted to give it a try. I don’t remember having a strong opinion. You might say I was neutral. I think the truth is I was too tired to even care. We agreed that our sex life was boring, and since I wasn’t bringing any other ideas to the table, we decided to try pornography.

The reason I’m telling you this is so you will continue to teach on this subject. I wish we had heard years ago some of what you taught today. It would have saved us from a lot of heartache. What started out somewhat innocently for my husband and me ended up having a tremendously negative impact on both of us. Pornography introduced porn actors into our sex lives and fantasy worlds. This influenced the way we thought about sex and each other. The sexual charge that it offered was so potent that it didn’t take long before we were watching it more frequently than I ever imagined.

We had no understanding about the addictive-like nature of porn, and how it affected us in such powerful ways.

One day I was reviewing our sexual relationship and realized that our solution to our problem had become our new problem. What we thought would be the answer to our sexual slump had now morphed into an obsession. For us, pornography opened the door to sinful lust and selfish demands.

Over time our need for porn became the focus, almost a compulsion, in our sexual relationship. Looking back, it all happened so fast—we both felt like a force was pulling us in. In some ways, it initially increased our sexual desire. But our desire involved fantasy that included someone other than each other. As I stop and think about it, most of the porn we watched included male dominance, and more often than not focused on the degradation and humiliation of women. In addition, the porn actors' bodies did not look *anything* like mine or my husband's.

She stopped for a moment, shook her head, and, struggling to hold back tears, said, “It’s like sex isn’t even about us anymore. It’s about two disconnected individuals who use fantasy and each other’s bodies to get their individual needs met. I can’t even believe I’m telling you this; I’m so ashamed of what we’ve done to ourselves and our marriage. After hearing you describe God’s purposes for intimacy and sexuality, and your cautions about pornography, I realize we have a problem that needs to be addressed.”

PORNOGRAPHY AND SEXISM

Pornography often violates the fundamental equality of women and men. It can align with misogyny, sexism, and how our culture objectifies and degrades women because it frequently depicts male dominance and violence against women.

Similar to other addictions, porn addiction can become progressive. What satisfies one day is not enough to satisfy the next day. This can open the door to a destructive cycle—like addiction that over time can consume people as their dependency on sexually explicit material increases. In our experience counseling many couples, once porn is introduced to a person or couple, it is often difficult to stop engaging with it.

Pornography introduces make-believe, unrealistic virtual relationships to husbands, wives, and marriages. Remember, the Enemy is subtle; he looks for people's struggles and then offers them a counterfeit solution. In marriages where only one spouse is involved with porn, the results can also be destructive. Another woman approached us at a REAL LIFE gathering and told us her husband was addicted to porn: "I feel angry most of the time. Most days I feel more like a prostitute than a wife. I often feel my husband just uses my body to have sex with his most recent virtual fantasy. At times I want to shut down and completely withhold sex."

IS THERE A SOLUTION TO A PORNOGRAPHY ADDICTION?

There are generally two approaches to overcoming a porn addiction. The first is the *discipline approach*. This approach instructs people to “just say no.” For the most part, we find the discipline approach to be ineffective. For example, in Genesis we read that in the beginning God told Adam that he could eat freely from any tree in the garden. And He commanded him to “just say no” to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As we know, the “just say no” campaign was a bust. Certainly, discipline helps in victory over addictions, but it takes more than discipline to successfully forsake the negative influences of a porn addiction.

The second approach is what we call the *passion approach*. Rather than just saying no, this approach focuses on healing that includes passionately embracing God and His truths. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”¹⁵ We believe the antidote to sinful lust is godly sorrow,¹⁶ and the remedy for lustful carnality is holiness. Godly sorrow and holiness open the door to repentance, and repentance includes the promise and hope of a better way. The Bible says, “The kindness of God leads you to repentance.”¹⁷ As you can see, even repentance is a “God thing.”

We believe porn addiction also includes a spiritual component that requires a spiritual strategy. Therefore, instead of focusing on “just saying no,” the passion model challenges people to fight sinful lust with the power and promises of God. This involves saying yes to the truths of God instead of the lies of Satan. We have found that typically people do not give up a certain behavior until they find something else to replace it with. If pornography is affecting you or your marriage in negative/sinful ways, we suggest you consider the following suggestions. We refer to this nonexhaustive list as the **Ten Rs**:

1. **Repent**; ask the Lord to forgive you. “The kindness

of God leads you to repentance.”¹⁸

2. **Remove porn from your life** (computer, smart phone, movies, magazines). “Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body,

but the immoral man sins against his own body.”¹⁹ 3. **Refocus your attention on something else—**

renew your mind. “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”²⁰ 4. **Reveal your struggle to**

a trusted friend/counselor. “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.”²¹

5. **Resist the Enemy.** “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”²²

6. **Realize your vulnerability.** “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”²³ 7. **Reclaim God’s**

authority in your life. “Greater is He

who is in you than he who is in the world.”²⁴ 8. **Relationships with healthy friends are important.** “Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory.”²⁵ 9. **Remember this is a**

spiritual battle. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”²⁶

10. **Rejoice in freedom and victory; and continue to walk out your recovery.** “Rejoice always; pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks.”²⁷

Thankfully, recent breakthroughs in neuroscience and new brain-imaging applications are providing valuable data regarding how the brain functions.²⁸ These will help to provide better understanding about how porn affects a person’s brain. Unfortunately, it is still difficult to fully understand

the spiritual, psychological, mental, and emotional impact that porn has on an individual—and on a marriage.

We realize there are Christians, as well as many non-Christians, who believe that porn is harmless. If you think it is fine, please consider a few questions. First, would you support adult members in your family—parents, siblings, children—who wanted to act out in various sexual ways in pornographic films? Second, if adult family members acted in these films, would that cause you to experience any shame? If friends mentioned that they enjoyed watching one of your family members and described specifics about them having sex in the film, how would you feel about their comments? Remember, shame never comes from God. Consider this: *every* person who acts in a pornographic film is someone's daughter or son. Furthermore, we've counseled men and women who said they watched porn as children, and that led them to act out what they were watching, including oral sex, intercourse, anal sex, same-sex sex, and group sex.

Pornography frequently involves smaller story “it’s all about me” living. That is why it is difficult for us to connect Christ-like love with pornography. Christ-like love focuses on loving-serving-giving (focus on others), whereas pornography proponents typically describe to us what they are getting out of pornography (focus on self). Ed Cole, founder of the Christian Men’s Network, captures the differences between love and lust: “Love desires to benefit others at the expense of self ... lust desires to benefit self at the expense of others.”²⁹

We encourage you and every reader to **I.O.T.L.**, step into the Larger Story by inviting *God* to be the main character in your life and marriage and ask for His wisdom concerning pornography. If you are struggling with sinful lust, out-of-control sinful fantasy, porn, or any sinful behavior that involves someone other than your spouse, we encourage you to talk to a trusted friend and consider investing in Christian counseling. The Enemy wants people to believe there is no hope. That is a lie—everyone can experience healing and deliverance from sinful lust and the negative effects of pornography.

Working with couples for decades, we understand some people quickly discount our take on the negative impact porn can have on a person's life

and marriage. Granted, we are not neuroscientists or pornography experts, but after counseling couples who have chosen to include sexually explicit materials in their lives and marriage, we have concluded that engaging with porn is risky behavior. Couples who use porn often experience shame, regret, and the tearing down—rather than the building up—of intimacy experiences.

We want to offer a few challenges to couples who advocate for pornography. First, consider the socioeconomic aspect that includes more poor people than rich people acting in pornographic films. Second, consider how porn promotes misogyny, sexism, and the degradation of women. Third, consider attending a gathering of recovering porn/sex addicts. Most communities and churches have these types of meetings. Carefully listen to the stories presented, and note if negative sexual imprinting, ungodly soul ties/bonds, or pornography played a role in an individual's or couple's situation and related sexual struggles or addictions. Try to discern if any part of the stories you hear connects with where you may be in your relationship with porn.

IT TAKES A TEAM

In our experience, it takes a *team* to help someone successfully overcome a porn addiction. This team includes God, counselors, sponsors, spiritual directors, and individual/group accountability. Remember, the goal is not to just focus on maintaining sobriety from a porn (or any) addiction. The goal should be for a person (or couple) to experience freedom and victory. Lastly, there are tools available to help overcome these addictions. For example, Covenant Eyes is one of many organizations that offer accountability software.³⁰

CHAPTER 5

BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY: CARRYING OUT GOD'S MANDATE TO REPRODUCE

Life is lived in a story

anne

Nothing changes life like the arrival of a baby. I so clearly remember the moments leading up to the birth of our first grandchild. We had been in Michigan for more than a week, anticipating our daughter Amy's delivery date. After a few false alarms and an attempt to induce labor, today was the day, so Tim and I drove to the hospital for the grand event.

As we headed toward our daughter's room, we saw the doctor walking out. Amy had just been scheduled for a Cesarean section. Having surgery definitely wasn't Amy and Curt's first choice, but it was the best option available in light of their specific circumstances. A short time later, medical attendants wheeled Amy out of her room with Curt walking right alongside. He held her hand and spoke words of reassurance as they headed for the delivery room, both of them looking equally scared and excited. Watching them move down that long hospital corridor, I couldn't help but think of their wedding day when, with family and friends gathered around,

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they had walked hand in hand down another long aisle and stepped into a new life together as one. Now here we were a few years later, looking on as they walked together through the final stages of their nine-month journey to parenthood.

Tim and I continued watching until they disappeared behind the double doors to the surgical suite. After all these months of praying, preparing, and dreaming, the time was actually here. We would soon be holding our first grandchild.

The family gathered in the waiting room. We tried to enjoy casual conversation, but it was hard to focus on anything other than the baby's arrival. Every minute that passed felt like an hour. We kept glancing toward the doors that separated the waiting room from the surgical area.

Finally the doors swung open, and Curt walked out in his blue surgical scrubs. As he approached, his step was light and his smile bright. The look on his face was indescribable—as if he were ready to burst.

As a mom, I wanted to stop the clocks and hold on to that moment forever. Before us stood a man who had just witnessed the miraculous birth of his first child. I knew he would never be the same—he was now a dad. He was about to experience a depth of love that he had never known before.

We all formed a circle around him. There was a long pause. Then, with a huge smile, Curt proudly announced, “It’s a boy! His name is Joel Christopher DeBoer.”

The cheers of our family broke the silence. Although there were only a handful of us there, my heart heard the sound of cheers from a stadium filled with people. In that brief moment, it felt like the whole world was sharing our joy. Some of us laughed, others cried. But we all thanked God for the gift of new life.

After a few minutes, Curt motioned us to follow him to the recovery room to see Amy. We walked through the doors that led us into the next season of our lives. Pulling back the hospital curtains, we saw our baby holding her baby. His perfect little body was bundled tightly in a light blue hospital blanket, like a gift waiting to be unwrapped. Drawing Joel out of Amy’s arms and into mine, I realized I was looking into the eyes of the next generation.

It has now been ten years since Joel’s miraculous birth. Since that wonderful day, we’ve been blessed with four more grandchildren. One year after Joel’s birth, Tim and I flew to Texas to be with our daughter Colleen and her husband Johnny, when John William III (Trey) was born. The following year we returned to Michigan to welcome the arrival of Joel’s little sister and our first granddaughter, Grace Elizabeth. And one year later, we flew back to Texas to welcome Emma Joy, and still later to Kalamazoo to hug and kiss Jack Timothy.

Both Tim and I would describe the arrival of each of our grandchildren as mountaintop experiences. Tim often says, “There are a lot of things in life

that are not what they're cracked up to be ... but being a grandparent is not one of them!"

We have found such delight in watching our children embark on the adventure of parenting. In addition to the joy of seeing the world once again through a child's eyes, being a parent and grandparent leads to a deeper understanding of how God is a generational God, and how He unconditionally loves His children. This enables us to more deeply appreciate God's purposes for marriage and family.

THE PROCREATION MANDATE

God designed men and women as sexual beings. And He designed marriage as a place for a husband and wife to experience the satisfaction and intimate pleasures in emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and orgasm. One of the purposes of marriage is to have children and fulfill God's command to reproduce. To reproduce means "to produce offspring."¹ In Genesis 1:28 we read, "God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it.'" This is the procreation mandate, and it is directly connected to God's blessing. Out of God's blessing, husbands and wives are to have children. This enables humankind to reproduce and expand community.

Having children is the continuation of a couple's story and marks the beginning of a new story. Having children is God's way of connecting one generation to the next. Bringing forth life reminds a man and a woman that they were created for more than just themselves. Reproducing provides unlimited opportunities to live out our REAL LIFE slogan: "It's not about me."

However, a couple can reproduce and expand community in many ways. In addition to having biological children, couples can adopt children, become foster parents, and come to be spiritual parents. All these types of parenting provide a couple with countless opportunities to reflect and reveal the character and goodness of God to each other, to their children, and to others.

Of course, sex is about much more than having children. However, in the remainder of this chapter we will focus on common questions related to the procreation mandate.

WHAT ABOUT BIRTH CONTROL?

Whenever the issue of reproduction comes up, it inevitably leads to the subject of birth control. Couples ask such questions as “What if we’re not ready for children right now? What kind of birth control, if any, should we use? When should we begin our family? How many children should we have? Does God say anything about this topic; if so, what?”

The Bible does not specifically address birth control. Some people contend that the story of Onan prohibits any action deliberately intended to prevent sex from resulting in a pregnancy. Onan was an Old Testament character who refused to follow the cultural code of his day, which said that if a man died without heirs, his brother was to take the widow as his wife, impregnate her, and raise their firstborn child in the name of the deceased brother. The text reads, “Then Judah said to Onan, ‘Lie with your brother’s wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother.’ But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he lay with his brother’s wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother. What he did was wicked in the Lord’s sight; so he put him to death also.”²

We do not believe this story is a conclusive text about birth control; we see it directly connected to the responsibility of a brother-in-law to his widowed sister-in-law under ancient cultural laws. Nevertheless, we will leave the debating of this passage to Bible scholars.

However, while we are hard-pressed to find any specific Scriptures that deal with birth control, stewardship *is* addressed throughout the Bible. Stewardship refers to “careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care.”³ We are to be faithful and wise stewards of our time, talents, and treasures. We are accountable to our Creator for what we do with *everything* He has given us. In keeping with this principle, we believe a couple is responsible to steward the husband’s sperm and the wife’s eggs as precious gifts entrusted to them by God.

COMING TO A DECISION TOGETHER

We do not believe there is only one right answer to all the questions surrounding birth control, and the issues for each couple may be complex in different ways. We encourage every couple to **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*) and include God in their decision-making process. This process strengthens their marriage and helps them advance in intimacy with God and with each other.

One wife we were counseling told us, “It never occurred to us to ask God what He thought about birth control. Including Him on these kinds of intimate decisions is new to us. Sometimes we pray, but in all honesty, we rarely stop to listen. I guess we had our own ideas and our own timetable for beginning a family. We never thought about asking God to give us His timetable.”

It is important for couples to agree, support one another, and stay current with each other in the process—especially if one tends to make quick decisions without including the other. If this occurs, other issues often surface.

Life is lived in a story

anne

I met with “Jack and Diane” after they had been married about eight years. When they got engaged, the decision to use birth control was simply assumed. Without much conversation or any prayer, Diane chose a method she felt comfortable with.

In the years following, the only time they did not use birth control was when they wanted to get pregnant. They now had two sons, ages five and three, but they weren’t sure if they were ready for a third child. As life’s demands increased, conflicts surfaced in their sexual relationship. Since communication was one of their weak areas, Diane discovered that she *was* able to get Jack’s attention when she withheld sexually. She said that she was experiencing some low-level anger toward Jack, partly because she felt as if she was bearing the full responsibility for birth control. Diane also acknowledged that she and Jack had only a limited amount of time together. They never seemed to have enough time to just talk, touch each other in nonsexual ways, and to catch up on life. Because of their growing family responsibilities, Diane and Jack were placing each other lower and lower on their priority lists.

I explained the benefits of focusing on emotional intimacy. And I reminded them about the importance of communication and how it affected their sexual intimacy. When they came in for couples counseling, Diane said to Jack, “I guess I don’t feel like you appreciate everything that I do. As far as our sexual intimacy, it seems to me like our decision to use birth control feels like it’s *my* job. I’m the one who has to take all the responsibility. And I feel pressure to be the one who makes sure we use our birth control correctly.”

Jack interrupted. “Do you want *me* to go to the doctor and track your cycle?”

Clearly hurt by his sarcastic response, Diane replied, “It’s not that I’m unwilling to take a major share of responsibility for birth control. It would

be nice if occasionally you acknowledged my efforts. This may sound crazy to you, but it would be nice to hear you say, 'Honey, I do appreciate you. Thanks for carrying the weight of birth control for us. I know it takes time and effort. Just knowing that you are handling it removes the pressure and worry about getting pregnant.'"

As they continued to talk, Jack and Diane were able to recognize the importance of processing their birth control decisions together. And this became the pathway to increased intimacy.

SEEKING A CLEAR PERSPECTIVE

Together **I.O.T.L.** and ask God for wisdom,⁴ listening to God,⁵ and talking openly with each other. We also encourage couples to consider seeking the wisdom and experience of others as they process birth control decisions. Remember, the Bible says, “In abundance of counselors there is victory.”⁶ In community, a husband and wife can be encouraged to consider new perspectives and gain wisdom.

Life is lived in a story

tim

I met with a couple who was preparing for marriage and asked how they arrived at their decisions regarding birth control and when to start a family. The man responded, “Whenever we make a decision on anything, we talk about it, gather the facts, and make our decision. As far as birth control, we both decided that we do not want to start a family right away. We are still young and we want to take some time to travel and have fun before we settle down.”

His fiancée added, “Besides, we just bought a house and we have a pretty steep mortgage payment. Plus, we have two car payments and are paying off credit card debt and college loans.”

This couple seemed to have good communication skills, which allowed them to process their decisions in a healthy manner. I explained how to **I.O.T.L.** and ask God for wisdom.⁷ I described the benefits of implementing the **Traffic Light Principle** and the blessings of inviting God into every area of their lives—including birth control decisions.

The husband replied, “But we’ve *agreed* to wait to have children.”

I explained to this couple how having agreement was only half the story. I reminded them that Adam and Eve had agreement in eating the forbidden fruit. The Bible says, “She took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.”⁸ Tragically, they never included God in their decision-making process.

This husband and wife were very teachable and both agreed to **I.O.T.L.** and wait until they were in unity on what they were sensing from God. In the months leading up to their wedding, they began to see that their motives for using birth control were more about the freedoms in not having children and paying off debt, rather than finding God’s direction for their lives. I encouraged them to get financial training, develop a budget, and work at getting out of debt. I explained that implementing a budget would help them to make wise spending decisions. Including God and others helped them to

exercise dominion over their finances, which directly influenced their decision about when to start a family.

THREE KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT BIRTH CONTROL

Married couples who already have the number of children they desire, as well as couples who are heading into a second marriage, often say to us: “What’s to discuss? What do we need to pray about? We already have kids, so for us using birth control is a no-brainer.”

Whatever your circumstance, the decision to have children or to delay having children should not be taken lightly. Reproducing is a purpose for marriage that carries eternal ramifications. Including God, your spouse, and others in your decision-making process provides wisdom and protection. We encourage *every* couple regardless of their age, years married, or number of children to **I.O.T.L.** and continue processing decisions about having children and using birth control. This is not just a one-time decision; it’s an ongoing marriage issue.

We challenge every couple to prayerfully answer three questions:

1. What are our motives for using or not using birth control?

When a couple takes an honest look at their motives, it often changes the way they see things. Some of these motives include religious convictions, family-of-origin issues, finances, emotional immaturity, health concerns, and fears surrounding parenthood. We challenge couples to ask themselves the following questions: *Did we **I.O.T.L.**? As we review our motives, what issues (spiritual, financial, emotional, relational) might be affecting our choices? And do we have a plan for dealing with these issues? Are we including others in our decision-making process? If so, whom? Have we implemented the **Traffic Light Principle**? Are we in agreement with what we sense God saying?*

2. If we use birth control, what method will we choose?

Again, we encourage every couple to **I.O.T.L.** and seek God's wisdom in making birth control decisions. The Bible says, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."⁹ The process of seeking God, discussing together with a spouse, including others, and consulting medical professionals allows a couple to gather information that helps them to make wise choices.

We believe that certain methods of birth control are dangerous, immoral, and have potentially harmful side effects. That is why it is important that every couple does their research and talks with their priest/pastor and a doctor who can help them understand different birth control methods, and how they might affect their bodies, babies, and marriage. There are many birth control methods, including condoms, oral contraceptives, the diaphragm, the IUD (intrauterine device), vasectomy, tubal ligation, sterilization, and natural family planning. The process of answering the "what birth control method" question should also include discussions about how each spouse will share in the responsibility for their birth control decisions.

3. Is our birth control choice a moral one?

Once a couple has sought God's will and chosen to use birth control, an important question surfaces: *Is our birth control method of choice a moral one?* Truth be told, the Bible does not give detailed information as to exactly when a fertilized egg (embryo) becomes a person. Our opinion is that 100 percent potential for life is present at conception. Therefore, any form of birth control that negatively affects the growing human life potential in a fertilized egg, an embryo, or a pre-born person raises moral concerns. On the other hand, our opinion is that forms of birth control that stop the sperm *before* it fertilizes the egg can be morally acceptable. All that is to say, people have very strong opinions on these subjects, which is why

we encourage every couple to understand and prayerfully process every aspect—motive, method, morality—of birth control decisions.

WHEN A COUPLE CAN'T GET PREGNANT

We realize that all this talk about reproducing can be painfully difficult for couples who deal with sterility and infertility. Sterility is an inability to reproduce. This can be rooted in some type of physical abnormality or it can be from the result of a permanent form of birth control such as vasectomy or tubal ligation. Infertility refers to the inability to conceive after at least one year of regular intercourse without the use of contraception. One survey indicates that just over 7 percent of married couples in the United States deal with infertility.¹⁰

Suffering through infertility or living with the knowledge of sterility often becomes an obstacle to marital intimacy. Couples processing the reality of barrenness in the midst of longing can easily feel isolated from God and each other. We encourage couples to proactively seek to advance in intimacy by walking through this together—and in community with others. What appear as *obstacles* can often become *opportunities* to love, serve, and comfort one another.

If this is your situation, we encourage you to consider other ways that you, as a couple, can fulfill the marriage purpose of reproducing. In addition to alternatives such as adoption and foster parenting, we encourage you to prayerfully consider how God might use you to impact others. We live in a fatherless and motherless generation unlike any in recent history. We sincerely believe the Church's primary need is for God to raise up spiritual moms and dads. Having spiritual children provides a couple with unlimited opportunities to reflect and reveal the love and goodness of God.

The apostle Paul was a spiritual father. Scripture provides no evidence that he had any biological children, yet in his decision to be a spiritual parent, he fathered countless new believers. Paul's passion and love for his spiritual children are evident throughout his writings. The apostle John, another spiritual father, wrote one of our favorite Bible passages, "I have no greater

joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”¹¹ If you and your spouse are facing infertility or unwanted sterility, please know that God still has a plan for you as a parent. Whether this is through adoption, foster parenting, or spiritual parenting, every couple (as well as every single person) can invest in and positively influence the next generation. Remember, Jesus Christ did not have any biological children, yet His love for others is the quintessential model for parenting.

Always remember that even though having children is very important, as Christ-followers we are to seek first God’s kingdom. And our highest calling is to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves.¹²

A BLESSING LIKE NO OTHER

As we have seen, one of God's main purposes for marriage is for a husband and wife to reproduce. God invites a man and woman to enter covenant, become one, and be fruitful and multiply. In marriage, having children—including spiritual, foster, and adopted children—provides opportunities to pass on godly values to future generations. Being a parent provides a lifetime of invitations to live in the Larger Story where *God* is the main character—and “it's not about me.”

Raising a family and investing in children have unlimited potential to advance God's kingdom. Why do you think the Enemy is so committed to distorting and destroying marriage and family as God designed? Raising biological, adopted, and spiritual children who know and love God can be compared with a strategic act of war. Godly marriages and children have potential to destroy the Enemy's efforts to defeat families. The Bible declares, “Behold, children are a gift of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.”¹³

Life is lived in a story

tim

It has certainly been our experience that children are a blessing like no other. I remember pulling into the driveway of our home early one morning. I had just gotten off duty from a busy twenty-four-hour firehouse shift, and I was coming home to change clothes and go to my side job. Between the two jobs, I was working more than seventy hours a week.

Before heading into the house, I sat in the car and took a deep breath. My energy level was at an all-time low as I thought about the two busy days ahead working my side job before returning to the firehouse for another twenty-four-hour shift.

Just as I was wallowing in self-pity, the front door of our home burst open and our four children raced out. They tackled me as I stepped out of the car. Timmy jumped on my back as I threw Amy over my shoulder. Colleen and Cate wrapped themselves around my legs and sat on my feet, forcing me to limp into the house.

All four of the kids were competing for my attention, smothering me with hugs and kisses, and telling me fragmented stories of their day. The more they giggled, the more energized I felt. All of a sudden, I forgot how exhausted I was and how many hours of work I had ahead of me. As I entered the house with them still clinging to me, our children screamed in unison, “Daddy’s home!” In my entire life, these are two of the greatest words I have ever heard.



PART TWO

Sensitive Sexual Issues

“And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”
Genesis 2:25

CHAPTER 6

REDEFINING SEXY, SEXUAL PREFERENCES, AND SEXUAL PEAK

God is pro-sex! Sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy—*becoming one* and celebrating being *naked without shame*—are game changers that husbands and wives are invited to experience throughout every season of marriage. As we have described throughout “Part 1: God Is Pro-Intimacy and Pro-Sex,” God created emotional and sexual intimacy, and a great sex life involves much more than intercourse and orgasms.

One influential pastor wrote, “Sex is not the search for something that’s missing. It’s the expression of something that’s been found. It’s designed to be the overflow, the culmination of something that a man and a woman have found in each other. It’s a celebration of this living, breathing thing that’s happening between the two of them.”¹

Life is lived in a story

tim+anne

A pastor contacted REAL LIFE Ministries to talk with us about hosting a Marriage Advance at his church. He was curious why we called our +77

gatherings *advances*. We explained that we do not use the term marriage *retreat* because we believe it is time for couples to *advance* and reclaim God's original marriage design.

This pastor then asked about what we teach at an Advance. We gave him an overview and talked through some of the administrative details including dates, times, costs, and follow-up information. Then he asked about how we handle the session on intimacy and sexuality. We told him that we approached that session just like every other—in a biblical and relevant manner. We explained that the “Naked without Shame” session strategically builds on the “Spirit Oneness” and “Soul Oneness” sessions.

He asked what specific subjects we addressed. We explained that we seek to help couples answer real-life questions about frequency, locations, timing, positions, and quickies. We also include sensitive sexual topics including masturbation, lust, orgasm, oral stimulation, oral sex, anal sex, BDSM, and other specifics.

There was a L-O-N-G pause. Then the pastor asked, “Do you talk about these things out loud?”

Yes, in fact, we do. In our experience, many churches resist addressing sensitive sexual issues. Take a moment and think about all the sermons you've listened to throughout your lifetime. How many passionately proclaimed that *God is pro-sex*? In addition, many Christian publishers resist publishing and promoting books containing sexual terms that may make readers uncomfortable. Unfortunately, when the Church and Christian publishers are silent, our culture, the media, the Hollywood entertainment industry, and all sorts of activists are eager to fill the void with unrestrained and immoral perspectives surrounding marriage and sexuality.

Therefore, in “Part 2: Sensitive Sexual Issues,” we will talk about God’s design for sexual intimacy. And we will address questions we have received throughout decades of counseling, while facilitating REAL LIFE gatherings, and while leading marriage small groups. Be forewarned: some of these questions and topics push the boundaries as far as what many Christian couples are comfortable talking about. Nevertheless, we encourage you to resist any fear, shame, or awkwardness by pushing through and choosing to talk about sensitive issues with your spouse. As we review a number of issues, our desire is to look to God’s Word for wisdom and guidance.

HOW DO MARRIED COUPLES DESCRIBE THEIR SEX LIVES?

After we describe God's purposes for sex at our REAL LIFE gatherings, we ask couples to individually write down three words or phrases that describe their sex lives. The responses vary widely: some husbands and wives use positive words such as *exciting, stress busting, playful, fun, adventuresome, comforting, the highlight of my day*. Others describe their sex lives in negative ways, such as *boring, routine, a power struggle, frustrating, one-way, nonexistent, painful, controlling, an unwanted duty*.

At one of our gatherings, we took an anonymous survey among a group of Christian leaders from a local church who had been married between fifteen and twenty-five years on average. We gave each person a piece of paper with two questions: (1) How do you rate your current sex life? and (2) How do you think your spouse would rate your current sex life? Each individual was instructed to write a number between 1 and 10, with 1 indicating "nonexistent" and 10 being "off the charts." We were surprised when we tabulated the numbers. As a group, these Christian men and women rated their current sexual satisfaction at 2.7 out of a possible 10. And they rated their spouse's current sexual satisfaction at 2.3. We have since repeated this survey and gathered similar data.

Our experience tells us that the emotional and sexual dimension in many marriages is far from what God intended. Sadly, the special bond God designed for marriage has in many cases devolved into destructive cycles of shame, blame, fear, and control. The ideals of celebration, procreation, pleasure, comfort, and protection have morphed into power struggles that end in disappointment and frustration. On the positive side, husbands and wives who rate their sex lives high also rate their marriages high as well. The good news is this: couples who make intentional investments into their spirit-soul-body oneness advance in friendship, emotional intimacy, and sexual intimacy.

Even Old Testament writers understood the importance of marriage: “When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out with the army nor be charged with any duty; he shall be free at home one year and shall give happiness to his wife whom he has taken.”² We think they had the right idea. In fact, it would be great if *every* married couple adopted the practice of learning what it means to “give happiness” to their spouse. An intentional marriage investment of time, energy, and unconditional love will reap many blessings.

It makes us wonder: *What if couples viewed growing in emotional and sexual intimacy as important steps in their own journey toward personal maturity?* Truthfully, after forty years of marriage, we still don’t fully know each other. But we are both committed to never stop advancing in intimacy, in knowing and being more fully known.

Through the upcoming chapters, our desire is to demystify sensitive sexual issues and look for ways to turn any *obstacles* into *opportunities*. However, as we continue on our author-reader journey, we understand that reading about sexual issues may be uncomfortable for some. Perhaps your marriage is currently struggling, maybe your family of origin had a negative view of sex, or you have regrets about your sexual history. You may have experienced negative sexual imprinting, a toxic religious church sex culture, or you are a survivor of sexual abuse.

As you read about sensitive sexual topics, therefore, we encourage you to invite the Holy Spirit to walk you through the following chapters. It is our prayer that every reader will discover *God is pro-sex!* We pray husbands and wives will advance in embracing the miracle and mystery of what it means for two to *become one*. And experience what it means to be *naked without shame* in ways you can’t even imagine.

REDEFINING SEXY

Sexy is a big word! So much so that millions of dollars are invested in trying to convince men and women what the word even means. Our culture's definition of sexy typically revolves around a person's physique, height, weight, the size of biceps or breasts, the length or style of hair, and personality type. Sexy can relate to what types of car people drive, the clothes they wear, or the homes and neighborhoods they live in. Sexy can be associated with a person's position, title, education, and profession, with certain professions being considered more sexy than others.

That said, after working with couples for decades, we've met with husbands and wives who viewed *sexy* in a much different way. These couples talked about sexy in terms of traits that went far beyond physical features, personal accomplishments, and financial or social status. As we interacted with them, we found these couples associated their feelings of arousal and sexual excitement to their spouse's intentional choices. It was sexy for them to experience their spouse as loving, kind, other centered, forgiving, and not easily offended. One spouse described how sexy it was for her to watch her husband fully engage with their child. For her, that was a turn-on. Others shared how sexy it was for them to observe their spouse initiate or establish healthy boundaries.

There seems to be something very arousing when married couples operate successfully as a team, moving together toward common goals, supporting each other's dreams and desires, and having each other's back. For these couples, sexy isn't overly focused on appearance. Instead, it includes having a good sense of humor and enjoying the *extraordinary-ordinary* of life.

After being married forty years, we believe a sexy person is someone who is loving, passionate, joyful, forgiving, confident, competent, and loves BIG. Our definition of *sexy* involves people who humbly walk in the strength of their true identity—who God says they are.

Pause and think about your marriage. What if sexy included seeing yourself and your spouse as God does? What if sexy included advancing in emotional intimacy, being reciprocal servants, delighting in each other, and co-leading together in mutual equality and mutual authority? Regarding sexual intimacy, what if being sexy had less to do with more sexual experiences and orgasms? Instead, what if sexy involved advancing in arousal, romance, foreplay, and increased intimacy? What if sexy included a husband and wife maximizing all their senses—talking and listening, touching, seeing, smelling, and tasting? In our experience, couples who passionately connect in their hearts, minds, souls, and bodies more fully enjoy emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy—as well as have more satisfying orgasms.

From a spiritual perspective, what if sexy included a husband and wife inviting God into every area of their lives, marriage, and lovemaking? Do you ever wonder what God thinks is sexy? We are quite certain it has little to do with a person's outward appearance, position, status, or possessions. The Bible may give us a clue as to what God thinks is important: "God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."³ God invites every married couple to live out what we believe is His description of sexy—being *naked without shame*.

LARGER STORY vs. smaller story

As we've said in previous chapters, every person can choose to live in one of two stories—the Larger Story or the smaller story. The way to determine which story you are living in is to ask this simple question: *Who is the main character in my story?* If the main character in your story is *self*, you are living in the smaller story. If the main character in your story is *God*, you are living in the Larger Story.

Every person is created as a volitional human being, with the ability to make choices. Therefore, people can choose “it’s not about me” attitudes, make unselfish decisions, and model others-centered, life-giving behaviors. In marriage, living in the Larger Story opens the door for couples to advance in oneness and unity. We believe Mother Teresa captured the essence of unity when she wrote, “Unity is the fruit of prayer, of humility, of love.”⁴ Living in the Larger Story as reciprocal servants becomes the pathway for husbands and wives to celebrate the miracle and mystery of *two becoming one*.

Likewise, every husband and wife can frame their sexual expectations based on the Larger Story or the smaller story. In terms of sexual intimacy, smaller-story living is where *self* is the main character and sexual intimacy is all about getting *your* needs and desires met. Often a husband or wife may try to convince a spouse that God is on their side, perhaps even paraphrasing a few Scriptures as support for their demands: *Your body no longer belongs to you. It now belongs to me, so hand it over*. Spouses who choose to look out for *number one* may appear to win a few sexual battles. However, they miss the incredible *naked without shame* reality that God designed for emotional and sexual intimacy.

Living in the Larger Story, by contrast, means walking in your true identity, who God says you are, and reflecting and revealing God’s love, grace, and goodness to your spouse in every area of marriage—including your sex life. Resolving differing expectations about sex involves a husband and wife

being willing to trust, risk, and stand emotionally naked before God—and each other.

SEXUAL PREFERENCES

Our experience suggests that every couple has their own distinct approaches, responses, and preferences regarding how they live out sexual intimacy. For example, one spouse may feel a greater measure of sexual freedom. They feel less inhibited and more adventuresome, while their spouse may tend toward being more reserved, and cautiously live life with one foot on the brake. As we counsel couples, we remind them that it takes an investment of time and energy to get to know how a spouse prefers to engage sexually, as well as negotiate any differences.

We describe a sexual preference as a desire to respond in certain ways. We believe a preference is not based on identity or gender but on preferred choices and behaviors. A sexual preference is influenced by many factors, including family of origin, culture, religious beliefs, love languages, sexual histories, sexual imprinting, soul ties, and life experiences. All of these factors play a part in how a spouse understands sex, expresses expectations and desires, and responds sexually.

Marriage is a journey couples can enjoy together rather than a destination at which they arrive. This journey includes learning how to adapt to and negotiate each other's feelings and preferences. A couple may be committed to God and to one another and may both desire love and affection, yet each feels a preferred way regarding sexual intimacy. Following are a number of sexual preferences we have observed throughout the years. See if you identify with any of them.

1. SLOW AND STEADY

This preference describes a spouse who seems to be content with what they have. For this individual, sex consists of a few tried-and-true sexual techniques based on past successful experiences. Typically, this spouse is uncomfortable with change, and generally avoids experimentation—it's just

too risky. A slow-and-steady person's thoughts and feelings surrounding sex might sound something like this: *If it isn't broke, don't try to fix it.*

2. DUTIFUL

This preference describes a spouse who tends toward keeping rules. For this person, sex is often driven by discipline. This spouse often has a religious-oriented mind-set that can be fueled by "hyper-discipline," or fear. A dutiful person's thoughts surrounding sex might sound something like this: *Sex is on my to-do list, and I am responsible to fulfill my sexual duty.*

3. ADVENTURESOME

This preference describes a spouse who loves new sexual experiences. Typically, this person dislikes routine and tends to get easily bored. Their focus is on new discoveries and experimentation. An adventuresome person's thoughts and feelings surrounding sex might sound something like this: *Let's try something new, because different is exciting!*

4. DISCONNECTED

This preference describes a husband or wife who does not engage with their spouse spiritually or emotionally during sex. This preference is often associated with a fantasy life involving real or imagined people and experiences and or a sex/porn addiction. A disconnected person's thoughts and feelings surrounding sex might sound something like this: *Sex has very little to do with my spouse's heart or emotions.*

5. "ME" FOCUSED

This preference can have similarities to the DISCONNECTED preference. This describes a spouse who is primarily focused on their own sexual needs, wants, and desires, and getting those needs met is paramount. A "ME"-

focused person's thoughts and feelings surrounding sex might sound something like this: *Let's focus on what I like best and is the most enjoyable for ME!*

6. "WE" FOCUSED

This preference describes a spouse who is aware of personal as well as their spouse's sexual feelings, wants, and desires. For this spouse, sex is a team sport. A "WE"-focused person's thoughts and feelings surrounding sex might sound something like this: *Whatever we do, doing it together as a team is most important.*

7. "GOD" FOCUSED

This preference describes a spouse who has learned (or is learning) to include God in *every* part of life—including sex. For this spouse, sex is a celebration of spirit-soul-body oneness. This preference involves Larger Story living where *God*, not *self* or your spouse, is the main character in your life, marriage, and sexual intimacy. A "GOD"-focused person's thoughts and feelings surrounding sex might sound something like this: *God is pro-sex!*

Understanding sexual preferences is a way to help meet your spouse's sexual desires as well as your own. It's important to note that a husband and wife are not locked into a particular sexual preference. As a couple journeys with God and each other, they may discover their sexual preferences have changed over time. And they may become open to or even excited about trying different things. For example, a spouse who typically enjoys a SLOW-AND-STEADY sexual preference may choose to enjoy ADVENTURESOME sex. However, regardless of a spouse's sexual preference, we encourage husbands and wives to grow in intimacy with God and their spouse as they look for ways to enjoy "GOD"-focused sex.

We challenge husbands and wives to take ownership and responsibility to better understand their own and their spouse's sexual preferences. A good starting place is to first **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*) and then begin a

loving dialogue with your spouse. Remember, having differences does not have to be viewed as an *obstacle*; it can be an *opportunity* to advance in intimacy—in knowing and being fully known. Before moving on, for those who identified with a DISCONNECTED or “ME”-focused sexual preference, we encourage you to consider exploring this with a trained counselor. Remember, sex is meant to be a shared experience with a spouse.

SEXUAL PEAK

When we talk about sexual intimacy, redefining *sexy*, and sexual preferences, we are often asked two questions by both husbands and wives: “Exactly when do men and women reach their sexual peak?” and “Have I passed my sexual peak?” The term *sexual peak* is not a biblical term. It is often misunderstood and misused. In our opinion, for Christ-followers who enter into the lifelong covenant of marriage, the issue of a person’s sexual peak should not really matter. A couple’s sexual peak—increased desire, passion, and energy—ebbs and flows throughout a lifetime. Longtime sex therapist Marty Klein, PhD, writes:

Reasonable answers to the question “when do I reach my sexual peak?” include: the question makes no sense. People never reach their sexual peak. It depends on what you mean. If by “sexual peak” you mean quickness to, and hardness of erection; and if you mean rapidity and propulsive force of ejaculation; and if you mean constantly thinking about and making dumbass jokes about sex; then yes. Many men peak around eighteen. And if by “sexual peak” you mean the age at which women are more sexually responsive and more reliably orgasmic, then yes, many women peak around thirty-five.

But this pair of definitions is only one way to understand “sexual peak.” For example, “sexual peak” could mean the age at which people enjoy sex the most, value it the most, understand it the most, have the most experience, or use it to connect emotionally with their partner the most.

“Sexual peak” could mean the age at which people have the most spiritual experiences with sex, or find it the most psychologically comforting in the face of sorrow, pain, or fear.⁵

From newlyweds to seasoned married couples, husbands and wives often view sexual peak exclusively in the context of intense physicalorgasmic intercourse. If that is the case, they can miss out on the amazing benefits and blessings of enjoying a lifetime of emotional and sexual experiences. As you read about sensitive sexual issues in the upcoming chapters, we

encourage you to pause ... and **I.O.T.L.** Bring your heart and sex life to God. Ask for His heart ... and listen for His response.

CHAPTER 7

SEXUAL FREQUENCY AND SCHEDULING SEX SEXUAL FREQUENCY

The topic of sexual frequency is one that affects every married couple. In fact, it's a common question asked at almost every REAL LIFE marriage gathering, as well as a hot topic on marriage blogs. Couples regularly ask, "Exactly how often should we be having sex?" Unfortunately, no Bible verse specifies an optimum number of sexual encounters for a healthy marriage. Instead, God leaves it up to a husband and wife to agree on sexual frequency. Since every person is different, every couple is invited to decide on what works best for them individually and as a couple.

In our experience, many couples, both wives and husbands, would like to enjoy sexual intercourse more frequently but struggle with this issue. Upon closer examination, their struggles can often be traced back to shame, fear, immaturity, misplaced priorities, avoidance, or attempts to "mind read." That is why healthy communication is necessary to negotiate different sexual preferences and to agree on the frequency of sexual intercourse.

It is interesting for us to hear couples respond when we ask them how they successfully manage different areas in their lives. They often

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immediately describe some sort of strategy they have put in place. Their plans may not be detailed, but they understand that working together enables them to reach their desired goals. We have found this to be true for couples managing their households, parenting their children, handling work responsibilities, finances, exercise, hobbies, sports, serving at church—and even eating every day. Successful couples unanimously agree about the

necessity of having a plan in place. As one spouse stated, “If we fail to plan, we might as well plan to fail!”

So why don't couples consider applying these same principles and develop a plan for their sexual intimacy, including having regular intercourse? When we hear couples describe sex as a burden or power struggle, we encourage them to consider reframing sexual intimacy from the perspective that it is an important and ongoing part of their married life. We encourage couples to view sexual intimacy similar to the ways they view other activities. Couples get up, shower, eat, go to work, parent the kids, enjoy hobbies, and serve at church. They agree on these and many other activities but often are bogged down when they begin to talk about sexual intimacy.

Our experiences suggests there is more in play when couples have ongoing struggles negotiating differences and reaching agreement about frequency of sexual intercourse. A few deeper issues we encourage them to consider are immaturity, unresolved anger, active and passive control, negative family-of-origin issues, unhealed sexual histories, negative sexual imprinting, or abuse.

Reaching agreement in any area of life requires healthy communication. That is why it is important for couples to grow in their communication skills and to take ownership and responsibility for their part in marriage. Negotiating the frequency of sexual intercourse includes taking the time to develop a plan by talking with a spouse, processing together, and reaching agreement. For example, a wife may desire to have sexual intercourse four times a week. Her husband also enjoys intercourse but considers once or twice a week to be just fine. If they dismiss or avoid having mature and at times difficult conversations, how might that impact their sexual intimacy? And how would spouses have their sexual frequency needs and desires met?

Remember, the problem is not in having different desires. In fact, it is natural for two people to think and feel differently. Differences become problems when a couple is unable to effectively communicate and process their desires with each other. Couples seeing a counselor to work on sexual issues will often spend more time on their communication and intimacy-building skills than on the sexual issues they originally came to resolve. A

counselor may review families of origin and ask each person to consider the following questions:

- + *How did your parents model communication while you were growing up?*
- + *Were your parents able to effectively communicate their needs to each other?*
- + *How would you describe the overall communication between you and your spouse?*
- + *How would you describe your ability to communicate in other relationships in your life?*
- + *How do you communicate your sexual desires to your spouse?*
- + *How does your spouse communicate his or her sexual desires to you?*

Life is lived in a story

anne+tim

We have friends in their mid-fifties who are now in the empty-nest season of their lives. They are a great couple who love marriage, but like every married couple, they have had their share of difficulties. One issue they have struggled with over the years is finding agreement on sexual frequency. The husband has a very high sex drive. If it were up to him, he would have sex every day. On the other hand, his wife would be more than happy with sex once a week.

As their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary was approaching, the wife wanted to do something special for her husband. After giving it some thought, she bought a card and placed a handmade coupon inside that read:

Happy 35th Anniversary!

*Let's commemorate this year by having sex every day for the next 35 days!!!
(I'll even initiate!)*

Her husband later told us that when he read the card he dropped the TV remote control and almost fell out of his La-Z-Boy! He thought he'd "died and gone to heaven."

We asked them how things progressed. The wife began, "Well ... the first few days went great."

They looked at each other and laughed. She continued, "Day three was just as good as day two. On day four I walked into the bedroom with a new nightgown on, and we enjoyed the evening together. Day five I gave him a massage."

Looking at each other, they smiled and the husband continued, "By day seven or eight we started getting a little tired."

"But I'd made a promise," the wife interrupted, "and I really wanted to keep it, so I pushed through."

“It was amazing!” the husband said. “We had more sex following our thirty-fifth anniversary than I could have ever dreamed of. But in all honesty, by the middle of the second week I was running out of gas. By day nine or ten, she came downstairs and began to initiate sex—again. I took a deep breath, looked her in the eyes, and said, ‘Honey, how about we just order a pizza and rent a movie?’” He dialed the phone to order the pizza while she jumped into her flannel nightgown.

In the example above, throughout their marriage the husband had the higher sex drive. However, this is not always the case. The truth is, many wives have a higher sex drive than their husband. Sadly, the typical story line of the husband constantly wanting more sex—and the wife who becomes afraid to “feed the monster”—aligns more with urban legend than with what the Bible says about sexual intimacy.

In one of the most direct Bible passages about sex (and authority) in marriage, the husband is the one commanded to first fulfill his sexual duty to his spouse. Likewise the wife is to fulfill her sexual duty to her husband.¹ Remember, in the beginning—in God’s original design for intimacy and sexuality—*both* the husband and wife were commanded to “become one flesh.”² And *both* the husband and wife were “naked and were not ashamed.”³

Furthermore, in the most sexually explicit book in the Bible—Song of Solomon—the *wife* repeatedly expresses her longings (emotional and sexual) for her husband. She vividly describes her husband’s body parts (5:10-16), desires her husband’s sweet taste (2:3), invites her husband to fondle and stimulate her (2:6; 8:3), describes her husband’s genitals (5:14), and invites him to come into her garden (genitals) and eat its choice fruits (4:16). It is the wife who initiates a sexual rendezvous in an outside vineyard (7:11-12). So much for the cultural stereotype of the boring, disinterested, unengaged wife whose main sexual responsibility is to satisfy her high-testosterone husband’s sexual needs.

Interestingly, in Song of Solomon God speaks only one time. He declares to the bride and the groom, “Eat ... drink, and imbibe deeply, O lovers.”⁴ Friends, *God is pro-sex!* And His desire is for *both* the husband and the

wife to celebrate and fully enjoy the sexual feast available in marriage. The key is for both partners to grow in their true identities—seeing themselves (and each other) as God sees them. Additional keys include understanding their sexual preferences, advancing in healthy communication, and taking ownership and responsibility to invest in any necessary healing from wounds that may be inhibiting one or both partners from sexual freedom and enjoyment.

That said, sexual satisfaction is not based on gender or defined by a couple's sexual frequency. We encourage couples to revisit what "having sex" means and to focus on the emotional part of their sexual intimacy. We believe God allows differences in a husband's and a wife's sexual desires for a reason. And those differences do not have to be viewed as *obstacles*, but can be viewed as *opportunities* to reflect and reveal God's love, grace, and goodness to each other.

SCHEDULING SEX

We encourage couples to consider the benefits of placing sexual intimacy high on their priority list by scheduling sex. We understand that for the romantic idealist, scheduling sex may seem to lack romance and spontaneity. You may question the suggestion to set aside specific times and days to have sex. But hang with us—and don't rule it out as an option just yet.

Stop and think about it; exactly how many times in the last few months has romantic, spontaneous sex actually occurred? In other words, how often do you currently have epic sexual experiences? Often, idealistic thinking surrounding romantic sex remains a fantasy, while real life marches on. Therefore, scheduling sex is one way to eliminate the relational and sexual tension that is often created when one spouse attempts to mind read, or wonder, *Is tonight going to be the night?*

Scheduling sex does not have to represent a negative, unromantic, or robotic, military-like decision. Instead, it can communicate a positive message. A message that says to a spouse: *You are a priority to me. I want us to be intentional about investing in our sexual intimacy.*

Consider the example of the husband or wife who has a lower libido or a spouse who rarely initiates sex. It's easy for either spouse to jump to mind reading, wondering: *Am I not desirable? Am I not enough? Is my spouse not attracted to me anymore? Is my spouse getting his or her sexual needs met apart from me? There must be something wrong with me—and our sex life.*

In reality, most husbands and wives have different libidos. So that means there is nothing wrong with you. That's why it's important to identify and understand your sexual preferences as you negotiate any differences. Working with couples, it's encouraging for us to see them enjoying the benefits of scheduled sex. In fact, spouses with the lower libido say the more they engage in sex on a regular basis, the more they desire sex. So we challenge husbands, wives—even the romantic idealists—to reframe

scheduling sex as one way to be romantic—and to advance in sexual intimacy.

SEXUAL INTERCOURSE FREQUENCY CHALLENGE

Before moving on, are you up for a sexual intercourse frequency challenge? As a side, the following challenge is representative of the numerous challenges and questions in our *NAKED: Reclaiming Sexual Intimacy in Marriage Companion Journal*. Throughout the book we have encouraged couples to begin *everything* by inviting the Lord into the process—*everything* includes sex. We begin this challenge the same way.

Step 1: Take some time to **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*) and determine a number that represents *your* ideal frequency for having sexual intercourse. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer to this question. People are different and have different desires for engaging in sexual intercourse.

Step 2: Schedule a date with your spouse to discuss your sexual intercourse frequency desires. Choose a quiet place you both enjoy—one that provides privacy. *Note:* We suggest the spouse who currently has the lower desire to engage in sexual intercourse to go first.

Step 3: Begin by looking your spouse directly in the eyes and share the number you chose for sexual intercourse frequency. Continue by sharing with your spouse why you chose that number.

Step 4: Remember, listening is a learned skill. It's important that your spouse understands what you just shared. So ask your spouse to reflect what they heard you say. Take time to process any questions and, if necessary, clarify anything.

Step 5: Now it's your spouse's turn. Repeat steps 3 and 4.

If you are like most couples, you probably have different numbers. But, in our experience, even with differences, couple's numbers are often not that far off from each other. That is why negotiating any differences can be an invitation to advance in intimacy.

The second part of our REAL LIFE sexual frequency challenge is for both spouses to be willing to meet each other's desired number for sexual intercourse for thirty days. You may want to begin by sexually serving the spouse who currently has a lower desire for sexual frequency. After thirty days, process together how this challenge went for each of you. For the following thirty days, it's the other spouse's turn to meet their spouse's desired frequency number for sexual intercourse. When those thirty days are over, schedule a date to discuss how this challenge went for each of you.

After completing this challenge, you are free to explore other options. If your numbers are very different, you can compromise by agreeing on a number that is in between the numbers you each selected. For example, one spouse desires sex four times per month (or one time per week). The other spouse desires sex twelve times per month (or three times per week). You both agree for the next thirty days to have sexual intercourse eight times per month (or two times per week). Afterward, discuss how this option went for each of you.

If the above sexual intimacy challenge triggered a spouse in inordinate ways, or if a couple is unable to fulfill their agreement with each other, we encourage them to make the mature decision to talk with a spiritual director and/or seek Christian marriage counseling.

SEXLESS MARRIAGE

Before moving on, we want to briefly address what is often referred to as a “sexless marriage.” In a sexless marriage, there is little or no sexual activity between spouses. The 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey found that of the married respondents, 2 percent reported no sexual intimacy in the previous year. The definition of a nonsexual marriage is often expanded to include couples where sexual intimacy occurs less than ten times annually, and in that case 20 percent of the couples in the National Health and Social Life Survey would fall in that category.”⁵ According to *Newsweek* magazine estimates, 15 to 20 percent of couples live in a sexless relationship.⁶ According to another study, up to 10 percent of married couples under age fifty did not have sex in the previous year. Among couples under age forty, up to 20 percent reported having sex a few times per month or per year.⁷

It is important to note that these studies do not clearly define “sexual activity.” We suspect these studies are referring to sexual intercourse. However, many couples are unable to have sexual intercourse yet have satisfying sex lives because they include investing in emotional intimacy and other ways to enjoy sexual intimacy in their definition of *having sex*.

SEXUAL ANOREXIA

Therapist Cory M. Schortzman writes, “Similar to sex addiction, sexual/intimacy anorexia is also an addiction. However, this is an addiction to safety or withholding love from one’s partner. Similar to the medical term of anorexia as a reduced appetite or aversion to food, sexual/intimacy anorexia is a reduced appetite or aversion to love or intimacy.”⁸

Dr. Doug Weiss⁹ offers the following questions in assessing possible sexual anorexia:

1. Do you withhold love from your partner?
2. Do you withhold praise or appreciation from your partner?
3. Do you control with silence or anger?
4. Do you have ongoing or ungrounded criticism of your partner that causes isolation?
5. Do you withhold sex from your spouse?
6. Are you unwilling or unable to discuss feelings with your partner?
7. Do you stay so busy there is no relational time for your partner?
8. Do you make problems or issues about your partner instead of owning your own issues?
9. Are you controlling or shaming of your partner regarding issues?
10. Do you withhold yourself spiritually or control through spiritual abuse and/or trauma?¹⁰

If you believe you are in a sexless marriage, struggle with sexual anorexia issues, or are unable to reach agreement on sexual frequency, **I.O.T.L.**, share your heart with your spouse, and be open to talking to a counselor who specializes in sexuality issues.

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This chapter addressed many sensitive sexual issues, including sexual frequency, scheduling sex, sexless marriage, and sexual anorexia, and it included a sexual intercourse frequency challenge. We want to encourage readers who desire to make *any* changes to take your time, if necessary seek counsel, and be kind to yourself. Remember, change is a constant, and to a degree, every person is in a process of change. Our encouragement is to first **I.O.T.L.**, and then trust God and take a risk. The reality is that every journey begins by taking a first step ... then a next step. Each step can be an invitation to enjoy that moment and to celebrate the *extraordinary-ordinary* everyday experiences in life.

Life is lived in a story

tim

Living in Colorado, Anne and I love to hike in the mountains. The first “fourteener” (the term used to describe a mountain over 14,000 feet above sea level) that we climbed was Mount Bierstadt, the next fourteener we climbed was Pikes Peak. If we limited our climbing experiences to climbing only mountains above 14,000 feet, as exciting as those hikes could be, we would have missed out on the weekly hikes we have enjoyed in the Garden of the Gods and Red Rock trails near our home. In fact, our countless regular—at times somewhat ordinary—hikes have provided us with much more enjoyment throughout many years of hiking when compared with our mountaintop experiences climbing fourteeners.

Likewise in marriage, a lifetime of enjoyable, at times somewhat ordinary, sexual experiences are just as valuable as occasional mountaintop experiences. The older we get, the more we enjoy the untapped *extraordinary-ordinary* experiences in our lives, our marriage—and in our sexual intimacy.

CHAPTER 8

TIMING, LOCATIONS, SEXUAL POSITIONS, QUICKIES, SEX AIDS, SEX DURING MENSTRUATION, AND PERSONAL HYGIENE

Let's continue to explore sensitive sexual issues.

TIMING

Couples often ask, “What happens when we disagree on the best time to have sex?” Choosing a time that is good for both spouses requires healthy communication, negotiation, boundaries, and compromise. To begin, it’s important for individuals to pay close attention to themselves¹ and be aware of their body clocks. Some people enjoy staying up late, while others enjoy the early morning hours. Can you see how these differences might become a potential problem for couples when deciding the best time to have sex?

Life is lived in a story

tim

We weren't married very long before we realized how our different body clocks affected our sex life. Anne was a night owl who could easily
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stay up past midnight. On the other hand, I was an early bird. I grew up with my dad leaving at 3 a.m. for his milkman route. While I didn't begin my day quite that early, I was in bed by 10 p.m. and usually ready to go by 5 a.m.

Trying to adjust to different schedules presented a problem when it came to deciding the best times for both of us to enjoy sex. I could try to manipulate, control, and “work it” to get my way. Or I could live in the Larger Story and choose to look for ways to love and serve Anne.

Early in our marriage, Anne defaulted to being a conflict avoider. She wanted to believe that marriage problems—especially sexual issues—would eventually work themselves out without having to talk about them. On the other hand, I viewed marriage difficulties as problems that needed to be solved—the sooner the better.

At that point in our marriage, we were too immature to successfully navigate our way through a healthy discussion that led to resolution. So together we sought counsel, and I began to discover the “dark side” of my communication style. One of the first things I began to work on was my listening skills. Instead of listening to Anne to agree/disagree or to direct/control, I began to focus on *listening to understand her*. This opened the door for me to live in the Larger Story with *God* as the main character, instead of living in the smaller story, where marriage was primarily about me—and getting my desires met.

Over time, we agreed to make it a priority to be more intentional about planning and scheduling sexual intimacy. This included learning how to negotiate with each other in loving and life-giving ways. We made it a priority to focus on being reciprocal servants, and this included compromise

and seeking middle ground in our sexual intimacy.

Personally, I became determined to take ownership and responsibility for my part in our marriage. I guess my problem really wasn't about timing; instead, I needed to look at areas of immaturity in my life. For me, it was time to put away selfish childish behaviors and become an adult concerning my sexual needs and desires. Bottom line, it was time for me to grow up!

HAVING SEX IN DIFFERENT LOCATIONS

When it comes to sexual intimacy, is your bedroom the main venue? A frequent complaint we hear from couples is, “Our sex life is routine, predictable, and boring.” If you are open to changing things up a bit, something as simple as changing locations may be the answer. Thinking outside the box in terms of location is just one way to push back against routine and boredom. Having sex in a variety of locations can increase passion and desire. For example, couples can enjoy sexual intimacy in different rooms of the house, in the car, or outside under the stars.

Life is lived in a story

anne

A couple we know attended a wedding, and on their drive home they reminisced about their early years of marriage and how fast time was flying by. Together they decided that it would be fun to pull their car over to a private place and make love in the backseat. They enjoyed this experience so much that having sex in different locations has become a new tradition they celebrate on special occasions—especially on their wedding anniversary.

One wife realized how many rules and restrictions she had regarding sex, so she decided to surprise her husband by having sex with him outside under the stars. She confessed, “I was so afraid, I actually imagined the morning headlines in our local newspaper reading: ‘Mr. and Mrs. Smith, leaders at First Community Church, arrested for indecent exposure by local authorities for having sex in an open field.’” In spite of her reservations, she pushed through and selected a place that provided the privacy and safety she needed. Her husband later commented, “Babe, that night was one of the highlights of my year!”

It is important to process your sexual desires together with your spouse. First **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*). Implement the **Traffic Light Principle**, and wait until you *both* have “green lights.” Lastly, if you have sex outside of your home, choose a place that provides complete privacy. Do not allow your freedom to become a problem for others. Remember, nakedness in marriage should be reserved for a husband’s and a wife’s eyes only. Others seeing you naked, especially children, can result in negative sexual imprinting. And, of course, no one wants to be arrested for indecent exposure.

SEXUAL POSITIONS

For couples who are interested in creative ways to engage in sexual intercourse, plenty of resources, books, and blogs are available. We find that when couples ask about new sexual positions, they are not asking for new ideas. Instead, they are asking for help on how to reach agreement about new sexual positions. Husbands and wives ask, “How do I respond when my spouse keeps insisting on sexual positions that I am not interested in—or comfortable with? It feels like we end up in a tug-of-war. Whose way is the right way?”

Some couples end up in arguments before they even begin a healthy discussion. An inability to process sensitive sexual issues can be an invitation for couples to explore deeper issues with a counselor or spiritual director. But always remember that in relationships, *control* responds to *control*, and *love* responds to *love*.

When considering something new, it is always wise to begin by inviting God into your process, and ask for wisdom.² It is also beneficial for husbands and wives to ask themselves these questions: *Is my sexual request, or my response, coming from a smaller story perspective that may be rooted in selfishness—where “it’s all about me,” my pleasure, and my desires being met? Or is my request coming from a Larger Story perspective that is focused on our WE—our pleasure, and both of our desires being met?*

Often couples may knowingly or unknowingly withhold sex in an attempt to communicate deeper issues. For example, if resistance continues to be an ongoing issue with one or both spouses, consider exploring where that resistance may be coming from with a counselor or spiritual director. Couples are often surprised to discover the impact of family-of-origin issues, sexual histories, negative sexual imprinting, abuse, toxic religiosity, personal concerns, physical problems, moral issues, or emotional issues. Often exploring a person’s feelings, boundaries, and decisions becomes the pathway to healing and advancing in emotional and sexual intimacy.

Remember, a key question for couples when it comes to sex is “Are we in unity with God and each other?” Practically, we encourage couples to implement the **Traffic Light Principle** when processing any sensitive sexual issue. First, both the husband and wife **I.O.T.L.** And they wait until they *both* have “green lights” from the Lord. Remember, unity is critical for mutual success and enjoyment. Another great question to answer is, “Are we reflecting and revealing the love, grace, and goodness of God to each other?”

A healthy marriage is grounded in love, friendship, trust, and a commitment to advance in intimacy—in knowing and being fully known. When wives and husbands are coming from those places, it results in an increase in emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy—as well as more joyful orgasms.

QUICKIES

Life is lived in a story

anne

At a recent REAL LIFE Marriage Advance, one of the questions submitted was “Could you talk more about quickies?” Before Tim or I could respond, the senior pastor jumped up out of his seat and said, “Let me answer that question.” We handed him the microphone.

He stood in front of his congregation and invited his wife to stand next to him. He said, “Friends, let me give you a great illustration of a quickie. My wife and I enjoy food. A few times a year we like to make reservations at an exquisite restaurant that promises a fine-dining experience. They have white linen tablecloths, silver utensils, and fine china. They offer multiple courses, including appetizers and dessert. Whenever we have a fine dining experience, it lasts for hours.”

He continued, “Don’t get me wrong; we love fine dining. But on our budget and with our full lives we are only able to enjoy it occasionally. Most of the time we are so tired and hungry at the end of the day, we just grab something fast. Sometimes we even zip through the drive-through window for some fast food. The point I want to make is my wife and I like to refer to *quickies* as ‘drive-through sex.’”

Everyone laughed, but the permission this leader gave to his congregation was much more valuable than anything we could have said about quickies.

SEX AIDS

Life is lived in a story

anne+tim

We counseled a Christian couple who had been married ten years. They had two children, and they were having sexual intercourse regularly. They scheduled a REAL LIFE intimacy and sexuality intensive and the wife told us that achieving orgasm was always difficult for her. She explained that she enjoyed sex and was happy for her husband's sexual satisfaction. She concluded, "In all honesty, for me sex is just okay, and my orgasms are extremely rare."

We thanked them for their transparency, especially concerning such a delicate subject. And we encouraged the wife to see a doctor in order to rule out any medical issues. Following a normal examination and lab results, the gynecologist suggested the wife consider using a sexual aid, specifically a vibrator, to help bring more blood flow to her genitals— hopefully enabling her to experience regular orgasms.

They scheduled another appointment with us to help them process next steps. Both reported very few sexual experiences before they got married. They explained that their families of origin could be described as religious and very conservative. And they wondered if that was why they had some reservations about purchasing any kind of sexual aid. The wife said, "My mom would have a stroke if she knew we were talking about buying a vibrator—let alone using one!"

We congratulated them for approaching this issue *together*—as a team—and viewing this issue not as "her" issue, but as a "WE" issue. And we commended them for being transparent with each other, for seeking medical advice, and especially for desiring all God has designed for them in marriage—including both of them regularly experiencing orgasms.

Then we challenged them to individually **I.O.T.L.** and take next steps only if they *both* sensed a "green light" from the Lord on following the doctor's advice and purchasing a vibrator. We explained, for obvious reasons, we did not see the use of sexual aids addressed in the Bible. Furthermore, we said that we did not believe that using electronic stimulation to help increase

blood flow with a desire to help achieve orgasm as being selfish, harmful, or violating any biblical principles.

At their next appointment, the wife began by saying, “We prayed, had unity, and went online and purchased a vibrator. We incorporated it into our lovemaking—oh, my gosh!—ask me if I’ve been experiencing orgasms.” We smiled and said that we didn’t have to ask.

This couple is a great example of following a healthy process. They explored any biblical principles involved, sought out medical advice, resisted negative family-of-origin propensities, and invested in Christian counseling. They implemented the **Traffic Light Principle** and waited until they both had “green lights” from the Lord before adding a vibrator to their love life.

Concerning adding things to your lovemaking, we want to offer a word of caution. Always be careful that the solution to your problem does not become your next problem. For example, the use of a vibrator (or other sex aid) for some couples may potentially be a good thing. But it can become a not-so-good thing if it becomes the main focus in your lovemaking.

SEX DURING MENSTRUATION

“Is it okay to have sex when the wife is menstruating?” Over the years, we’ve talked with theologians, spiritual parents, pastors, and friends about this question. And we have received many different responses. For example, one scholar quoted passages from the Old Testament—Leviticus 12:1, 18:19, 20:18—and said this prohibition is still valid. Another scholar said, similar to hundreds of other Old Testament ceremonial/cultural laws, restrictions on sex during menstruation no longer apply.

One medical doctor said he did not recommend this practice because prohibiting it protects the wife from getting infections because her cervix is open during menstruation. A pastor friend believes that refraining from sexual intercourse during menstruation opens up opportunities for couples to experience what he calls an “erotic obstacle.” His position is that refraining from intercourse while the wife is menstruating can become an intimate invitation to look for other creative ways to love and sexually satisfy a spouse. A woman described how her period negatively impacted her physically and emotionally. So for her to choose *not* to have sexual intercourse during menstruation provided her time she needed to simply rest. And I (Tim) recall a conversation with a fire chief who was married ten years longer than us. He said that he and his wife came to the realization early in their marriage that intercourse during his wife’s period greatly eliminated her menstrual cramps. As you can see, people are all over the map on this topic.

Our encouragement is to first **I.O.T.L.** Ask God to speak to you about this issue. Second, study the Bible, specifically the texts about sex during menstruation. Third, implement the **Traffic Light Principle**—and do not engage in this activity unless you *both* have “green lights.”

We counseled one couple where the wife really wanted to engage in intercourse during her period. As a side, her top love language was service. Her husband was somewhat hesitant as he envisioned engaging in menstrual intercourse. But, he agreed to **I.O.T.L.**—and sensed a “green

light.” Despite his hesitancy, he offered to sexually serve his spouse in this way. The wife, wanting to be sensitive to her husband’s feelings, suggested he wear a condom and they experiment in the shower.

PERSONAL HYGIENE

When we lead REAL LIFE Marriage Advances, we invite people to anonymously submit questions and at almost every gathering we receive a question about personal hygiene. In our experience, this problem is more common than one might think, and it must be handled with wisdom and grace.

Life is lived in a story

anne

At one REAL LIFE marriage gathering a woman who appeared to be in her thirties approached me on break. Looking over her shoulder to make sure her husband was not within earshot, she whispered, “I am crazy about my husband, and I enjoy making love with him, but his personal hygiene is really a problem. For example, after a hard day working construction, the first thing he wants to do when he walks in the door is give me a huge hug and passionate kiss. And sometimes he jumps into bed at night without even showering—or brushing his teeth. I love that he initiates physically and sexually. But how can I get him to understand that for me any kind of *stale man-smell*, especially bad breath, totally turns me off? Do you have any suggestions?”

I encouraged this wife to address her propensity toward avoiding conflict by working at developing a more direct style of communication. On a lighter side, I also suggested she consider asking her husband to join her in the shower when he came home from work or invite him to join her in a hot bubble bath before heading to bed. Not many husbands would say no to a shower if they knew what was on the other side of the agreement.

This woman was merely sharing what research confirms. How a person smells dramatically impacts attraction. One study done by Oxford University asked women to rate men’s attractiveness.³ Women found men more attractive in the presence of pleasant scents. In another study on initial attraction, female college students ranked a man’s scent higher than his looks, height, weight, physique, or income. In contrast, men rated a woman’s physical appearance as the highest in initial attraction. It appears women are more influenced by their nose than men are. And they have a higher reaction to smells when it comes to romance. Scientifically speaking, a man’s pheromones are more easily detected when his body is clean.⁴

Are you up for a REAL LIFE challenge? Pause for a moment ... how do you rate *your* personal hygiene? Do you bring your best to your marriage? Or do you invest more time getting ready for work or going out with friends

than you do getting ready to sleep with or make love with your spouse? The problem of poor personal hygiene is more prevalent than you may think. Is this an area you need to work on? And if your spouse needs to work on this area, be very winsome in choosing the right time to gently bring up this subject.

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As we conclude this chapter, we encourage couples to process sensitive sexual issues by first choosing to **I.O.T.L.** Study what the Bible says, and seek out seasoned couples for wisdom. Then honestly share your heart with your spouse, and focus on never shaming your spouse. Implement the **Traffic Light Principle** and wait until you *both* have “green lights” from the Lord *before* you address any marriage issue.

CHAPTER 9

ORGASM

Life is lived in a story

anne

At one of our REAL LIFE marriage gatherings years ago, a woman in her late fifties approached me. She told me she had been married more than thirty years but wasn't sure if she had ever experienced an orgasm. She was obviously uncomfortable disclosing this information. We talked for a while, I told some stories, and she began to relax. As we pressed deeper into our conversation, tears ran down her cheeks. "In all the years I've been going to church, I've never heard anyone talk about this subject."

For more than thirty years, this woman had suffered a limited understanding of the gift that God had created for her to enjoy. Not only was she missing the opportunity for pleasure, but her husband was missing the joy of bringing her pleasure. As we finished, she encouraged Tim and me to continue to talk about difficult topics and push back against the negative sex culture in many churches.

ORGASMS—GOD'S IDEA

God is pro-sex! He created you and your spouse as sexual beings, and He designed the human body with the ability to experience intense sexual pleasure. Remember, orgasms were God's idea. He created a woman's clitoris with twice as many nerve endings as anywhere else on her body, and He created a man's penis with more nerve endings than anywhere on his body. Marriage is a one-of-a-kind, *two-become-oneflesh* relationship where a wife and husband are invited to regularly experience the deeply bonding effect sexual intimacy and orgasms provide.

THE BENEFITS OF EXPERIENCING ORGASMS

Everyone agrees that an orgasm feels great. However, in addition to incredible feelings, there are many physical, emotional, and physiological benefits as a person's body releases the "feel good" hormones of oxytocin and endorphins. A nonexhaustive list of ten benefits to sex follows: "(1) counts as exercise, (2) important for heart health, (3) boosts immune system, (4) brightens complexion, (5) stress relief, (6) more sleep, faster, (7) lowers blood pressure, (8) increased mental clarity, (9) improves female bladder control, (10) may reduce prostate cancer."¹

Dr. Juli Slattery adds to the benefits of sex in marriage: "When a couple has a new, exciting sexual experience, the body releases different chemicals, including phenyl ethylamine (PEA) and adrenaline. The combination of these two is powerful—much stronger than the steady stream of oxytocin and endorphins. In fact, PEA and adrenaline impact the brain in a way similar to crack cocaine."²

Dr. Cliff and Joyce Penner describe the orgasm experience this way: "Most of the time we let our minds control us. But in the moment of orgasm we are released from that control. Climax is a 'total being' experience; everything about us enters into it. Perhaps this is how the sexual experience represents our relationship to God. In this total, intense fusion of body, emotion, and spirit, we are connecting with what it can be like to be totally one with God. This is, indeed, a mystery."³

Orgasms can be experienced in a number of different ways. For example, male orgasms can include nocturnal orgasm (wet dream), premature ejaculation orgasm, reaching orgasm through manual or oral stimulation, experiencing multiple orgasms, and simultaneous orgasms with a spouse. Females can also experience many different types of orgasms, including nocturnal orgasm, reaching orgasm through manual or oral stimulation, clitoral orgasm, vaginal orgasm, multiple orgasms, G-spot orgasm, and simultaneous orgasms with a spouse.

Simultaneous orgasms involve a husband and wife climaxing at the same time. For many couples this is the exception in their lovemaking rather than the rule. Therefore, we encourage couples to not make simultaneous orgasm their primary goal. The reality is some couples are able to achieve simultaneous orgasms, and other couples describe having a deeply satisfying sex life despite never experiencing a simultaneous orgasm.

SENSITIVE SEXUAL SPOTS

For couples who may be interested in a wife's G-spot or a husband's sensitive sexual spot, learning where they are located and how to stimulate them can become an emotionally bonding experience. When the search begins, it often feels like setting out to find the Emerald City. While there is no detailed map, gently exploring each other's bodies can become invitations for couples to experience increased intimacy—to know and be fully known. This includes learning how to verbally express your sexual desires and lovingly negotiate any differences. However, if a husband or wife decides to begin the search, mutual agreement is essential. Once again, we always challenge couples to first **I.O.T.L** (*Inquire of the Lord*), implementing the **Traffic Light Principle**, and waiting until you *both* have “green lights” from the Lord before you try anything new.

FEMALE G-spot—Couples ask, “Where is a woman's G-spot located?” The clitoris has always been considered the main trigger for female orgasm. However, ever since German researcher and physician Ernst Gräfenberg first identified this elusive erogenous zone in the late 1940s, it has been a topic of debate.

For those who are curious about this, we encourage you to consider doing your own research. The G-spot is said to be located approximately two inches inside the vagina, along the top wall (belly button side). Upon further investigation, it can be identified by its textured or ribbed surface, as opposed to the smooth surface of the surrounding tissue. When aroused, this area swells resulting in a slight bump on the top of the vagina wall.

Without substantial scientific evidence, researchers continue to debate this topic. Nevertheless, some women report the G-spot to be a highly sensitive area that is a source of sexual pleasure, while other women seem unable or unwilling to confirm its existence. For women who do not enjoy or respond to manual stimulation, experimenting with different sexual positions during intercourse can result in a husband's penis massaging this area.

MALE sensitive sexual spot—Couples ask, “Does this even exist?” The male sensitive sexual spot is believed to be related to the prostate gland, which is approximately the size of a walnut and located under a man’s bladder. Some believe that when the perineum area, the area between the penis and rectum, is massaged it can stimulate the prostate. And this can be pleasurable and increase the intensity of an orgasm.

SPECIFIC PHASES TO ORGASM

Experiencing various kinds of orgasms can be different for every person. That is why it is important for people to understand how their body functions. This includes understanding God's design of male and female anatomy. Since the topic of orgasms seems to prompt questions with many couples we meet, let's briefly consider the phases of orgasm. The sex research team of Masters and Johnson broke down the sexual response pattern into four specific phases.⁴

1. The Excitement Phase

This is the initial arousal phase when sexual stimulation causes a man's penis or a woman's nipples to become erect. Your spouse may be visually stimulated by your body or sexually charged by a memory of a romantic time together. Many things can distract a person from the excitement phase, and a person's sexual response can be diminished if other areas of their life are out of balance. Some of the issues that can interfere with arousal include stress, illness, hormone imbalance, lack of sleep, bad nutrition, poor health, depression, negative sexual imprinting, abuse, and low self-esteem.

2. The Plateau Phase

This is the longest phase of lovemaking as arousal intensifies for the man and the woman. A woman's clitoris and a man's penis experience the most dramatic change during this phase. A man's penis swells while a woman's vagina becomes lubricated in preparation for penetration. In this phase, a husband and wife focus on sexually stimulating one another.

3. The Orgasmic Phase

This is the shortest and most intense phase, when orgasmic contractions are experienced. Intense sexual stimulation occurs, breathing increases, blood pressure and heart rates rise, muscles contract, and a man ejaculates. Typically, a man's climax is centered on his genitals, while a woman's climax tends to encompass her entire body.

4. The Resolution Phase

During this phase, muscles relax and the body returns to its prestimulated state.

In our experience, couples often view orgasm from a performancebased perspective. This success/fail mentality can lead to fear, insecurity, and pride. We encourage couples to view orgasm as a *journey* to be enjoyed rather than a *destination* couples must arrive at. Instead of a performance-oriented, pressure-to-achieve-orgasm sexual intimacy model, we challenge couples to focus on emotional intimacy, which includes maximizing *all* the senses—talking and listening, touching, seeing, smelling, and tasting. This spirit-soul-body journey invites couples to experience deep levels of intimacy as together they celebrate the *extraordinary-ordinary* of what it means to be “naked and not ashamed.”⁵

Life is lived in a story

anne

One Sunday after church we ran into a young newlywed couple—“Lou and Lisa”—who had come to us for their premarital counseling several months earlier. They were excited to see us and eager to catch up. They told us all about their honeymoon, apartment, and new puppy. At some point in the conversation we asked how their sex life was going. Lou quickly replied, “Sex is great!” Lisa simply nodded, a less-than-enthusiastic response.

I gently asked a more specific question: “Are you both having orgasms?” Again, Lou gave an immediate thumbs-up response, declaring, “No problem in that department.” His bride hesitated as if she didn’t know how to answer the question. She said, “I think so. I mean ... it feels good—I guess.” Lou looked at Lisa with surprise.

Tim pulled out his Day-Timer and said to Lou, “Let’s do lunch this week. How about Wednesday at Chili’s? Eleven-thirty—you’re buying.” Lou agreed.

When they met over lunch, Lou began their conversation by declaring his confusion: “I could not believe how Lisa responded to Anne’s question about orgasms. What did Lisa mean when she said, ‘I think so’? I’m pretty sure that if she had an orgasm she would know it, wouldn’t she?”

Lou came from a fatherless home and had very little sexual training or experience. Growing up, everything he heard about sex came from the locker room. We had discussed sex during our premarital meetings. However, after he got married he never thought to ask his wife if she was enjoying sex or experiencing orgasm. Lou did not grow up in a family that communicated well or shared their feelings. Talking to Lisa about how she responded sexually or whether she experienced orgasm never occurred to him. He assumed that sex was as great for Lisa as it was for him.

So at that lunch, Tim began by describing to Lou some of the benefits of emotional intimacy—of passionately pursuing and delighting in Lisa. Tim explained the importance in understanding that sex in marriage includes a

spouse's spirit, soul, and body. Then he looked around the restaurant to see if anyone was within earshot of their conversation. Leaning toward Lou, Tim drew a simple sketch of the female genitalia on a paper napkin. Lou stared at the napkin and listened attentively to every word. Tim explained about female anatomy, foreplay, direct and indirect pressure, rhythm, timing, lubrication, and the different phases of orgasm. He encouraged Lou to talk with Lisa, ask her questions, and most important, *listen* to what she said.

As Lou paid for lunch, he thanked Tim and shook his hand. Tim looked into this young man's eyes and said, "Lou, when the Bible commands a husband to fulfill his sexual duty to his wife that means it's your job to make your wife's toes curl—so get to work on that!"

A few weeks later, they approached us after church. Lisa was glowing. She said, "Ask me if I've been having orgasms." I looked at her and said, "I don't think we have to; it looks like things are going great."

On the way home that day, Tim asked me if I had noticed Lou's response when his wife was talking about her sexual success. He went on: "Lou looked like a peacock at Lincoln Park Zoo. He was proudly displaying his feathers and strutting his stuff as Lisa talked about being sexually satisfied by her man."

When we recently told this story at a REAL LIFE Marriage Advance, a young man in the audience raised his hand to ask, "Hey, Tim! Any chance husbands can get a copy of that napkin?"

A BRIEF WORD TO HUSBANDS (FROM TIM)

I'm guessing most husbands will read about orgasms. Therefore, I thought this would be a good place to pause ... and speak directly to husbands. For decades I've listened to men talk about their sex lives. And I've reached the conclusion that many husbands consider themselves as having the final say in regard to sexual intimacy. For example, I've counseled husbands who tell me they won't wear condoms because it takes away from *their* enjoyment. I've worked with husbands who regularly demand that their wife submit to them and respond sexually in the ways they desire. And I've talked with husbands who require that their wife experience an orgasm every time they have intercourse. As a side, that's a great way to encourage a wife to fake orgasms.

Come on, guys! In my opinion, these attitudes reflect generations of hierarchical marriage views. The Bible clearly commands *mutual submission*: "Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ."⁶ It also talks about *mutual authority* in marriage.⁷ Thankfully, I am seeing a shift in marriage perspectives. For example, many husbands, especially millennials, are beginning to understand the benefits in co-leadership.

Of course, every couple is free to choose how they want to live out marriage. But instead of endlessly debating a handful of controversial marriage texts, I challenge you to revisit the mutual equality and mutual authority principles of Paradise. I believe living out marriage as co-leaders is a much healthier (and biblical) representation of the mutuality in God's character—and His original design for marriage. Furthermore, I challenge you to reject male privileges and focus instead on humility and being a servant. The Bible says, "In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."⁸ Trust me, focusing on love, functional equality, and reciprocal servanthood will bear much fruit. And it will help you advance in emotional and sexual intimacy with your bride.

A BRIEF WORD TO WIVES (FROM TIM)

I'd also like to speak directly to wives. I was raised in a home with four men, and I served for more than twenty-two years on a suburban Chicago fire department working with 150 men. I am comfortable with and enjoy hanging out with men.

That said, whenever I lead a REAL LIFE men's gathering, and the subject turns to sex, I ask men this question: "When do you feel most like a man sexually?" Their response is so predictable. After the typical macho replies subside, I press them for a genuine response. Usually an older (wiser) man will say, "I feel most like a man sexually when my wife is sexually satisfied." This opens doors for all kinds of honest dialogue.

Wives, please hear me on this: husbands try to appear to have it all together sexually—but we don't. Every husband is created with a longing to connect with and sexually satisfy his bride. My experience suggests that a husband's desire to connect with you sexually directly relates to his connecting with you emotionally. With that in mind, would you consider reframing your husband's pursuit of you sexually as a way for him to connect with you emotionally?

Furthermore, when it comes to sexual intimacy, for reasons I suspect originated in patriarchal, hierarchical, and misogynistic soil, many wives default to not fully celebrating and experiencing sexual satisfaction. Remember, *God is pro-sex*—and He created *you* to enjoy a great sex life!

Regarding marriage standpoints, I challenge you to compare hierarchical and complementarian marriage views with the marriage principles of Paradise. There is so much untapped kingdom-advancing potential available when wives and husbands maximize *all* the gifts the Holy Spirit has given them—without gender-based restrictions. When couples co-lead together, they can become a marriage powerhouse. Lastly, in my opinion, wives (all women) who view themselves as functional equals more fully embrace their

true identities—and this results in women better seeing themselves as God sees them.

BEING A GOOD LOVER

Advancing in sexual intimacy is both an art and a science. The *science* of making love involves specific body parts, and includes understanding how your body and your spouse's body function and respond. The *art* of making love involves a person's emotions—especially his or her heart. It involves being sensitive to your spouse's needs and desires as you initiate and respond to each other emotionally and sexually.

Every spouse wants to be a great lover. That said, it's normal for husbands and wives to wonder if their attempts to sexually arouse their spouse are working. Ideally, the primary person to provide feedback and guidance to help your spouse become a great lover is *you*!

This a good place for a challenge. Can we ask, “How well do you know your body and your spouse's body? Do you know how your body and your spouse's body function and respond?” After answering those questions, can we offer an additional challenge question? “How comfortable are you communicating that information to your spouse?”

We encourage husbands and wives to invest in identifying *anything* that blocks open and honest communication. This can include immaturity, family-of-origin issues, awkwardness, sexual histories, lack of forgiveness, negative feelings, fears, and body-image issues.

Remember, great sex is not limited to the intensity of an orgasm. Instead, God invites a husband and wife to experience joy and pleasure as together they explore the miracle and mystery of *two becoming one*. This includes two spirits, two souls, and two bodies joining together. In marriage, enjoying sex and experiencing orgasm can be one way that God foreshadows something greater than marriage or themselves—spending a joyful, cosmic, orgasmic-like eternity with Him.⁹

You may have identified yourself as a person who is not experiencing a satisfying sex life. You may be struggling in your attempts to advance in intimacy with your spouse. Maybe it's difficult to talk with your spouse

about sensitive sexual issues. Hopefully this does not come as a surprise, but we remind every husband and wife in every season of marriage, from newlyweds to seasoned married couples, that they “will have trouble.”¹⁰ Counseling for many decades, our experience shows that *every* couple experiences sexual problems at some time in their marriage.

Life is lived in a story

anne+tim

Have you heard the story of the elderly couple who saved up for years to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary by taking a cruise? They had never done anything like this, and they had the time of their lives. At the end of the cruise, as they prepared to leave the ship, the captain shook their hands and encouraged them not to wait until their fifty-fifth wedding anniversary to take another cruise.

The elderly couple politely thanked the captain and started to move on. Suddenly, the wife stopped and turned back toward the captain. “We had such a wonderful time,” she said. “But throughout our stay we couldn’t help noticing all the beautiful banquet tables. They were filled with a variety of delicious food, desserts, and extravagant ice sculptures. There were unlimited choices, and everything was so beautifully prepared.”

She hesitated, then asked, “Captain, if we take another cruise, how much more would it cost us to have the meals included? We brought our own food, enjoyed cheese and crackers in our room, and our entire cruise was such a wonderful experience. But we can only imagine how amazing it would have been if we would have been able to eat from the banquet table....”

The captain was shocked. He couldn’t believe the couple did not understand that the food was included with their cruise ticket. He was deeply saddened to learn that this dear couple had missed out on the banquet that was prepared for them every night.

This elderly couple’s cruise experience bears a heartrending resemblance to the sexual aspect in many marriages. God has prepared a banquet table. He invites every husband and wife to eat, drink, and imbibe deeply in spirit, soul, and body oneness. Yet so many couples, figuratively speaking, settle for cheese and crackers. Unfortunately, they do not understand that God has invited them to a sexual intimacy feast.

Truth be told, many couples are settling for much less than what God has

designed for emotional and sexual intimacy. When troubles surface, they refuse to talk to a counselor, physician, pastor, or trusted friend. Many husbands and wives will not even talk to each other. They may feel embarrassed or ashamed to admit having sexual questions, problems, or concerns. The Enemy relishes in secrets as he seeks to magnify shame, blame, fear, control, rebellion, and rejection. As sexual issues arise, couples often deny or attempt to endure them. They hope that over time the difficulties will somehow magically resolve themselves. And that solution typically becomes a couple's next problem.

In our experience, without some kind of intervention, marriage problems do not magically disappear or get better on their own—in most cases things get worse. Furthermore, couples often believe that sex issues are their main problem, but they are usually the result of the problem. Root issues in a person's life can stay hidden for a long time then and surface in the sexual dimension of a couple's relationship.

Sexual struggles can be viewed as warning flags. These struggles can be rooted in a number of things, including a lack of knowledge, a medical issue, negative family-of-origin or toxic religious perspectives about sex, negative sexual imprinting, or abuse. Whatever it may be, do not let troubles remain *obstacles*, instead **I.O.T.L.**—and ask God to help you view them as *opportunities*.

Now let's move on to more sensitive sexual issues—many topics that we rarely, if ever, hear addressed in churches.

CHAPTER 10

LUST AND MASTURBATION, ORAL STIMULATION AND ORAL SEX, AND ANAL SEX

The topics of masturbation and lust generate passionate opinions and much disagreement among Christians. For example, some people consider masturbation a natural expression of a person's sexuality. Others firmly believe masturbation is a sin. When talking about lust, most Christians hold a negative view. Therefore, let's take a closer look at these topics, and see how they relate to each other.

LUST

What comes to mind when you hear the word *lust*? For many Christians, the word bears a negative connotation. Lust is an “intense or unbridled sexual desire.”¹ The phrase “unbridled sexual desire” brings to mind words like *uncontrolled*, *unchecked*, and *unrestrained*. Many people struggle with sinfully lusting after people, money, power, possessions, positions, and sex.

There are a number of biblical references to sinful lust. For example, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, *lust*, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”²

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Another passage says, “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, *lust*, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.”³ Jesus spoke about lust and redirected people from focusing on outward behavior to focusing on a person’s heart: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with *lust* for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”⁴ You get the picture; sinful lust is depicted in the Bible as part of a pagan lifestyle that includes unbridled desires for the wrong things.

Fast-forward two-thousand-plus years, we are living in a culture where people keep looking for love in all the wrong places. Turn on the news, go online, check a mobile device, or read a newspaper. Lusting after things with unbridled desire is a popular lifestyle choice, and having everything *your way* is the go-to way of life. However, self-centered choices made at the expense of others reflect smaller story, “It’s all about me” living. This me-centered attitude says, *I want what I want ... and I want it now!*

Unbridled desires typically focus on outward appearances and perceptions. The Bible says, “People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”⁵ Throughout the Scriptures, God continually points people

back to the heart. And sinful lust and unbridled desires negatively affect a husband, a wife, and their marriage.

We want to pause for a moment and gently ask, “Are there any areas in your life where you struggle with unbridled desires or sinful lust?” God invites men, women, and couples to live a lifestyle that reflects personal maturity. One way that reflects maturity is for a person to take ownership and responsibility for healthy/unhealthy desires and choices. Therefore, we caution people to be careful when dealing with sinful lust and unbridled desires. Sexual intimacy in marriage involves both spouses’ spirits, souls, and bodies. Unbridled desires and sinful lust can open the door to counterfeit forms of intimacy, and draw a person (or couple) into something much deeper than they can understand.

CAN LUST BE FRAMED IN A POSITIVE WAY?

Few people need to be convinced about the potential harm resulting from unbridled desires and sinful lust. However, we'd like to offer another perspective. Can lust be viewed positively? Remember, the definition of lust is "intense or unbridled sexual desire." But it is also defined as "an intense longing."⁶ In the Bible, the word *epithumeo* means strong desire.⁷ This word can describe lust in a healthy and life-giving way. For example, in Luke 22:15, Jesus said to His disciples, "I have earnestly desired [*epithumeo*] to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."

Having a strong desire for the right things is good. For example, strongly desiring your children to love God, your church to flourish, and for discrimination and injustices against others, especially women, to end are all good desires to have. In marriage, having a strong desire for a spouse can open the door to advancing in intimacy. This includes desiring a spouse's body and enjoying his or her physical attributes. It also includes desiring, longing for, delighting in, and celebrating your spouse's heart, gifts, intellect, and sense of humor. Counseling for many years, we have found both husbands and wives long for their spouse to strongly desire them—to know them intimately and to be intimately known by them.

That said, in our experience lust can be viewed in both positive and negative ways. Lusting in unhealthy ways—*unbridled sexual desire*—can inhibit intimacy; lusting in healthy ways—*intense longing*—can help couples advance in intimacy.

MASTURBATION

In discussing masturbation, let's look to see how, or if, the Bible addresses this topic. To begin, does it say anywhere in the Bible, "Thou shall not masturbate"? We do not find masturbation specifically addressed. Even so, we understand some people try to build a case prohibiting masturbation by using the story of Onan found in Genesis. "Then Judah said to Onan, 'Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother.' But Onan knew that the child would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring for his brother."⁸ Onan was an Old Testament figure who would not fulfill the ancient cultural law of providing offspring to a dead brother's widow. Personally, we do not believe this passage supports the conclusion that masturbation is a sin. Nevertheless, we will leave the debating to the scholars. That said, whenever the Bible does not provide definitive answers on any number of topics, it is wise to review God's principles throughout the Scriptures and proceed with humility and wisdom.

People have passionate opinions surrounding masturbation. Since the focus of this book is marriage, consider your thoughts regarding masturbation. Is this something you are comfortable discussing with your spouse? Why, or why not? In our experience, some husbands and wives believe masturbating when thinking about their spouse in a loving way is acceptable. Others believe masturbating, even if they are thinking about their spouse, is wrong. Regardless of whether a couple believes it to be right or wrong, masturbation often includes a sexual fantasy component, so we encourage couples to always include the Lord. First **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*)—ask God for wisdom.⁹ Initiate a conversation with your spouse to discuss your thoughts and feelings about unbridled sexual desires, sinful lust, intense longing, and masturbation.

Remember, an orgasm releases powerful chemicals in the brain. If a spouse is involved in masturbation and experiencing orgasms with real or imagined people or images other than his or her spouse, this practice can become a negative part of that person's sexual imprinting, and it can result in ungodly

bonds and soul ties. We have counseled people— especially those who secretly lust and compulsively masturbate—whose minds are deeply imprinted with images of people other than their spouse. These images negatively affect a couple’s emotional and sexual intimacy.

Any secret sexual experience has potential to undermine marital intimacy. Look at it this way: A couple opens a joint bank account. They agree to a specific plan that includes using godly principles to steward their finances. They both agree to discuss and manage their account with integrity and openness. Together they manage their money, and they agree to make regular deposits into their financial account. If one spouse wants to make a withdrawal, they agree to discuss it first. This financial plan provides them a level of accountability and protection while the value of their financial account increases.

Now what if couples view their sexual relationship as a joint sexual intimacy account? They agree to a specific plan that includes using godly principles. They both agree to manage their account with integrity and openness. Together they discuss and manage their sexual needs and desires, and they both agree to make regular deposits into their sexual intimacy account. For example, every time they express love by nurturing, comforting, and providing sexual pleasure to each other, they are making a deposit into their account. And if one spouse wants to make a sexual withdrawal they first discuss it. This plan provides them a level of accountability and protection while increasing the value of their sexual intimacy account.

However, what happens if either spouse decides to make secret withdrawals from their sexual intimacy account without including their spouse in their decision? For example, a spouse chooses to experience sexual pleasure through fantasy focused on anyone other than his or her spouse through pornography, or secretly masturbates without processing with his or her spouse. How might these behaviors affect the openness and integrity of their sexual intimacy account? And how might it affect their marital “WE”?

In addition, ongoing masturbation can affect a spouse’s sexual desire. If one spouse wants to have sex, the partner who is regularly masturbating may not be as interested because his or her sexual needs have already been met.

Masturbation can also be a way to passively avoid working through marital chaos. Self-centered, secret, sinful, and lustful masturbation can be referred to as “me-sex” because it can negatively impact God’s *two becoming one* and *naked without shame*, one-flesh marriage principles.

How about you? If you regularly engage in masturbation and do not believe it creates any problems in your marriage, we encourage you to process the following questions with your spouse: Does your spouse know whenever you masturbate? Does your spouse know why you masturbate? Have you asked your spouse to meet your sexual needs and desires? And would you be comfortable telling your spouse what you are thinking about while you masturbate?

We believe questions like these can invite couples to explore implications surrounding masturbation. Working with couples for many decades, it has been our experience that husbands and wives who secretly masturbate while fantasizing about other people rate their overall marital sexual satisfaction low. Secret, self-focused, “me-sex” masturbation can become a way to sabotage intimacy, become a means of self-medicating, and become a way to avoid exploring potential deeper personal and marital issues.

ORAL STIMULATION AND ORAL SEX

There are many topics the Bible does not cover in detail. As with masturbation, whenever a topic is not clearly addressed, it must be approached with care and considered in light of broader principles given in God's Word. We define oral stimulation as one spouse orally stimulating their spouse's genital area and oral sex as orally stimulating a spouse to orgasm.

The Old Testament book of Song of Solomon explores marital intimacy and sexuality. It is a love story rich in imagery and figurative language. Song of Solomon also speaks graphically about the sensual pleasures in marriage. It refers to specific body parts that visually stimulate and bring pleasure to a spouse. And it describes stages of sensual arousal a couple experiences as their passion and love for each other increases.

Biblically, the garden is symbolic of female genitalia. Chapter 4 says, "May my beloved come into his garden and eat its choice fruits."¹⁰ The wife is inviting her husband into *his* garden to take in all its splendor. In another passage the bride says, "In his shade I took great delight and sat down, and his fruit was sweet to my taste."¹¹ Many Bible interpreters believe these passages refer to oral stimulation and oral sex.

Men and women often have strong feelings about oral stimulation and oral sex, ranging from extremely positive to extremely negative. Some married couples say that oral stimulation and oral sex are important parts of their sex life, increasing their pleasure and taking their sexual enjoyment to new levels. Other couples have no desire to participate in these forms of sexual stimulation.

An elderly woman who had been married more than fifty years approached us at a *NAKED: Reclaiming Sexual Intimacy in Marriage*

gathering and thanked us for addressing this sensitive sexual topic. She then quietly whispered to us that at her and her husband's age, oral stimulation

was an integral part of their foreplay—almost a necessity for both of them to experience orgasms.

As with every sensitive topic related to sexual expression, opinions range all over the map. We have heard a variety of comments, including, “We believe oral stimulation is okay, but a man ejaculating in a woman’s mouth is not okay. The only place for a husband to place his seed (sperm) should be in his wife’s vagina.” Others say, “Orally satisfying one another is a highlight of our lovemaking.” And others say, “Orally stimulating one another is something we are not remotely interested in.”

One young husband said, “My wife wants me to perform oral stimulation, but I have never done that before. I am not opposed to giving it a try, but honestly, I have no clue what I am supposed to do—can you help me?” Pause for a moment ... how would *you* answer this question?

Various couples have described oral stimulation and oral sex as fun, gross, joyful, sinful, natural, and unnatural. With such a wide variety of reactions, it is no surprise that some couples have told us these topics cause division and strife in their marriage. When a husband and wife begin to explore each other sexually, one person may feel a measure of freedom to experiment while their partner does not share the same enthusiasm. These kinds of differences often cause conflict when one spouse feels pressure to engage in a specific and unwanted sexual activity.

Practically speaking, how do married couples process oral stimulation and oral sex? We strongly caution against pressuring a spouse to do something that he or she is not comfortable with. Remember, control, manipulation, or having a demanding spirit never produces good fruit. Loving and respecting each other while focusing on unity and emotional intimacy are much more important than one spouse having his or her individual desires met.

Our counsel to couples concerning oral stimulation, oral sex, as well as other sensitive sexual issues, is to invest time studying what the Bible says, or doesn’t say, about these topics. **I.O.T.L.** and implement the **Traffic Light Principle**. Share anything that you sensed the Lord saying. And focus on listening to what your spouse heard from the Lord. Take a moment to repeat back what you heard them say. And ask the Lord to give you both

“green lights.” A healthy, God-honoring process opens the door for couples to celebrate the amazing *two become one* and *naked without shame* components in marriage.

The Bible says that every marriage will experience trouble.¹² When a couple disagrees, they have a choice. Ideally, they can choose to view disagreements as *opportunities*—not as *obstacles*. This choice can lead to deeper levels of intimacy as they explore the roots of any disagreement. In addition, we encourage couples to be open to explore any “triggers” they may be experiencing, or any resistance they may feel about sensitive sexual issues. Then look for ways to begin talking and processing together by sharing feelings, fears, and perceptions.

We also encourage couples to invest in godly counsel, as this often provides benefits and breakthroughs. For example, a husband or wife may not want to experiment with oral stimulation because they grew up in a toxic religious, shame-based environment. Throughout their formative years when the subject of sex came up, they observed a lot of shame, fear, rules, and negativity. Furthermore, if a husband or wife experienced negative sexual imprinting or any type of abuse, it would be beneficial to process any hurt and pain with a trained Christian counselor. A key to advancing in intimacy is to focus on God and His design for marriage. Remember, marriage has limitless opportunities to reflect and reveal the love, grace, and goodness of God to your spouse. Some couples tell us that oral stimulation and oral sex are exciting and adventurous parts in their lovemaking, and we celebrate the decision they have mutually reached. We talk with other couples who say they have identified these as areas they don’t want to try, and again, we celebrate the decision they have mutually reached. We talk with other couples who have differing views on these topics. One spouse wants to experiment with oral stimulation and oral sex, and the other spouse does not. We encourage these couples to avoid pressuring one another, **I.O.T.L.**, implement the **Traffic Light Principle**, wait for unity ... and watch God work.

ANAL SEX

We realize this may be an uncomfortable subject, but when we speak to married couples, premarital groups, or students, we regularly get questions about anal sex. We have been approached by wives who privately say something like this: “My husband and I have a pretty good sex life—we both enjoy variety. Recently, however, he has been pressuring me to try anal sex. To use your terminology, I just don’t have a ‘green light.’ What should I do?” We have also had teenage girls ask, “Can I have anal sex with my boyfriend, not get pregnant, not get an STD, and still be a virgin?”

In recent years there has been an increase in discussion, along with a measure of confusion and misinformation, surrounding anal sex. Personally, we believe the growing interest in anal sex relates directly to the increase in pornography highlighting anal sex.

Some Christians conclude anal sex between a husband and a wife is okay—if both agree. These people base their position on the silence of Scripture. In other words, since anal sex in marriage is not specifically prohibited in the Bible, they conclude it is permissible between a consenting husband and wife.

We are cautious about reaching conclusions based on the silence of Scripture. *Why?* Because the Bible is silent on a number of things. For example, the Bible does not specifically talk about cutting yourself, using tobacco, or illegal drugs. Yet it is unwise to introduce these things into your life or marriage. These behaviors violate the biblical—and common sense—principles of not harming your body. Remember, as a follower of Christ, your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?”¹³

Our encouragement to husbands and wives who engage in, or are considering, anal sex to first **I.O.T.L.** and ask for wisdom.¹⁴ Then we invite them to explore a few biblical passages. For example, “Therefore, I urge

you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”¹⁵ “You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”¹⁶ “Each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable.”¹⁷ Together implement the **Traffic Light Principle** and wait for unity.

ANAL SEX CONCERNS

Before a husband and wife engage in anal sex, we offer some concerns for them to research and process through—*together*.

1. Anal sex causes many wives severe pain because a rectum does not have the same elasticity as a vagina.
2. The anus is not self-lubricating in the same way that a vagina is, and some lubricants can absorb into the digestive system and cause harm.
3. E-coli bacteria in the anus are designed to eliminate toxic by-products of digestion. If these bacteria then enter a wife's vagina following anal sex or are introduced to a husband through his penis, infection can result.
4. When compared with vaginal intercourse, participating in anal sex increases the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).
5. Repetitive anal sex can harm the muscles in the anus causing a condition called anal prolapse.
6. Anal penetration can cause tears and bleeding that may go undetected. Tears and fissures in the anus, rectum, and colon can lead to infection and other serious medical problems, including extreme consequences like toxic shock—which can result in death.

The act of anal sex in marriage involves a husband's penis penetrating a wife's rectum. Obviously, it does not involve a wife penetrating a husband's rectum. Therefore, we offer another thought for your consideration. We support functional equality in marriage and we believe in egalitarianism, “a belief in human equality ... and a social philosophy advocating the removal of inequalities among people.”¹⁸ We wonder, however, if sexism, misogyny, male privilege, and objectification of women might be in play when a husband performs anal sex on his wife—especially with the concerns listed above?

We encourage husbands to review the potential risks involved in anal sex. And how does exposing a wife to the potential negative consequences of

anal sex align with truly loving a spouse? Remember, hurting a spouse in *any* way is not a part of God's design for marriage.

Life is lived in a story

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After teaching about anal sex at a *NAKED: Reclaiming Sexual Intimacy in Marriage* gathering, we took a break. A middle-aged man approached me, looked around to see that no one was listening, and said, “You know, there was a season in our marriage when the guys at work kept talking about anal sex. My wife is great, and she is typically open to trying new things sexually. But when I continued to pressure her to give anal sex a try, she told me she thought it would be painful. I assured her that it wouldn’t hurt because I would use plenty of lubrication.”

I responded, “So ... how did you and your wife work through this issue?”

He replied, “My wife, in a very respectful manner, suggested another option. She said, ‘Babe, before we try anal sex, how about we agree to purchase a penis-sized sex aid, lubricate it generously, and let me insert it into *your* rectum?’”

He laughed and continued, “That was over ten years ago—and I’ve never brought up anal sex again!”

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The ultimate law of the universe is LOVE. “Love is patient ... kind ... does not act unbecomingly ... love does not seek its own.”¹⁹ Love is other centered instead of self-centered. When wives confide in us that they are afraid to engage in anal sex, we encourage them to process together with their husband a Bible passage that relates to fear and love, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.”²⁰ Remember, fear responds to fear, control responds to control, and *love responds to love*. Love is the essence of relationship in our triune God ... and love is at the heart of God’s design for marriage.

In addition to questions about anal sex, couples ask questions about anal stimulation. Similar to anal sex, we do not find anal stimulation addressed in the Bible. The area surrounding the rectal opening contains many sensitive nerve endings. Massaging this area can stimulate the prostate gland, which for some men is pleasurable. And for a woman, anal stimulation can arouse her erogenous zones—including her G-spot and clitoral area. Although anal stimulation may not involve as many risks as anal sex, we offer cautions similar to those listed above, especially potential contamination from unhealthy E-coli bacteria.

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As we conclude this chapter on lust and masturbation, oral stimulation and oral sex, and anal sex, similar to other sensitive sexual issues, we advise couples to avoid pressuring one another. Instead, **I.O.T.L.**, ask God for wisdom,²¹ implement the **Traffic Light Principle**, and wait until you *both* have green lights.

Now let's transition from oral stimulation/sex and anal sex/stimulation to bondage, domination-discipline, submission-sadism, and masochism (BDSM).

CHAPTER 11

BONDAGE, DOMINATION-DISCIPLINE, SUBMISSION-SADISM, AND MASOCHISM (BDSM) **BDSM**

The topic of bondage, domination-discipline, submission-sadism, masochism (BDSM) has gained increased interest and international media exposure—most likely because of the increase in pornography and the popularity of books like *Fifty Shades of Grey* that draw attention to BDSM. The sales of this book were epic. It has sold more than 100 million copies, and has been translated into more than fifty languages.

Increased interest in BDSM has resulted in a number of outcomes. For example, in recent years Christian sex-toy home parties have grown in popularity. These social gatherings have become one way to introduce couples to BDSM. In the comfort of someone’s living room, husbands and wives are encouraged to purchase blindfolds, handcuffs, ropes, whips, and the latest BDSM paraphernalia.

Fifty Shades of Grey and the sequel, *Fifty Shades Darker*, have generated dialogue and debate in churches, the media, on school campuses, and among Christian small groups. Many self-proclaimed tolerant Christians have challenged their more traditional Christian sisters and brothers,

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asking: “Who are you to judge *Fifty Shades of Grey*? Have you read the book or watched the movie? We have friends who are experimenting with BDSM and they tell us they are experiencing amazing results.” Others question why the American church, and people they describe as

“selfrighteous BDSM-phobics,” are judging and marginalizing certain groups of people. They are proclaiming, “Why don’t you mind your own business and stay out of people’s bedrooms? Besides, Jesus never said anything about BDSM, kinky sex ... or *Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

Some may have never heard about *Fifty Shades*. However, many have. In 2012 a publisher surveyed Christian women, asking, “What is the most influential book you have read this year?” Women who responded said the most influential book they had read was *Fifty Shades of Grey*.¹ So why are we seeing these kind of statistics among Christians? And what does the popularity of this type of book say about sex and marriage? Personally, we believe it says a *lot* about what is going on behind closed doors, even in Christ-centered homes.

Briefly, *Fifty Shades of Grey* tells the story of a handsome, sexually abused, emotionally wounded, wealthy, successful businessman who meets and enters into a relationship with a much younger, innocent, pure, beautiful, female college literature student. The book basically follows the classic protagonist/antagonist story line.

However, in addition to the emerging “romantic” relationship between the main characters, *Fifty Shades* describes in graphic, highly sexualized details things that take place in the “red room of pain.” This is a secret chamber where BDSM takes on a main-character-like role in the story.

We believe one of the reasons behind *Fifty Shades*’ success is that readers (especially women, as statistics indicate more women than men are purchasing this book) can be drawn into the fantasy world of pseudoromance, and the amped-up passion that erotic and graphically described sex scenes can stimulate. In a twisted sort of way, readers can temporarily escape the reality of difficulties in their own lives, including stress, boredom, marriage and intimacy issues, and sexual problems.

So, in an attempt to respond to the BDSM and *Fifty Shades* hype, we wonder, where is the best place to begin? Authors have a number of choices. For example, some authors can choose to not address BDSM and *Fifty Shades*. Others can condemn this fictional book as reprehensible

pornography and judge any person who reads it. Still other authors can itemize everything they believe is wrong as it relates to BDSM.

Personally, we thought it would be wise to **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*). Invest some time praying, talking to spiritual mentors, and researching these topics. We also read book reviews and blog comments about BDSM and *Fifty Shades*. So, let's begin this discussion by defining some terms.

Bondage— the state of being bound usually by compulsion (as a law of mastery); sadomasochistic sexual practices involving the physical restraint of one partner

Domination— supremacy or preeminence over another; exercise of mastery or ruling power

Discipline—punishment; instruction; a field of study

Submission—the condition of being submissive, humble, or compliant; an act of submitting to the authority or control of another

Sadism—a sexual perversion in which gratification is obtained by the infliction of physical or mental pain on others (as on a love object)—compare masochism; delight in cruelty

Masochism—a sexual perversion characterized by pleasure in being subjected to pain or humiliation especially by a love object; pleasure in being abused or dominated; a taste for suffering

Kinky—(1) closely twisted or curled; (2) relating to, having, or appealing to unconventional tastes especially in sex; also sexually deviant; (3) outlandish, far-out

Erotic—(1) of, devoted to, or tending to arouse sexual love or desire; (2) strongly affected by sexual desire

Erotica—literary or artistic works having an erotic theme or quality ²

SEX IMPACTS A PERSON'S SPIRIT, SOUL, AND BODY

Sex is more than a physical act because every man and woman has a spirit, soul, and body. In marriage, BDSM (and all sexual activity) impact a spouse's spirit, soul, and body. An interesting phenomenon for some people is that when they experience both pleasure and pain their body responds physically, chemically, and emotionally.

Therefore, when a person engages in BDSM or sexual acts that include being dominated, controlled, or subjected to pain and humiliation, the body releases chemicals that can give some people a temporary high. BDSM proponents describe how they are sexually energized and experience a measure of pleasure when they are tied up, gagged, called names, spanked, pinched, flogged, scratched, or bitten. Almost anything goes as long as there is consensual agreement and the activity leads to enjoyment and pleasure.

AN IMPORTANT QUESTION

In an earlier chapter we defined pornography as: “the depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement; material (in books or a photograph) that depicts erotic behavior and is intended to cause sexual excitement; the depiction of acts in a sensational manner so as to arouse a quick intense emotional reaction.”³ Of course, pornography is nothing new; it has existed for centuries in many different forms. In regard to the *Fifty Shades*, pause for a moment ... **I.O.T.L.** ... do you think this book meets the definition of pornography?

We have worked with couples who invited porn, BDSM, and other things into their marriage. After the initial chemical/physical high, most couples we have worked with wished they could have a “do over.” And they wished they could delete from their memories the experiences, images, scenes, and people (real or imagined) that they invited into their marriage.

Our counseling experiences also suggest that porn and extreme sexual experimentation can become progressive. What may satisfy one day often does not satisfy the next. Furthermore, the increase in BDSM and pornography in recent years concerns us, especially when young adults and children are exposed to these influences. The result is negative sexual imprinting and a loss of the innocence and childlike wonder God designed for children.

Truth is, there are many opinions surrounding BDSM, pornography, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. For example, some people—Christians and nonChristians—have the opinion that *Fifty Shades* is a love story with a happy ending. Some people believe BDSM, pain, and violence are acceptable ways to spice up a boring sex life, as long as the husband and wife are in agreement. And others condemn anyone who chooses to read erotic literature or introduce pornography or BDSM practices into a marriage.

CONSENSUAL AGREEMENT

Many BDSM proponents say that as long as a couple “consent” and are in “agreement” on limits they have in place—basically as long as they have “consensual agreement”—they are in a safe place. Consensual agreement can be elusive because the body responding to intense painful stimuli can negatively affect a person’s decision-making abilities. Therefore, consensual agreement may not always provide protection for couples. For example, to use a nonsexual example, the first married couple—Adam and Eve—had consensual agreement when they ate the forbidden fruit. We suspect they may even have enjoyed eating it. But tragically, they never included God in their process. And Adam and Eve, all humankind, have experienced the negative consequences of the decision they made in consensual agreement. Nevertheless, the reality is a husband or wife can consent, agree, and experiment with all sorts of experiences.

Life is lived in a story

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As a firefighter, I remember an emergency call where a teenager had heard from his friends about autoerotic asphyxiation. They told him that restricting the blood flow to his brain while he masturbated would increase the intensity of his orgasm. Home alone one afternoon, he decided to give it a try. He placed a hangman's noose around his neck, secured the other end to the top of his closed bedroom door, and attempted to masturbate. Tragically, his experimentation resulted in his mom finding her naked teenage son dead as he hung from the makeshift sexual gallows he had created in his bedroom.

Proponents of BDSM often include a couple where the husband, the wife, or both have experienced negative sexual imprinting, often including being victims of abuse. However, we understand there are sex therapists who claim "people into S/M—spanking, whipping, blindfolding, etc.—are no more likely to come from abusive backgrounds than non-S/Mers."⁴

Our experience indicates that most BDSM proponents have been involved in pornography. This makes us wonder if it's possible that suppressed (conscious) or repressed (subconscious) thoughts, feelings, and experiences surrounding past negative sexual experiences, abuse, or pornography might partially explain the desire to engage in BDSM. It concerns us when a person with negative sexual imprinting or abuse in his or her background chooses to engage in BDSM. *Why?* Because a person who acts out in these ways, even with consensual agreement and having boundaries in place, could be exposing himself or herself (consciously or subconsciously) to the possibility of being revictimized.

Furthermore, might the Enemy's insidious plan for a person who has been abused or victimized, whose innocence has been stolen, include introducing shame through condemning thoughts that could include self-loathing and self-hate? Is it possible that a victim of abuse (sexual or other abuse) who engages in consensual BDSM behaviors including domination, violence, control, and inflicting pain be unknowingly feeding repressed

(subconscious) feelings of shame as a result of being the victim of negative sexual imprinting and abuse?

In addition, throughout decades of marriage counseling experiences, we have made some observations surrounding husbands and wives who were raised in highly toxic religious environments. In these families of origin, issues surrounding sex or sexuality were responded to with megadoses of shame, blame, fear, and control. People who grew up in these types of environments may have an inordinate propensity toward sexual curiosity and experimentation—often from an early age. In addition, people who have experienced religious trauma (especially in their families of origin or in church/ministry environments) tend to be attracted to unhealthy relationships, and many choose to act out rebelliously in both passive and active ways.

In all honesty, we are not sure why this is true, but it could be a response to the religious toxicity, extreme rules, and suppression/repression resulting from the religious trauma they experienced. Tragically, many abuse survivors, for any number of reasons including post-traumatic stress, are reluctant to get help. Note to victims of abuse: remember, if you are a survivor of abuse, you have been victimized—and what happened to you was not your fault.

From a healing and deliverance perspective, the histories, behaviors, and experiences of ancestors (both good and bad) can open the door to generational propensities in addition to sexual imprinting and highly toxic religious environments. The Bible talks about the iniquities of ancestors affecting future generations.⁵ For example, some families tend to struggle with finances, others with addictive behaviors, and still others with sexual issues. This is not to assign blame to a person's ancestors, but to raise awareness that there is often a generational link in play in relationships, decisions, and behaviors. Thankfully, this Scripture passage also talks about generational blessings.

We also believe that spiritual entities, including a spirit of fear⁶ or demons of lust, can be connected to violence and pornography. Remember, *violence responds to violence*, which may partially explain the progressive nature of

violence. But, thankfully, the Bible offers a “more excellent way”—the way of love.⁷ And the very good news is *love responds to love*.

Every human being believes there are things that are good, righteous, and holy, and there are things that are bad, unrighteous, and evil. Unfortunately, because of the secrecy and shame attached to many BDSM behaviors, not much reliable scientific data is available on these subjects. Therefore, we encourage people involved in BDSM practices to consider a few questions: (1) Which spouse suggested experimenting with BDSM? (2) Does the spouse who suggested these practices have a history that includes negative sexual imprinting, abuse, or a toxic religious environment? (3) Was pornography a part of either spouse’s story or a part of the process in the couple opening the door to BDSM? (4) Was there sexism, misogyny, male privilege, or objectification of women in either spouse’s history or family of origin?

NEXT STEPS

We encourage husbands and wives to make their main life focus to live out unconditional love. This includes being patient, being kind, not acting unbecomingly, not seeking one's own interests.⁸ And to bear the fruit of a Spirit-filled life that includes "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."⁹

May we ask, "How do behaviors that include being tied up, gagged, spanked, dominated, controlled, or experiencing intense pain compare with being patient, being kind, not acting unbecomingly, not seeking one's own?" And how does BDSM compare with the fruit of a Spirit-filled life that includes "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control"?

Of course, every married couple has freedom to make choices, and the Bible does not give specific instructions for every situation or behavior. And always remember that decisions have consequences. Therefore, we challenge couples to process the potential costs *before* inviting BDSM, pornography, pain, or violence into their marriage or sex lives. Granted, for some people these practices might release stimulating chemicals in the brain and initially appear to enhance their sex life. But it is possible that over time the need for the chemical high will require increased, potentially damaging and dangerous levels of stimulation. Rather than focusing on *Fifty Shades of Grey's* fictional counterfeit intimacy, we encourage couples to contrast these behaviors with God's purposes for marriage.

From another perspective, we align with egalitarian—gifts-based versus gender-based—principles. And we believe in mutuality and co-leadership in marriage. Therefore, in our opinion, when one spouse is "dominant" and exercises power and control over their spouse in any way, this violates the fundamental principles of love and mutuality in the one-flesh, spirit-soul-body oneness that is exclusive to marriage. From a more personal perspective, when talking about the *Fifty Shades* phenomena with a friend,

he shook his head saying, “As a grandpa I cannot in my wildest dreams envision encouraging adult grandchildren to engage in BDSM.”

Lastly, if any comments or questions in this chapter have “triggered” you in inordinate ways, an intense emotional reaction may be an invitation to process your responses and your story with a trained Christian counselor.

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God is pro-sex! He designed every human as a sexual being with longings, passions, and desires. The Bible gives Christ-followers many permissions, but they come with warnings. “Everything is permissible for me, but not all things are beneficial.”¹⁰ The Bible also cautions people about freedom: “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”¹¹ We encourage husbands and wives to “guard your heart[s]”¹² from anything, or any persons, real or imagined, that may enter into your marriage and inhibit you from living out the miracle and mystery of *two becoming one* as you advance in celebrating being *naked without shame*.

Always keep in mind that if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit resides in you. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?”¹³ Do you believe that is true—that the Holy Spirit lives in you? The Bible also says, “You do not have because you do not ask.”¹⁴ Are you up for a reallife challenge? Pause for a moment, and **I.O.T.L.** Ask the Holy Spirit what behaviors He may want to be a part of, or not want to be a part of, and record anything you sense.

In our experience, people tend to do what they want to do. Regarding making decisions, we encourage couples not to take our opinions, or any person’s opinions, as the final authority on what to read, watch, include in their sex lives, or how they live out their marriage. Instead, we challenge couples to take ownership and responsibility for their choices. Our challenge to couples who are considering inviting something new into their marriage is to **I.O.T.L.**, explore biblical principles related to what they are considering, implement the **Traffic Light Principle**, and wait until both partners have “green lights” from God.

Are there people or things that you regret being involved with? Whether they are real or imagined, pour out your heart to God. He loves you more

than you can comprehend. We encourage you to ask for and receive God's forgiveness, and then forgive yourself. If necessary, forgive your spouse or anyone who introduced or encouraged you to open your life and marriage to things you may now regret or may want to discontinue. **I.O.T.L.** ... and journal any thoughts you may have.

CHAPTER 12

ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION (ED), PERFORMANCE ANXIETY, IMPOTENCE, AND NEXT STEPS

Life is lived in a story

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Note: The following story represents a combination of couples we have counseled throughout the years. I will refer to this couple as “Tina and Tony.”

Tina scheduled an appointment to see me. She enjoyed being a mom, and was articulate, was a leader at church, and was successful in her career. She seemed like the kind of woman her friends, especially younger women, looked up to.

At our first meeting, Tina appeared confident as she began to tell her story. She explained, “Actually, my life is very full. I love my family, friends, career, and church. But in the past few months—okay, maybe the past season of my marriage—I’ve been so frustrated with Tony.”

“Frustrated in what way?” I asked.
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Tina explained, “Well ... frustrated in a lot of areas—communication is a big one. But the reason I came to talk to you today is mainly about our sex life—it’s almost nonexistent.”

“Describe what you mean by nonexistent.” I said.

Tina responded, “Well ... we use to have sex regularly, like three to four times a week. Tony and I always enjoyed our sexual intimacy—until about a year ago.”

“So what’s happened this last year to change that?”

“It’s difficult for me to talk about, but my husband struggles with maintaining an erection. The result is we rarely have intercourse, which leads to a lot of frustration. Frankly, it’s become a major issue in our marriage.”

Tina continued, “What frustrates me even more is Tony refuses to talk to me. From his perspective, there is nothing to talk about. I believe it bothers him, but when I start to discuss it, he responds by shutting me out. It’s as if he is hoping things will magically get better. But we are coming up on over a year without sexual intercourse and nothing has changed. Can you help me?”

“How have you been dealing with your frustrations?” I asked.

“A few months ago I suggested Tony see a doctor but he got angry. Every discussion after that seemed to escalate into an argument. We’ve never been great communicators, but enjoying sex has often been the way we resolved our conflicts. Now that we are struggling with sex, it feels like we don’t have anything that connects us and bonds us together.” Tina continued, “After our first few months without intercourse, I thought I’d try again to address our problem, and I suggested we make an appointment with a marriage counselor. But Tony shot that suggestion down too. He got really angry and said he will not talk to any counselors, pastors, or doctors about not being able to get an erection—his exact words were ‘No frickin’ way!’ So, here I am—I decided to make this appointment. Frankly, I am at a point in our marriage where I’m struggling too.”

“Tina, can I ask, what has struggling looked like for you?”

“As our sex life and communication continued to deteriorate, I found myself starting to read fiction books that were sexual in nature. Not hardcore pornography but romance novels that I purchased at the grocery store.”

Tina paused for a moment and looked down at the floor. “This is a little embarrassing for me to admit. But reading erotic novels has led to masturbation. And being totally honest, masturbation has replaced my sexual intimacy with Tony. When he shut me out, I began shutting down toward him.”

As Tina continued, she seemed relieved to share her struggles with someone who would listen to her. Holding back tears, she continued, “You know, I have never been interested in anyone except Tony, but I’m starting to feel

guilty about my fantasy life. At first, I was so angry at Tony I fantasized about imaginary people and experiences in books. Frankly, it seemed like a simple solution to a temporary problem. But as the months went by, we became more and more disconnected. It's like our sex issues are beginning to impact other areas in my life."

"Help me understand—what other areas are being affected?" Tina hesitated before continuing: "A few months ago, I was asked to be on a committee at church that required quite a bit of my time. The leader who heads up the committee is married. In fact, his wife is in my women's group. Anyway, he has become really flirtatious with me. I mean ... it hasn't gone any further than flirting. But I have to admit I am enjoying him pursuing me. I find myself looking forward to seeing him, and I intentionally dress in a way that encourages compliments. Lately, I have found myself adding him to my fantasy life when I masturbate." She paused and then admitted, "The choices I am making are scaring me, and I feel like I'm getting closer and closer to making some really bad decisions."

"Have you made other attempts to address this issue with Tony?"

"Yes, last weekend, in an effort to spice things up, I purchased some sexy lingerie. But in spite of my efforts, the evening didn't go well. Tony was still unable to maintain his erection. We ended up in an argument, and I said some things that I know were shaming. Tony stormed out of our bedroom and went downstairs to watch TV. It seems like he is spending more and more time sleeping on the couch—or in our guest bedroom. I never thought we'd be in this place in our marriage. And to tell you the truth, I am starting to feel hopeless."

I replied, "Sexual issues are always difficult. But asking for help was a good decision. Often people begin their healing journey by wishing for change in their spouse. Or they emotionally disconnect in an attempt to avoid pain. But as you know, neither one works. And it sounds like Tony is not ready right now to take ownership and responsibility for his part in your marriage and sex life. Tina, would you be willing to take a closer look at the ways you contribute to your marriage struggles?"

"Yes, that's why I'm here. I really love Tony, and I truly want a great marriage—and sex life."

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“Tony and Tina” represent just one example of many couples who struggle sexually. Similar stories are often shared by couples as they journey through different seasons of marriage. Erectile dysfunction (ED), performance anxiety, impotence, and other sensitive sexual issues can prompt couples to take a closer look at their marriage and areas where they may be struggling.

In the preceding story, Tina and Tony loved each other and they enjoyed sex. And up until this point in their marriage, they weren't forced to take a closer look at their emotional intimacy because sex became a BandAid that temporarily covered hidden issues. Therefore, they were not prepared for the negative impact ED and performance anxiety had on their marriage.

When they began to experience trouble, Tony minimized the issue, refused to engage with Tina, and sought to control through anger. The shame he felt was a blind spot that blocked him from seeking help. Tina contributed to the growing emotional and sexual disconnect by attempting to escape through fantasy in order to avoid her pain. It was also a passive way to rebel against Tony's emotional and sexual abandonment. These responses were different forms of control. We regularly remind couples that *control responds to control*—and *love responds to love*. Tony and Tina were using active and passive control in an effort to fix their problems and heal their pain rather than looking for ways to unconditionally love each other.

EVERY COUPLE STRUGGLES IN SEXUAL INTIMACY

Remember, “Those who marry will face many troubles.”¹ In our experience, a number of components contribute to every marriage struggle. That is why we offer couples a holistic approach. For example, communication is one of the first areas that must be addressed as couples navigate through marriage problems. When couples struggle with orgasm or ED, we always recommend they start by seeing a doctor for a complete checkup in order to rule out any potential medical issues. Often as men age, they experience changes in the strength of and their ability to maintain an erection. At the same time, many women struggle with perimenopausal and menopausal hormonal changes, fatigue, and adrenal problems that can negatively impact intercourse. Any one of these issues can affect arousal as well as achieving orgasm. In addition, medication can have negative sexual side effects.

Our encouragement to couples is to view struggles—sexual or nonsexual—as *opportunities* not as *obstacles*. Therefore, we want to offer suggestions for addressing sexual problems like the one presented above. The first step is always to **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*), and ask God for wisdom.² In addition to having a complete medical checkup, we remind couples that it is important to understand both spouses’ sexual preferences. And each person should take ownership and responsibility for the ways they contribute to struggles in their marriage. Often a husband or wife will focus on what they perceive as their spouse’s problems and avoid exploring their own areas that need healing.

SENSITIVE SEXUAL ISSUES AND HOW THEY RELATE TO EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

Typically, couples view sex as a performance-based activity with the goal of experiencing an orgasm. This perspective limits a couple's ability to celebrate all God has designed for them. If a hard erection is the main requirement for sexual satisfaction, then a couple's pleasure is limited by their bodies' ability to respond. This mentality reduces sex to a physical activity that does not involve a person's spirit and soul. It also opens the door to insecurity, performance anxiety, and pride.

How a couple relates sexually is influenced by how they relate emotionally. A strong emotional connection lays the groundwork for couples to be able to engage in difficult conversations about their sexual needs and desires. And this allows them to navigate their way through issues with love and grace.

Celebrating the benefits of emotional intimacy opens the door to increased physical enjoyment in steps of intimacy, foreplay, intercourse, and orgasm. Remember, intimacy is experienced in many different ways. But it always contains similar ingredients, including love, grace, forgiveness, mutuality, passion, joy, reciprocity, and hope. We also encourage couples to be intentional about making regular emotional deposits into each other's lives. This builds a strong foundation that can carry couples through difficult seasons throughout their entire married life.

Advancing in intimacy is not about perfection or performance, it is the mingling of hearts and souls. It can be described as emotional foreplay, an intense connection that trumps the sexual performance-based model. It includes all the senses—talking and listening, touching, seeing, smelling, and tasting. Advancing in emotional intimacy involves understanding your true identity—seeing yourself as God sees you—and being present with yourself and your spouse. It includes understanding God's purposes for

intimacy and sexuality—celebration, procreation, pleasure, comfort, and protection—as well as the worship and warfare aspects to sexual intimacy. It involves experiencing feelings of passion, happiness, excitement, tenderness, joy, and comfort. Advancing in emotional intimacy includes advancing in wanting and delighting in your spouse as they want and delight in you.

From a spiritual perspective, we encourage couples to invite God, the Author of intimacy and sexuality, into their lives, marriage, and lovemaking. This becomes an invitation to step into the Larger Story—where *God* is the main character—instead of living in the smaller story where *self* is the main character. Husbands and wives can reframe marriage from “it’s all about Me” to “it’s all about our WE.”

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Let's return to the "Tina and Tony" story.

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Since Tony was not ready to take ownership and responsibility for his part in the marriage relationship, I encouraged Tina to continue to seek her own healing. Thankfully, she was willing to take a closer look at the ways she contributed to their marriage issues by keeping destructive cycles going. Tina began to see the value of including the Lord in every area of her life—even in her sexual struggles. She began to experience personal healing as she grew in seeing herself the way God saw her.

Often when couples find themselves in painful places, they focus on the struggle and tend to forget the reasons why they chose one another. At one of Tina's sessions, she began to share with me a number of things she loved about Tony. I reminded her of a previous appointment when she said to me, "I really love Tony, and I truly want a great marriage—and sex life." I encouraged her to continue looking for ways to see Tony the ways God sees him. This included presupposing the best in him. We talked about forgiveness, and I asked her to consider forgiving Tony for his outbursts of anger, isolating behavior, shutting down, failing to engage, as well as not meeting her sexual needs and desires. I challenged her to release to God any negative thoughts and feelings she had about Tony.

As we continued to meet, Tina spent a lot of time working through forgiveness issues. At some point in her healing process, I asked her what it would look like to ask Tony for forgiveness. She appeared completely confused by my suggestion, asking, "Could you please help me understand why I need to ask Tony to forgive me ... what exactly have I done?"

I reviewed our previous sessions and asked her to consider asking Tony for forgiveness for any ways she may have shamed or blamed him. Or for any ways she may have judged him or compared him with someone else. I suggested she consider asking forgiveness for any times she may have been passive-aggressive, sarcastic, or demanding. And for the times she subtly, and not so subtly, demanded that sex went the ways she desired. As an advanced challenge, I encouraged her to consider asking forgiveness not

just for the things she did (commission) but for the things she failed to do (omission). This included failing to encourage, extend grace, and presuppose the best in Tony.

“Can you help me understand what asking for forgiveness from Tony might look like for me?” she asked.

I suggested she look Tony directly in the eyes. And using the forgiveness model I taught her, say, “I am sorry for [and then name the offense] ... I was wrong ... will you forgive me?”

As we continued to meet, Tina talked about the benefits she was experiencing from the fruit of her forgiveness. As I listened to her stories of renewed hope, I was again reminded of how hard Tina was on herself. I gently asked; “Tina, I wonder what life would look like for you if you decided to completely forgive yourself? What if you stopped punishing yourself for your perfectionism? What would it feel like to forgive yourself for flirting with another man at church? Tina, what would happen if you truly let go of all the self-condemnation?” Tina began to cry.

In reality, no one was harder on Tina than Tina. That was part of the reason why she was so hard on Tony. She was merely treating him the way she treated herself. Over time, Tina began to experience greater levels of personal freedom, and she was able to focus on new ways to talk with Tony. I challenged her to relearn his love languages.³ As it turned out, Tony’s top love language was verbal affirmation, so I encouraged her to verbally share positive things she saw in him. She described him as being honest, intelligent, a great provider, a great dad, and a good friend. I encouraged her to look him directly in the eyes and lovingly share each of those things.

As I continued to meet with Tina, she began modeling the Bible passage that says, “You who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness ... bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.”⁴ It was a privilege for me to watch Tina live out what the apostle Paul described as “a still more excellent way”⁵—the way of love.

Reviewing the Tina and Tony story, my primary focus was on Tina and the decisions I encouraged her to make. Obviously, Tony had many issues that

he needed to address. However, for whatever reasons, he was not willing to seek counsel, see a doctor, or take ownership and responsibility for his part in the marriage. But thankfully Tina was. And as we continued to meet, I reminded her that based on my experience, the chances for her marriage—and sex life—getting better were dramatically increasing.

IS THERE HOPE FOR COUPLES STRUGGLING WITH ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION AND IMPOTENCE?

We encourage couples struggling with any sexual, emotional, physical, and/or spiritual concerns to respond in a holistic way. Begin by including the Lord—**I.O.T.L.** and ask for wisdom.⁶ Seek medical input, enter into marriage counseling (individually and/or as a couple), and strive for unity. Often with ED, a man is prone to performance anxiety, shame, and negative self-talk, which dramatically affect his most important sexual organ—his mind. That is why the wife is a key ally in coming against shame, as she lovingly helps a husband to take next steps.

As a side, millions of dollars are spent annually for ED medications. As far as taking Viagra, Cialis, or other medical prescriptions, we do not see the use of medications violating biblical principles. That said, we encourage couples to seek medical advice and consider all the possible side effects of any medication they may choose to take. Furthermore, in recent years, many advances have been made in addressing ED and impotence, for example, new medicines, stimulating lubricants, penile injections to stimulate an erection, as well as penile implants.

In our experience working with couples, ED and impotence in marriage can become *opportunities* rather than *obstacles*. Practically, we encourage husbands and wives to begin by taking ownership and responsibility for their part in any marriage problem. And to purposely advance in emotional intimacy as they look for creative ways to love, serve, and bring pleasure to each other.

NEXT STEPS

Advancing in intimacy and working through sexual struggles dovetail with growing in personal maturity. The Bible reminds people that when they were children they spoke like children, thought like children, and reasoned like children. But when people become adults, it's time to put away childish things.⁷ We challenge couples to view any areas of sexual immaturity as opportunities to step into adulthood. This includes taking ownership and responsibility for what belongs to each partner.

Please hear us: we are not minimizing or dismissing real marriage issues that need to be addressed and healed. Instead, we are saying that every person can benefit from living as a mature adult. In talking about and working through sensitive sexual topics, maybe it's time for some readers to put away childish behaviors. Tim, who has a more "direct" counseling style than Anne, often challenges husbands-wives-couples, saying, "Might it be possible that your problem isn't as complicated as you think? Maybe it's just time for you to grow up!"

Throughout the years, we have observed many couples take next steps and navigate their way through sexual and nonsexual marriage difficulties. Remember, every husband and wife, from newlyweds to seasoned married couples, "will face many troubles."⁸ If things have surfaced in your marriage that need to be addressed, and if you are unable to talk with your spouse, consider getting help. Talk to a mentor, spiritual director, and seek Christian counsel to help you locate root issues, which can often be hidden beneath surface issues. The Bible gives an encouraging promise: "In the abundance of counselors there is victory."⁹

Pause for a moment ... and consider: *Might your marital struggles be an invitation to invest in advancing in intimacy with God—and with your spouse?* God offers grace, forgiveness, and relationship with a desire to strengthen, encourage, and comfort every person. God is the quintessential model for how to relate in relationships—especially in marriage. God invites every human being to walk in their true identity as a beloved son or

daughter made in His image. He invites people to enter into relationship with Him and in faith to trust Him.

TRUST

Throughout *NAKED* we have written about the importance of husbands and wives trusting each other. Trust is a vital component in marriage as well as in other relationships. Personally, there is no person in the world we trust more than each other. However, it's interesting to us that trusting a spouse is not commanded in the Bible. Instead, women and men are repeatedly commanded to *trust the Lord completely*. "If you want favor with both God and man, and a reputation for good judgment and common sense, then *trust the Lord completely*; don't ever trust yourself. In everything you do, put God first, and he will direct you and crown your efforts with success."¹⁰

Many decades ago, we both placed our trust in the life, death, and lifegiving resurrection of Jesus Christ. We both repented of our sins and trusted Jesus Christ as our Lord and our Savior. For us, putting God first has become the pathway to live in the Larger Story where *God* is the main character—and "it's about WE"—instead of living in the smaller story where *self* is the main character—and "it's all about me."

Our sense is there may be some readers who have never trusted their lives, marriage, eternities—*everything*—to Jesus Christ. If that is you, we encourage you to invite the Holy Spirit to fill you, and ask Jesus to speak to you right now.

This might be a long shot, but is it possible that you were led to invest in reading this book not to just learn about marriage, emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and sensitive sexual issues? But instead to learn about God—the Creator of marriage, intimacy, and sexuality? Therefore, you have total permission to pause, put this book down, **I.O.T.L.** ... and do whatever you sense in your heart.

DEMYSTIFYING SENSITIVE SEXUAL ISSUES

Our desire in Part 2 has been to demystify a number of sensitive sexual issues—ones that are often difficult to talk about. If you are married and enjoy sexual intimacy in the ways God designed, give thanks to God. Women, the Bible instructs older, wiser women to invest in younger women. We encourage you to **I.O.T.L.**—ask God to lead you to a young wife, and take her out for coffee. Pray for an opportunity to share your story. Talk with her about emotional and sexual intimacy. Push through any uncomfortable barriers that may be present. Both married and single women need the godly counsel, encouragement, and wisdom that come from mature women.

Men, likewise, we challenge you to **I.O.T.L.** Ask God to lead you to a young man, and take him out for coffee. Pray for an opportunity to share your story and experiences surrounding emotional and sexual intimacy. Both married and single men are longing for spiritual dads. We believe as more wives and husbands invest in younger married couples, the relational and sexual temperature of many marriages will dramatically increase for the better.

Couples in all seasons of marriage are experiencing healing and breakthrough by taking ownership and responsibility and choosing to discuss marriage issues. Singles, couples, parents, spiritual parents, ministries, and communities of faith must do whatever is necessary to advance in talking about emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and sensitive sexual issues. We believe men and women who have godly views will become the change agents to help couples advance together.

For decades, our ongoing prayer has been that God births a marriage reformation—a powerful *kairos* time (“a time when conditions are right for the accomplishment of a crucial action: the opportune and decisive moment”)¹¹ when God will invite husbands and wives to live in oneness, equality, and mutuality. *Both* made in God’s image—intrinsically equal.

And *both* given the dominion and procreation mandates—functionally equal. We believe God is inviting couples to humbly and passionately return to the marriage principles of Paradise.

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We understand that it is impossible for any book to cover every aspect related to emotional and sexual intimacy.¹² If you are currently struggling individually, or as a couple, there are a number of next steps you can take. First, always begin with prayer—**I.O.T.L.** Focus on your true identity—who God says you are. Invest in necessary healing, always keep in mind that healing requires courage. When making decisions, implement the **Traffic Light Principle**. And wait until you *both* have “green lights” from the Lord before you add anything new to your marriage or sex life. Respect your spouse, and don’t presuppose that you know them better than they know themselves. Always be willing to take ownership and responsibility for *your* part in any marriage struggle. Focus on communicating in loving, nonjudgmental ways. Be willing to say, “I am sorry.” Understand how attitudes (positive or negative) impact how a husband and wife interact. Bottom line: In marriage, love, grace, reciprocal servanthood, and unity must always trump disunity.

We want to end Part 2 repeating the exact words that began Part 2: **God is pro-sex!** *Sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy—becoming one and celebrating being naked without shame—are game-changers that husbands and wives are invited to experience throughout every season of marriage.*



PART THREE

Real Life Issues And Challenges

“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; And the greatest of these is love.”

1 Corinthians 13:13 NRSV

CHAPTER 13

WHAT IF I AM NO LONGER PHYSICALLY ATTRACTED TO MY SPOUSE?

As we begin Part 3, let's briefly review our author-reader journey together.

In Part 1 we said *we love being married*. And we described God's purposes for sexual intimacy. These include celebration, procreation, pleasure, comfort, and protection. We talked about sexual histories, sexual imprinting, and soul ties; the impact of pornography in marriage; and God's mandate to reproduce.

In Part 2 we focused on sensitive sexual issues that are often difficult to talk about because of so much shame surrounding the topic of sex. We talked about redefining sexy, sexual frequency, sexual preferences, scheduling sex, timing, locations, positions, quickies, sex aids, sex during menstruation, personal hygiene, orgasm, lust and masturbation, oral stimulation and oral sex, anal sex, BDSM, erectile dysfunction (ED), performance anxiety, impotence, and next steps. Our desire was to demystify these issues and encourage couples to talk about sensitive sexual topics.

We challenged you as readers to consider the benefits in community by identifying safe people you can talk with about *anything*. *Why?* Because, people are created for community.¹ And people advance in wisdom and

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understanding when in relationship with God and trusted friends. Our culture inordinately focuses on social media and whatever is trending, Hollywood, and scripted reality TV shows like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. All of these can inhibit a person and a couple from

experiencing face-to-face intimacy when people can share their hearts, hurts, joys, and fears. Close community provides opportunities to gain God's and other people's perspectives, resist shame, and grow in intimacy.

Throughout *NAKED: Reclaiming Sexual Intimacy in Marriage*, we have declared that *God is pro-sex!* And we have encouraged readers to focus on their true identities—as *beloved* sons or daughters made in the image of an amazing God. We have reminded spouses that *every marriage will experience troubles*,² and we have encouraged couples to view troubles as *opportunities* rather than *obstacles*. In addition, we have challenged husbands and wives to put away childish behaviors and to take ownership and responsibility for the choices they make.³ And we have encouraged you as readers to live in the Larger Story—with *God* as the main character, instead of living in the smaller story—where *self* is the main character.

In Part 3 we address two questions we repeatedly hear: (1) “What if I am no longer physically attracted to my spouse?” and (2) “Do couples have a sexual duty to each other?” We will offer Five Intimacy-Building Challenges and talk about sexual agreement. We conclude Part 3 by encouraging husbands and wives to *dream BIG*, to remember that *marriage is not “it,”* and through life walk together ... side by side.

WHAT IF I AM NO LONGER PHYSICALLY ATTRACTED TO MY SPOUSE?

Throughout years of counseling and leading marriage gatherings, wives and husbands have asked, “What if I am no longer physically attracted to my spouse?” or “How can I deal with negative thoughts and feelings I have about my spouse’s physical appearance?” The reality is some couples go through brief periods, sometimes seasons, when because of physical changes one or both spouses feel that “the thrill is gone.”

We live in a culture that indoctrinates people from an early age to focus almost exclusively on a person’s appearance. This begins immediately after a child is born and their physical features are observed. It is not unusual to hear a baby described as big, small, petite, long, short, lean, lanky, or chubby. He or she might have rosebud lips, a certain color eyes, a particular complexion, a certain-sized nose, and a wide or narrow face. The baby may have fine hair, curly hair, or no hair at all. We understand people’s comments begin with innocent excitement. But evaluating physical appearances becomes more judgmental as a person advances through childhood, puberty, and adulthood. Outward appearances affect every person.

Since this is a book about marriage, we will focus on how physical appearance impacts a husband, wife, and couple. In our experience, focusing primarily on outward appearances can negatively affect a couple’s emotional and sexual intimacy. Truth be told, it’s much easier to focus on a spouse’s outward appearance than to focus on a spouse’s heart, integrity, and character—qualities God considers very important.

CHEMISTRY AND ATTRACTION

On a basic level, *chemistry* is related to attraction and is a part of every relationship. Chemistry and attraction influence the level of connection a person experiences with family, friends, business partners, colleagues, teammates, even casual acquaintances. When it comes to marriage, chemistry and attraction play a part in how a relationship begins as well as how it continues to grow. However, when feelings of attraction diminish, a husband or wife can view this situation as an *opportunity* rather than an *obstacle*.

While there is no simple answer to struggles surrounding a loss of attraction toward a spouse, it's been our experience that often a husband or wife initially reacts to a loss of attraction by shifting blame. Individuals focus on how they think their spouse needs to change rather than focusing on their own issues or the characteristics they could consider changing. A spouse taking ownership and responsibility by looking within and dealing with their individual issues requires maturity. And this is much more difficult than defaulting to shaming or blaming a spouse.

Life is lived in a story

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A number of years ago, we counseled a couple I will refer to as “Dick and Jane.” At our first meeting, I began by asking why they were seeking counsel. Dick was eager to respond to the question. He began by systematically summarizing what he believed to be the main problem in their marriage. For starters, he could not understand why Jane was so unmotivated when it came to maintaining her weight and physical appearance during most of their twenty years of marriage. Dick went on to describe how his wife’s lax approach to life was causing him frustration. He talked about how her indifference was negatively affecting every area of their marriage—especially *his* sex life. Dick felt that the key to a successful life is discipline. He supported this perspective by sharing a few of his success stories that centered on health, exercise, nutrition, and his personal accomplishments.

As Dick explained his perspective, he seemed to kick into “autopilot” and use sound bites that Jane had apparently heard many times before. Jane appeared numb to his assessment of their marriage problems. On the other hand, Dick seemed completely unaware of his words’ effect on his wife. Jane visibly shut down as Dick confidently repeated his simple solution: “If my wife would just exercise more, eat less, and make healthier food choices, her weight would come off and our sex life would be back on track. And if she spent a little more time on her hair, makeup, and dressed more stylishly, she would feel better about herself and look as beautiful to me as she used to.” He paused, and quite impressed by his proposed solutions, added, “Frankly, I don’t think it’s too much to expect. After all, I always look my best, I wear designer clothes, and my disciplined approach to life has enabled me to maintain my weight throughout the years.”

Dick looked at us, seemingly waiting for us to agree with him. Instead, I asked Jane if she would like to share her perspective of their marriage. Pushing through the obvious disconnect between them, she responded quietly: “As you can see, we should have gotten help years ago. It’s always difficult for me to listen to Dick summarize our marriage because whenever

there has been a problem, the problem is never Dick's. He continually resorts to offering simple solutions to complex problems. In my husband's mind—*everything* in our marriage could be easily solved if I would just choose a more disciplined lifestyle. My husband seems to think that he will not have a problem in the world if I just lost a few pounds, dressed with more style, and fixed my hair the way he wants.”

I replied, “Jane, as counselors we understand there are always more than two sides to every marriage story. There is a husband's side, a wife's side, and a deeper side. Would like to share more of your side?”

Jane continued, “With regard to Dick's perspective, I see the past twenty years very differently than he does. Allow me to give you a little history ... during our early years of marriage we experienced a lot of change in our lives. We moved three times, and we had four children—all of them delivered by C-sections. I went through postpartum depression after my second baby was born and was prescribed antidepressants. The following year, my mom, with whom I was very close, died suddenly. During the first seven years of our married life, I was pregnant, nursing a baby, packing/unpacking our house, or grieving.

“So, for me our marriage has been full of change—and loss. I did gain weight in those early years. The medications I was on were responsible for some of it. But honestly, I think depression had more to do with it. Looking back, I was doing as much as I could to be a good wife and mom. I don't pretend to be a supermodel, but I also don't see myself as negatively as Dick sees me. Maybe I'm in denial, but I feel like I am an average wife and mom who works hard raising our kids, and I'm doing the best I can. Frankly, Dick is difficult to live with. I only wish the high standards he sets for me were lived out in his own life with regard to being a loving husband and father. And as far as our sex life, the sexual passion that I enjoyed at the beginning of our marriage has been pretty much extinguished.”

There was a long period of silence. Dick seemed unmoved by his wife's pain. Jane paused and struggled to hold back tears: “My marriage is disappointing on so many levels—except for my kids. Dick is angry most of the time, and more recently his anger has become increasingly shaming and often escalates into rage. There is always something bothering Dick. For

example, last week he unloaded on me when the house was not up to his standards. As far as my appearance, it's extremely important that I *look* and *dress* in certain ways—how *he* thinks I should look. Frankly, I just never seem to be quite enough for Dick. He is perfectionistic about the kids, our house, the lawn, the car ... Dick worries a lot about what others think.” As we listened to Jane share more of her story, it became apparent that Dick's ongoing control, shaming, and discounting were destroying their marriage and sexual intimacy. Jane admitted to pulling back from Dick emotionally—and sexually. His never-ending attempts to motivate her to exercise more, eat less, make healthier food choices, and be more stylish resulted in her emotionally shutting down.

As Jane shared her heart, Dick seemed completely unaware of the effect his words were having on his wife. The more he tried to control with his opinions, judgments, and demands, the more Jane tried to escape. Jane attempted to numb her pain and rejection by being overly involved with the children and finding comfort in food.

After Jane gave her perspective, Tim asked Dick if he would be willing to reflect back some of what he just heard his wife say. After a moment of silence, it appeared that Dick was either unable or unwilling to respond. Instead, once again he flipped into autopilot by using his familiar sound bites to deflect attention off of himself and back onto Jane.

Tim gently asked, “Jane, would you be willing to tell Dick how his style of relating affects you?”

Jane paused, took a deep breath, and said; “Dick, the way you treat me is extremely painful. And I'm not just talking about the hurtful comments you make about my weight. It's your sarcastic looks, deep sighs, and the not-so-subtle ways you discount me—especially in front of the kids. I feel like I am a total disappointment, that I'm just not enough—not disciplined enough, not thin enough, not pretty enough—as your wife I will *never* be enough.” Then Jane looked directly into her husband's eyes and continued, “Dick, if I was being totally honest, it's not just the hurtful things you say to me, it's the things that you *never* say to me.”

Dick appeared defensive; he looked away, crossed his arms, and shook his head back and forth in a condescending manner.

Jane pushed through: “Dick, when was the last time you said *anything* positive to me? When was the last time you said something nice about me in front of the kids? You are quick to mention what I’m doing wrong, but you seem incapable of acknowledging what I do right—the positive things I bring to our marriage.”

Dick interrupted, “You always fish for compliments, Jane. The reality is that we wouldn’t even be having this conversation, or paying for counseling, if you lived a more disciplined life.”

The tone of Jane’s voice got firmer: “Dick, you think the answer to every problem can be simply solved with more discipline. But your controlling style of relating lacks love and encouragement. You are so concerned about how *I look*—you never consider who *I am*. I can only imagine what it might feel like to hear you say, ‘Thank you for being a good wife and mom’! Or what if you occasionally affirmed me for the ways I manage our household, handle our finances, and take the lead in parenting responsibilities that you rarely have time for? How about acknowledging the ways I encourage you to deal with your never-ending job complaints and ongoing stress and anxiety? What about the ways I support you going out with your friends and help you to enjoy your latest hobby? How about a simple ‘thanks’ for the ways I help out with your parents? It’s not that I mind—I love Mom and Dad. But do you have any idea how many times I cover for you? When was the last time you spent the afternoon with them or told them how much they mean to you?”

Jane’s voice got louder: “I am really angry that we are in a counseling office for the first time in twenty years, and *your* position is our biggest problem is *my* weight! NEWS FLASH ... our problems are so much bigger than a number on a scale! Dick, I am so much more than my body, the color of my hair, or designer labels. But, in your typical controlling style, you shift any blame off of yourself and onto me. And you continue to discount me and offer your simple solution that if I would just exercise more, eat less, update my wardrobe, and color my hair, our marriage would be back on track. *Are you serious?*”

Dick was shocked at his wife’s display of anger. He asked, “Do you have a Bible?” Tim handed him one and Dick flipped through the pages. He found

the passage he was looking for and read it out loud. “Ephesians chapter 5 clearly says, ‘Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.’⁴ I really don’t want to sound like the bad guy, but the Bible commands the wife to submit to the husband. Instead, all I get from Jane is resistance, distance, and disrespect!”

Tim asked, “Dick, can you read the passage *before* that—verse 21?” Dick slowly read aloud, “And be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.”⁵

Tim replied, “Dick, the Bible commands mutual submission to followers of Christ.⁶ It also says a husband and wife have mutual authority in sexual intimacy.⁷ And if headship is important to you, I challenge you to continue reading the rest of that chapter. You will discover *how* a husband is to be the head—a husband is to ‘love [his wife] as Christ also loved the church’ (Ephesians 5:25). It also says a husband is to *nourish* and *cherish* his wife in the same ways Christ nourishes and cherishes the church (verse 29). Dick, please look your wife directly in her eyes.”

Dick closed the Bible, slowly turned toward Jane ... and stared at her with an arrogant intensity.

Tim asked, “Dick, as you look into your bride’s eyes, does she look like a wife who has been *nourished*, *cherished*, and has a husband who is *willing to die for her*?”

After a long, pregnant pause, Anne circled back to Jane’s earlier comment about Dick’s control and anger. “Dick, would you agree that control and anger are a problem in your marriage?”

Dick hesitated and then answered in a softer voice: “Yes, control and anger are something I’ve wrestled with most of my life. If I was being totally honest, I guess I do worry about what other people think about me, my wife, and family.”

I paused and gently asked, “Dick, help me understand—since you are such a disciplined person, why don’t you simply exercise your discipline and stop responding to Jane and your children with control and anger?”

For the first time in our session, Dick had no response.

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Throughout decades of counseling, we've heard women and men say, "I really want to see my spouse the way God does. It all sounds so great, but to be totally honest I don't know how to change my negative thoughts and feelings about my spouse's physical appearance." Unfortunately, our culture sets up men and women with unrealistic expectations and then highlights imperfections. Listen to the radio, turn on the television, read the newspaper, go online—body image is continually emphasized as a goal that far supersedes the condition of a person's heart. This often results in shame that reinforces the lie that a person is flawed or defective—just not quite good enough. Feeling judged or rejected by a spouse for any reason is always painful. That is why it is very important how a spouse handles issues surrounding physical appearances. Because what a wife or husband says about a spouse's physical and outward appearance has potential to build up or deeply wound the spouse. In our experience, how a husband or wife handles internal struggles of not being physically attracted to a spouse is often a strong indicator of his or her self-image.

Before we go any further, you may be wondering if we believe that it is important for people to take care of their physical body and personal appearance. Of course we do. A person's body is described in the Bible as the temple where the Holy Spirit resides.⁸ So, taking steps to honor and take good care of your bodies is important. This includes taking ownership and responsibility to get medical checkups, eat healthy, monitor stress, and make regular exercise important life priorities. However, every person's body will change over time. Medical, physical, and emotional changes are part of the aging process. A person can make all the right choices, live a disciplined lifestyle, and still struggle with certain areas. This is true with spiritual, physical, emotional, and sexual issues—and with matters of the heart.

HEALTHY SELF-LOVE

The Bible challenges people to live out what is called the Great Commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... Love your neighbor as *yourself*.”⁹ Often when husbands or wives are unable to unconditionally love and presuppose the best in themselves, they are unable to unconditionally love and presuppose the best in their spouse.

Back to the Dick and Jane story: As we continued to meet with Dick, he began to understand that his abusive treatment of Jane reflected how he felt about himself. Dick realized that no one was harder on himself than he was. Throughout his life, he had acquired a catalog of rules that kept him from enjoying intimacy with God, himself, and others—especially with his wife. His standard for self-discipline became a replacement for unconditional love.

A root issue surfaced—rejection—and he tried to transfer his self-rejection onto Jane by rejecting *her*. Remember, rejection is a two-sided coin. One side says, *I’m better than you*. And the other side says, *I’m not good enough*. Dick’s default was to verbally and nonverbally convey, *I’m better than you*. He lived a religious-oriented, hyper-disciplined life that focused on outward appearances. Striving to look better than others replaced focusing on the condition of his heart. In marriage, it was easier for Dick to tell Jane what *she needed to do* instead of courageously facing his own shame and rejection.

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Can we gently ask, *Do you allow any negative thoughts about your spouse to adversely influence your relationship? Does your thought life limit your ability to celebrate who your spouse is?* When marriage troubles surface—and they will—we encourage you to “stay in your own lane” and take ownership and responsibility by being aware of any negative internal dialogue or unrighteous judgment that replays in your mind. That destructive dialogue belongs to you and is not resolved by seeking to control another person, especially a spouse.

Firing up the “shame/blame thrower” and demanding that your spouse change is never the right response. Instead, it further damages the relationship. Remember, control responds to control—and love responds to love. In marriage, attempting to solve your problems by making them your spouse’s problems will always become your next problem. Inner conflict about your spouse’s physical appearance is an invitation to examine your own heart.

Some readers may default to shaming or blaming a spouse because of their spouse’s physical appearance. If that includes you, we encourage you to begin with the Lord—**I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*), and invite Him into your process. Be still and listen for any promptings you may sense from the Holy Spirit. Ask God to help you see your spouse in the ways He does. Revisit life-changing Bible passages, for example, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed* by the renewing of your mind.”¹⁰ And “The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”¹¹

Remember, this verse doesn’t mean that God is not concerned about a person’s physical appearance. It means the condition of a person’s heart is much more important to Him. Another verse says, “May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.”¹² Of course, this includes wives rejoicing in the husband of their youth.

Our experience suggests that it is next to impossible to give something to someone when you have not received it yourself. Husbands and wives who understand their true identities are able to more wholeheartedly love their spouse. The Bible affirms this: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.”¹³

All that is to say, although chemistry and attraction are parts of a healthy marriage, they should never trump commitment and covenant. We encourage couples to follow Jesus’ example. He never controls, shames, blames, demands, manipulates, or unrighteously judges; instead, He invites a spouse to choose a better way—unconditional love.

MARRIAGE PROBLEMS ARE MULTIFACETED

Marriage problems are often multifaceted because they involve two people who have different families of origin, temperaments, personalities, propensities, and spiritual gifts. When couples come in for help, the way they relate and respond to each other can often be traced back to the consequences of the Fall. Our experience suggests a common post-Fall propensity for husbands is to power up (seek to dominate) or emotionally check out (desert). And a common post-Fall propensity among wives is for them to attempt to control (actively or passively) or manipulate (often by withholding emotionally and sexually).

Nevertheless, regardless of what a couple is struggling with in their marriage relationship, a wise first step is to invite God into their process. A hurting or disappointed spouse can give God their pain and frustration. In addition, investing in counseling and personal healing can help individuals see themselves and their spouse as God sees them. And this helps them respond to their spouse in loving and life-giving ways. Marriage is unlike any other relationship. Men and women are invited to humble themselves, to forgive and/or ask for forgiveness, and to put away childish things.¹⁴

GENERATIONAL PROPENSITIES

Marriage struggles are often the result of deeper problems. In our experience, many problems can be traced back to marriage views that came after sin entered the story. These include traditional, hierarchical, patriarchal, and complementarian marriage views. That is why a couple's understanding of God's original functional equality and mutuality marriage design can become a solid foundation to relate to each other as equals and push back against the propensity toward male privilege.

Reviewing the Dick and Jane story, as we continued to meet, we learned that Jane was raised in a religious home with a controlling father and a passive mother. Her father's authoritarian views could be traced back through his generational line. Like Jane's grandfather, Jane's father did not allow anyone in the household to go against his opinions and decisions. Jane observed her mother being passive and never speaking up. And she regularly heard her father make negative comments, not only about his wife's looks but about other people's appearances as well. He would quickly define a person's value based on their outward appearance, profession, education, and possessions.

His male-centric approach to marriage and family created a blueprint for the husband Jane would choose and how she would live out her marriage. Because of the ways Jane learned about equality, headship, submission, and authority,¹⁵ it took her twenty years to find her voice, express feelings of anger, and appropriately respond to Dick's abusive anger, shaming, and control.

Regarding different marriage views, of course couples can choose to live out marriage in a number of ways. However, we believe any marriage view where a wife is not functionally equal with her husband can open the door to male privilege. And this becomes a key ingredient in functional inequality and often leads to a husband controlling, devaluing, or even abusing a wife.

In God's original marriage design— *in the beginning*—both the man and woman were made in God's image; they were *intrinsically equal*. And *in the beginning*, both the man and woman were given the dominion and procreation mandates—they were *functionally equal*. It is important to remember that traditional, hierarchical, patriarchal, and complementarian marriage views all came *after* sin entered the story. Review Scripture: after the Fall, functional equality as well as emotional and sexual intimacy were rarely a part of the marriage story.

Before moving on, please note we have primarily focused on a husband (Dick) struggling with the physical appearance of his wife (Jane). However, this problem is not gender exclusive. We also regularly meet with wives who say they are not physically attracted to their husband.

SOWING AND REAPING

Every person is created as a volitional human being who has been given the ability to make choices. Therefore, a husband and wife can choose to respond to their spouse in mature, life-giving ways. For example, a wife or husband who struggles with not feeling physically attracted to their spouse can instead choose to focus on how God sees that individual. Practically speaking, this involves a spouse choosing to be kind, show appreciation, and presuppose the best. This approach opens the door for one to lovingly focus on a spouse's heart, kindness, loyalty, generosity, faithfulness, humility, and other-centeredness. Focusing on these conveys love, respect, and value to a spouse.

When a spouse behaves in other-centered ways, a spiritual law of the universe comes into play—the law of *sowing* and *reaping*. *Sowing* is anything people invest their time, energy, and resources on. *Reaping* is experiencing the consequences of what a person sows. As a side, a firehouse version of this spiritual law is “What goes around, comes around.”

To illustrate the sowing and reaping principle, a spouse who sows grace, compassion, and understanding into his or her spouse will *reap* the benefits from those acts of love and kindness. Likewise, a spouse who sows judgment will reap judgment, and a spouse who sows control will reap control. When a spouse sows comparison they often reap comparison—as well as competition. Therefore, if you are comparing your spouse to anyone else (real or imagined), do everything you can to stop. Comparison always leads to competition and kills intimacy. The fruit of comparison can often be connected to roots of pride, selfishness, idealism, and perfectionism.

Many husbands and wives sow negative views of their physical selves. They are hypercritical and tend to default to inordinately focusing on negative thoughts and feelings. Rather than sowing negative thoughts and reaping negative feelings, we encourage husbands and wives to sow into their minds positive things. The Bible affirms this counsel: “Fix your

thoughts on what is true and good and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely, and dwell on the fine, good things in others. Think about all you can praise God for and be glad about.”¹⁶ Sowing positive thoughts and feelings opens the door to reaping positive thoughts and feelings.

The truth is, most husbands, wives, and couples make more good choices than bad choices. Therefore, we have three questions for you: (1) *What are a few good choices you have made throughout your life and marriage?* (2) *When you view or think about your physical appearance, what do you sow — and what are you reaping?* (3) *When you view or think about your spouse’s physical appearance, what do you sow—and what are you reaping?*

Regarding a person’s outward appearance, what people consider as desirable and attractive has changed over time. For example, do you ever recall your grandparents obsessing about having the perfect hair color, a bronze tan, six-pack abs, or the size of their chest, waistline—or penis? Think about men and women from previous generations, did any of them look like today’s supermodels? This makes us wonder, *How much power do we want to give our culture when it comes to determining what men and woman are “supposed” to look like?*

For a wife or husband who inordinately struggles with his or her spouse’s physical appearance, we do not want to minimize or discount your struggle. We understand many spouses view this as a loss, and dealing with loss typically includes a number of components. Remember that in marriage, and in life, one constant is change. The reality is the way a spouse looks will not remain the same. For example, most people do not look the same on their tenth, twentieth, thirtieth, fortieth, and fiftieth wedding anniversaries as they did on their wedding day.

Therefore, we encourage a spouse to deal with any loss and appropriately grieve changes in your spouse’s physical appearance. It is also important to feel your feelings and give God any negative energy attached to feelings of grief and loss. As a side, remember a person is not their feelings; feelings are often connected to a person’s ego, which most often is not a friend. Lastly, as changes occur, it is always important to remember all the good times from a lifetime of being married and walking together ... side by side.

PICTURE A SPOUSE AS GOD SEES HIM OR HER

A key intimacy-building step for husbands and wives is to revisit the blessings and benefits, the power and protection in covenant. And to focus on your spouse's true identity—on their heart, intimacy, friendship, and how you have walked together, through good times and bad, and in sickness and health. This becomes an invitation to unconditionally love, honor, and cherish your spouse. Remember, Jesus summed up the entire law and the prophets when He said to love God and love others as you love yourself.¹⁷ It is from a place of unconditional love that a couple is in the best position to see themselves and each other as God does.

More than twenty years ago, Mike Mason wrote *The Mystery of Marriage*.¹⁸ We absolutely love how the author describes his wife in his chapter titled "Sex":

I sometimes wonder what it's like for nudists, whether they ever really get used to it. As for me, I still haven't gotten used to seeing my own wife naked. It is almost as if her body is shining with a bright light, too bright to look at very long. I cannot take my eyes off of her ... and yet I must. To gaze too long or too curiously is ... even with her a breach of priority, almost a crime. It is not like watching a flower or creeping up to spy on an animal in the wild. No, my wife's body is more fascinating than a flower ... shier than any animal in the wild, and more breathtaking than a thousand sunsets. To me her body is the most awesome thing in creation. Trying to take in her wild, glorious beauty, so free and primal, so utterly unchanged since the beginning of time, I catch a small glimpse of what it means that men and women are made in the image of God ... if even the image is this dazzling ... what must the Original look like?

We believe this quote captures the essence of what it means to see a spouse as God sees them. Pause for a moment and read it again. **I.O.T.L.** and ask God to help you grow in seeing your spouse in the ways He does.

In marriage, comparing your spouse with others always leads to competition, which kills intimacy. The truth is, judging a spouse can become a poor substitute for loving, honoring, and presupposing the best in them. Instead of denying or suppressing any disappointments, we encourage husbands and wives to discuss their concerns with a mentor, spiritual parent, or trained counselor. Inviting someone to help you process feelings and disappointments helps to avoid shaming or blaming a spouse.

As you review the challenges in this chapter, we encourage you to be kind to yourself and your spouse as you accept life's inevitable physical changes. Regularly ask God to give you His heart for your spouse. Take ownership and responsibility to invest in taking good care of your body. This includes getting medical checkups, eating healthy, monitoring stress, and making regular exercise important life priorities. And for any spouse who continually defaults to shaming and blaming, we challenge you to advance in your personal healing and spiritual formation. This includes an invitation to step into the Larger Story where *God* is the main character instead of the smaller story where *self* is the main character. As you take positive steps, you can rekindle your marriage passion, and you will be drawn toward increased emotional and sexual intimacy.

CHAPTER 14

DO COUPLES HAVE A “SEXUAL DUTY” TO EACH OTHER?

We regularly ask couples the following question at REAL LIFE marriage gatherings: “What words come to mind when you think about your sexual relationships?” We hear both negative and positive responses from husbands and wives. The positive responses include *exciting, stress busting, playful, fun, adventuresome, comforting, and the highlight of my day*. Some of the negative responses include *boring, routine, a power struggle, frustrating, one-way, nonexistent, painful, controlling, and unwanted duty*. Regardless of a person’s response, whenever the word *duty* comes up, it always leads to interesting discussion.

Duty is a word that often reminds people of something they are required to fulfill. For example, when a US citizen receives a jury duty selection letter, it means they must report for duty—or face the consequences. The Bible talks about duty in marriage; a husband and wife have a sexual duty to each other:

The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and

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likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.¹

Let’s take a closer look. This passage commands a husband and wife to not deprive one another and to fulfill a sexual duty to each other. Duty is “a

moral or legal obligation; a responsibility.”² We don’t know about you, but fulfilling a duty—especially a sexual duty—doesn’t sound romantic.

Life is lived in a story

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For most of my fire department career, I worked a twenty-four-hour shift every third day. Being a firefighter wasn't just a job for me, it was a profession that I was honored to be part of. It was my dream career choice since childhood. On the day I was sworn in, I raised my right hand and promised to take ownership and responsibility to fulfill the requirements of being a firefighter. Back in 1975, my sworn oath included a Bible and ended with the declaration, "So help me God."

Being a firefighter consisted of many responsibilities. For example, reporting for duty on my assigned duty days, putting my turnout gear on the fire truck, standing roll call, checking out firefighting and safety equipment, maintaining and cleaning the rigs, participating in daily training, performing mandatory physical fitness, and participating in assigned housekeeping chores. And the best part—responding to emergency calls throughout my twenty-four-hour shift.

I quickly realized that being a firefighter and experiencing the firehouse life was not about me. It involved being part of a *team* where every team member understood duty. Each fire officer and firefighter took ownership and responsibility for their part on the team. Looking back over my career, I never once viewed duty negatively, or as a "downer." It was an honor for me to perform my firefighter duties to the best of my abilities.

I loved being a firefighter, and many duty days were filled with lights and sirens, excitement, and risk. But there were plenty of days when I did not *feel* like reporting for duty. I was exhausted from working seventy hours a week at two different jobs, and often things were stressful at home. On those days, reporting for duty seemed more like work than excitement and joy. Thankfully, I did not base fulfilling my firefighter duties on my *feelings*. If I told my company officer, "Lieutenant, I've had a rough few days, and I really don't feel like fulfilling my duties today," I would not have lasted very long in the fire service.

On the day I was married, I entered into covenant with God and with Anne. I publicly declared, “I, Tim Evans, celebrate you, Anne O’Shaughnessy, as my wife ... for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, honor, and cherish you until death parts us.”

And similar to the dream of becoming a firefighter, since childhood I had always dreamed about getting married and having kids. For reasons I don’t fully understand, God placed in my young heart a passion for marriage. And throughout the years, God has fanned the flames of my desire to live out the miracle and mystery of *two becoming one* and embrace what it truly means to be *naked without shame*.

However, after being married a short time, I realized that I could try to make marriage “all about me”—my wants, desires, and feelings. Or I could invite God into our marriage and choose to view marriage as not about *me*—but about “WE.” For me, being married, just like at the firehouse, involved Anne and I being a team. And my part on the team included fulfilling duties, including my sexual duty as a husband. Looking back over four decades of marriage, I have not viewed marital duty as a downer or from a negative perspective. Instead of focusing on Anne’s duties, or how I was feeling, I have focused on what an honor it is for me to live out my marriage duties. This has included taking ownership and responsibility for my part in our marriage—and in our sexual intimacy.

And similar to the fire department, there are times when sex is fun, exciting, and a lights-and-sirens experience. But there are also times when one of us, or both of us, are working long hours and for any number of reasons we are tired, stressed, and exhausted. During these times, one of us may desire sexual intimacy and to experience an orgasm, while the other does not. Truth be told, on those days taking ownership and responsibility for my part in our sex life can feel more like reporting for duty than a celebration of emotional and sexual intimacy.

“SEXUAL DUTY” ... ARE YOU SERIOUS?

Working with many couples, we believe this 1 Corinthians 7 passage is often misunderstood. We have actually heard husbands say, “The Bible says my wife’s body belongs to me. She needs to meet my sexual needs!” We’ve also heard wives say, “My husband’s body belongs to me. He needs to meet my sexual needs!” Biblically, are they both right? Or might they both be wrong?

Reviewing the text, it appears pretty clear and straightforward. And if sex were just a physical act, couples could view this text as the law and take a hyper-religious, legalistic approach. One spouse could demand or try to shame the other into following the letter of the law. However, we believe that couples who choose that style of relating miss the benefits and intimacy-building potential implied in this passage.

The heart of this command is for couples to focus on love and reciprocal servanthood—rather than focusing on how they feel, their perceived rights, power, or control. In our experience, often the person with the lower sexual frequency desire can appear to have a measure of power or control. *Why?* Because their desire for sexual frequency is being met.

Therefore, it’s not unusual for the spouse with a higher sexual desire to feel controlled by the spouse with the lower sexual desire. However, God never designed intimacy and sexuality between a husband and wife to be defined by power or control. Of course, God is all-powerful and always in control, but His control is never self-serving, shaming, or manipulative. We agree with theologian Greg Boyd, who writes that anything “that characterizes God’s power in terms of control rather than self-sacrificial love—must be identified as essentially pagan.”³

In a Christian marriage, husbands and wives are invited to process what *sexual duty* means. Remember, how a couple views sexual duty deeply affects each spouse individually and as a “WE.” This passage shifts a

couple's primary focus away from self and onto God and His plan for emotional and sexual intimacy. As reciprocal servants, husband and wives are invited to concentrate on the love, grace, and forgiveness that are rooted in humility and mutuality. Practically, this means first pleasing God, then loving and serving your spouse, and then having your individual needs met.⁴

This passage in 1 Corinthians 7 gives only one exception to the command for a husband and wife to fulfill their sexual duty. If a husband and wife decide not to have sex, their decision should meet these criteria: (1) there is mutual consent ("except by agreement"), (2) their abstention is temporary ("for a time"), and (3) the reason is prayer ("to devote yourselves to prayer").⁵ In other words, this passage says the only reason for a husband or wife to withhold sex from each other is when they both agree to do so for a specific period of time and for the purpose of prayer.

Okay, we understand that a spouse may be thinking, *What if I don't feel like fulfilling my sexual duty?* In our experience, couples who base decisions on how they feel miss out on many of the blessings and benefits that come from choosing unconditional love and reciprocal servanthood. As we've previously stated, feelings are often connected to a person's ego, which most often is *not* their friend. Perhaps some readers are disturbed by the idea of sex as a duty. A spouse may think, *My body belongs to me not to my spouse. I don't have to give my body to my spouse. Maybe she or he can enjoy my body when I decide to share it, but my body belongs to me!*

Regardless of what a couple is struggling with, we encourage husbands and wives to include God in their process. Advancing in intimacy with a spouse begins with the Father. Tips, tools, and techniques can be helpful and are an important part of the healing process. But God is the Author of marriage, the great Counselor, and ultimately the One who heals.

The idea of a husband or wife submitting sexually may stir up issues related to childhood, past relationships, unforgiveness, negative sexual imprinting, abuse, or other experiences. In addition to beginning with God, we suggest individuals struggling with this concept consult a counselor to help explore issues that may have surfaced. Often, unresolved pain and broken trust can

contribute to resistance or rebellion. Making an intentional choice to seek deeper understanding around why a spouse struggles with sexual duty is a step toward advancing in intimacy with God and in the marriage. Makes us wonder: *What if the spouse who has a negative response to sexual duty viewed their response as an invitation from God to receive healing at a deeper level?*

Marriage is unlike any other relationship, and it has unlimited potential to develop and nurture *unconditional love*. After being married forty years, we believe growing in maturity and advancing in unconditional love is foundational to healthy marriages. Remember, unconditional love involves loving a spouse without expecting anything in return.

SEXUAL INTIMACY AND SPIRITUAL WARFARE

The reality is, we are in a spiritual battle. Humans exist in a world that includes the natural and the supernatural. This includes an amazing triune God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—as well as angels, demons, and humans. Authors John and Stasi Eldredge write in *Love and War*: “You have an enemy. Your marriage has an enemy. Believe it or not, this is very good news. Because the epiphany that follows is this—your spouse is not the enemy. He is not the enemy. She is not the enemy. Really.”⁶ Although many people do not understand spiritual warfare, throughout history, especially before modernity⁷ became popular, most people believed that the unseen supernatural world was as real as the “seen” natural world.

The Bible supports this position and describes the spiritual battle, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”⁸ And in fact, the very next verse stresses the importance of putting on the full armor of God so that we may stand firm against the Enemy’s schemes.⁹ And Jesus taught us to pray for protection from evil: “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”¹⁰

Unfortunately, some Christians take extreme positions when spiritual warfare and the demonic realm are addressed. They deny the spiritual battle, are fearful and afraid to engage in spiritual warfare, or they become overly focused and fascinated with it. All of these positions are unwise. The Bible reminds Christ-followers: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”¹¹ Christ-followers can step into their true identity and resist the devil in the name of Jesus and through the authority they have in Him. Not only that, we are encouraged to seek God: “Draw near to God; and He will draw near to you.”¹²

Let’s return to the passage on sexual duty (1 Corinthians 7): “Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may

devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”¹³ Do you ever wonder why Satan is specifically mentioned in a passage about sexual intimacy in marriage? Notice this passage doesn't say resist temptation from others, from porn, or from a spirit of sinful lust. It says resist temptation from the chief evil demon, Satan. Makes us wonder, *Maybe Satan understands the power in a healthy marital sex life. And that is why he attempts to introduce disagreement, division, and disunity through lies and temptations.*

When we teach about fulfilling a sexual duty in marriage, we encourage husbands and wives to not view sexual duty as a shame-loaded millstone placed around a spouse's neck. Instead, it can become an invitation to connect with a spouse, live out grace at a deep level, resist Satan's temptation, and protect marital oneness. This is why, similar to sexual intimacy being an act of worship, marital sex can become an act of spiritual warfare as together couples resist Satan's temptations. When a husband and wife are sexually serving and pleasing each other, this behavior becomes a hedge of protection around each of them and their "WE."

DO I ALWAYS HAVE TO SAY “YES” TO SEXUAL INTIMACY?

Always being available to engage in sex sounds ideal, but life happens! Husbands and wives find themselves contending with many things that pull them in different directions. Jim Daly, president of Focus on the Family, writes,

It’s important to remember that sexual intimacy in marriage is a lifelong process. Its expression will vary in youth and old age, in times of stress and times of joy, during pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing, during and after menopause—the list could go on and on. At every stage, healthy attitudes toward marital sex are characterized by candor, prayerfulness, vulnerability, flexibility, and willingness to communicate.¹⁴

Therefore, please understand that this passage (Ephesians 7) is God’s *ideal* for husbands and wives. Similar to the Great Commandment, which commands Christ-followers to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... and love your neighbor as yourself”¹⁵—that is God’s *ideal* for love. But for various reasons, the command to love your spouse 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength is virtually impossible to live out. Likewise, expecting a spouse to be available to engage in sexual intimacy 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, is unrealistic.

When a husband and wife disagree regarding sexual intimacy, their differences can become invitations to practice unconditional love, grace, servanthood, and forgiveness. Practically, we encourage couples—“don’t just say no.” Instead, be willing to choose vulnerability by sharing with your spouse the “why” around your decision. We suggest that whenever one partner requests a pass, that partner agrees to initiate sex the next time. Of course, if requesting a pass is an ongoing issue, we encourage couples to seek counsel. Remember, asking for help reflects maturity. It’s a way to take

ownership and responsibility for marriage struggles that every married couple deals with.

Back to our presenting question: *Sexual duty ... are you serious?* Yes, as we've described in this chapter, duty does not have to be viewed negatively. Sexual duty can be regarded as part of a healthy marriage. Read 1 Corinthians 7:5 again: "Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." Pause and ask yourself, *Why did God give this command to married couples?* Might a command of this magnitude include an invitation for couples to process through any pain, rejection, or unforgiveness?

Furthermore, does fulfilling a sexual duty stir up in you any anger, fear, rebellion, resentment, or a desire to control? If so, why do you think you respond in those ways? Remember, God created every human being with the ability to make choices. As co-leaders, a husband and wife can choose reciprocal servanthood as they unconditionally love and bring pleasure to their spouse. Regarding pleasure, one popular pastor and author writes, "Pleasure, though, is not a zero-sum game. If I give someone pleasure, there's not necessarily less for me. Au contraire. And if I pursue some pleasure for myself, there's not less for others ... pleasure increases when it's mutual."¹⁶ Bottom line: your motive, heart, and attitude are keys to fulfilling your sexual duty.

AUTHORITY AND SUBMISSION

Speaking of co-leadership and reciprocal servanthood, let's briefly return to this 1 Corinthians passage. Verse 4 says, "The wife does not have *authority* over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have *authority* over his own body, but the wife does." Notice how *authority* is framed in this passage, a husband and wife have *mutual authority* in physical and sexual intimacy.

It's also worthwhile to note that in this key marriage passage, there is no mention of headship, hierarchy, the husband as the wife's leader/ spiritual cover,¹⁷ male privilege, or the wife being sexually (or otherwise) subordinate to the husband.¹⁸

All that is to say, we hope this chapter has encouraged husbands and wives to reframe sexual duty in positive and life-giving ways. Instead of living in the smaller story where *self* is the main character, and marriage—and sex—are "all about me," this approach can become an invitation to step into the Larger Story where *God* is the main character.

CHAPTER 15

SEXUAL AGREEMENT

Life is lived in a story

anne+tim

We counseled a couple who had been married more than fifteen years. Their life included stressors that are typical for families in their season of life. They appeared to be Type-A individuals who both held fulltime jobs outside the home. Each of their three children was involved in a number of activities that included family involvement. And the wife's elderly mom lived nearby and required a lot of time and personal attention.

At our first meeting they said, "The main problem in our marriage is our sex life—basically we don't have one!" They described that whenever the subject of sex came up they ended up in an argument. Until recently, they had been able to juggle their responsibilities fairly well, but lately their marriage was showing the effects of their demanding lifestyles, and their sexual relationship was taking the hardest hit. By the time they met everyone else's needs, sexual intimacy was the first

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thing to drop to the bottom of their to-do list. By the end of most days, they were too exhausted to even try.

As we listened to their story, we thought about how the Enemy was slowly adding ingredients to a recipe for marital disaster. Over a number of counseling sessions, they discovered that being overscheduled wasn't their only issue. It seemed when they did have time for sex, it was often used as a form of control or manipulation. They also began to realize just how much their inability to communicate played into their struggle. So, in attempts to nonverbally communicate disappointment, disapproval, or anger, they withheld sex from each other.

Sex became a power play, almost like a bargaining chip, that resulted in frustration. As we began discussing their sexual relationship, the tension between them was palpable. The husband felt ignored and punished by his wife, and he accused her of passively controlling by withholding sex. The wife dismissed his accusations and defended herself. She was quick to

shame him, declaring that her level of sexual satisfaction was almost zero. Apparently, she had little, if any, interest in working on an area of their life that seemed to be all about him.

We read 1 Corinthians 7:2-5, and we challenged them to invite God into their process—to **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*) and listen. And we encouraged them to leave space for what the Lord may have to say about their sexual relationship.

When this couple returned a few weeks later, they both confessed to struggling with the concept of sex as a duty they were responsible to fulfill. Even though romance had left their marriage years ago, they felt that *sexual duty* sounded too regimented. The husband bluntly said, “Are you kidding me? We are supposed to view sex as a duty we are required to fulfill? That sounds more like a military command.”

This couple’s story is an example of how a presenting problem such as “The main thing wrong in our marriage is our sex life” is often a signpost leading to unaddressed deeper issues. People’s stories are complex, and problems in one area of marriage are usually related to other areas. Sex problems are always related to intimacy issues. So we challenged this couple to review their schedules, parenting issues, finances, relationships, church life, work life, and play. We challenged them to develop a plan for how they would better manage these areas. We explained that advancing in intimacy doesn’t happen by accident while real life runs on high speed. And we encouraged them to look for ways to slow down the pace of their lives and live more intentionally.

When this couple returned several weeks later, the wife, who had great administrative skills, pulled out a detailed spreadsheet showing the different areas in their lives. Recognizing that they needed more time to dream and have fun, they scheduled bimonthly date nights. They implemented a plan for parenting that included scheduled family nights and more dinners together around the table. They had a financial plan that included tithing to their church, supporting ministries they cared about, and saving for retirement. They made a plan that included maintaining healthy boundaries in their involvement at church, coaching children’s sports teams, and

volunteering at schools. They even renewed their health club membership and began to regularly work out.

As we reviewed each area of their life, we applauded them for the healthy choices they were making. The wife commented, “We should have done this years ago. Of course, it takes time and energy. But we are both beginning to take ownership and responsibility instead of shaming or blaming each other.” The husband added, “It is a lot of work, but we believe it’s worth the effort, and we already see positive results in our marriage.”

We then asked if they noticed anything missing from their new life plan. As they looked over their spreadsheet, lights suddenly went on. They realized they had not included a plan for their sex life—a sexual agreement.¹ We explained, “Just like every other area of your life, a healthy sex life takes time and discipline. But if you are both willing to take ownership and responsibility instead of defaulting to shame, fear, control, or blaming each other, it will be worth your effort.”

When this couple returned for their next session, their sexual agreement was not fully in place. They explained that they argued about sexual frequency, taking turns initiating, and self-imposed consequences. As a third party, we helped them process through some of their differences and reach agreement.

SEXUAL AGREEMENT

A sexual agreement can be a great starting place, and though it can be helpful, it is not a magic cure all for every sexual problem and frustration in a marriage. As we continued to counsel with this couple, other issues surfaced that affected their sexual intimacy. We challenged them to look at their families of origin, sexual histories, as well as ungodly bonds and soul ties. We encouraged them to consider how codependence played a part in the ways they related to each other and to their family. We talked about how emotional intimacy relates to sexual intimacy. And we helped them understand how they each responded in different ways sexually. In addition, we began to meet individually with each spouse.

As we continued to walk with this couple over the next few seasons, they began to see the positive effects of fulfilling their sexual agreement. The following year they came in for a tune-up, and their marriage, especially their sex life, was better than ever.

As we emphasized throughout this book, *God is pro-sex!* That said, if you fail to have a plan to advance in sexual intimacy, you might as well plan to fail. Because maturity and growth do not happen by accident, we challenge husbands and wives to implement a sexual agreement. This is a tool that walks couples through a step-by-step process that covers many of the topics in this book, for example, frequency, timing, locations, positions, quickies, oral stimulation, oral sex, and self-imposed consequences. As an aside, our *NAKED: Reclaiming Sexual Intimacy in Marriage Companion Journal* dovetails with this book. It provides questions and REAL LIFE applications for each chapter. And it also includes a detailed sample of a sexual agreement.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TO SEXUAL AGREEMENTS

For couples who desire to advance in sexual intimacy, we challenge them to begin by understanding God’s purposes for sex. It’s also important to commit to processing sexual histories, soul ties (and ungodly bonds), negative sexual imprinting, as well as sensitive sexual issues. Along with these steps, we encourage husbands and wives to process the following questions, viewing these as tools to help advance in emotional and sexual intimacy. Couples can experience remarkable growth when they **I.O.T.L.** and implement the **Traffic Light Principle** as they consider the following questions—together.

1. Are we doing anything that Scripture prohibits?

Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”² God allows tremendous sexual freedom within the covenant of marriage. However, the Bible also sets certain prohibitions. In their book *Intimate Issues*, authors Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus list ten things Scripture specifically prohibits. These include fornication, adultery, homosexual acts, impurity, orgies, prostitution, lustful passions, sodomy, obscenity and coarse joking, and incest.³

2. Am I doing anything that hurts or offends you?

The Bible says, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”⁴ Hurting a spouse in any way is a violation of God’s design for love and marriage. Therefore, your sexual relationship should never involve anything that hurts or offends your spouse.

3. Am I doing anything that you would prefer me not to do?

The Bible also says, “Everything is permissible for me, but not all things are beneficial.”⁵ Often a wife or husband may feel more sexual freedom or desire for sexual creativity than their spouse. Here is where co-leading together and implementing the **Traffic Light Principle** can be helpful. If the husband and wife *both* have “green lights” after they **I.O.T.L.**, then they should go for it! But if one spouse has a “yellow” or “red light,” discussion is needed. This opens the door for couples to prayerfully process any differences in their sexual intimacy—as well as in every area in their marriage. Remember, marital unity is always more important than disunity.

4. Is there anything you would like to try or experiment with?

The Bible clearly indicates God’s intent for a married couple to fully enjoy each other’s bodies: “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.”⁶ “Eat ... drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers.”⁷ God designed sexual intimacy to be enjoyed with freedom and creativity. Choose a good time to initiate a discussion with your spouse about the sexual dimension of your marriage. Implement the **Traffic Light Principle**, and be open to adding creative experiences to your lovemaking.

One seasoned couple told us they equate sex to food. They agreed that food is something that nourishes, energizes, and strengthens them. Food is something they enjoy every day. They decided to take the same approach to their sex life. Every day they look for some way to nurture their sexual intimacy. It may not include sexual intercourse and mutual orgasms. But every day they plan to do something to bless each other and to advance in emotional and sexual intimacy. For example, they include verbal intimacy with direct eye contact, sensual touch, passionate kissing, bathing or showering together, and massage—just to name a few.

+ + +

After you have processed the preceding questions with your spouse, consider an individual REAL LIFE challenge—ask the same questions to the Lord.

+ Lord, am I doing anything that Scripture prohibits? + Lord, am I doing anything that hurts or offends You? + Lord, am I doing anything that You would prefer I

not do?

+ Lord, is there anything You would like me to try or experiment with?

CHAPTER 16

FIVE INTIMACY-BUILDING CHALLENGES

In this chapter, we want to give you a taste of the questions and REAL LIFE challenges in the *NAKED: Reclaiming Sexual Intimacy in Marriage Companion Journal*, which dovetails with this book.¹ Investing in the following intimacy-building challenges and working through the *NAKED Companion Journal* will help you and your spouse *advance* in your marriage. Remember, we call our REAL LIFE marriage gatherings *advances* instead of *retreats* because these are a time for couples to *advance* rather than retreat in marriage.

1. ASK FOR FORGIVENESS.

Living out forgiveness is an important step of growth in every person's maturity. We often describe marriage with two words—*inexhaustible forgiveness*. Focusing on forgiveness leads to advancing in emotional and sexual intimacy. In counseling couples, we often challenge them to go on what we refer to as a *forgiveness-fest*.² The positive feedback we have received from couples implementing forgiveness-fests has been amazing.

Certainly forgiveness relates to all relationships. However, the following challenges focus on forgiveness in marriage. We suspect some
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husbands and wives may be thinking, *Okay, I understand that forgiveness is important. But how do I practically live out forgiveness in my marriage?* An initial step is to ask your spouse for forgiveness for things you have done—acts of *commission*. For example, “I am sorry for being selfish and living in the smaller story, making marriage ‘all about me.’” Or, “I am sorry for saying one thing and doing another.” Or, “I am sorry for acting childish.” Or, “I am sorry for withholding emotionally or sexually.”

A deeper step of living out forgiveness is asking your spouse for forgiveness for things you have failed to do—acts of *omission*. For example, “I am sorry for failing to presuppose the best in you.” Or, “I am sorry for failing to initiate.” Or, “I am sorry for not getting my own healing.” Or, “I am sorry for not taking ownership and responsibility for my part in our sexual intimacy.” Or, “I am sorry for not loving you well.”

Lastly, when addressing forgiveness issues, it's been our experience that it's often difficult to forgive yourself. So, always include yourself in the forgiveness process.

REAL LIFE Challenge: I.O.T.L. (*Inquire of the Lord*) and invite God into your process. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind *anything* you need to ask for your spouse's forgiveness. This may include asking forgiveness for something you did (committed) or asking forgiveness for something you

failed to do (omitted). If you need to ask for forgiveness, always remember to look your spouse directly in his or her eyes as you follow these steps:

Step 1: “I am sorry for [and then name the offense].” **Step 2:** “I was wrong.”

Step 3: “Will you forgive me?”

Process these forgiveness steps with your spouse. If asking for forgiveness reveals a hurtful pattern, commit to getting help.

I.O.T.L. and write down anything you may want to ask your spouse forgiveness for:

Lastly, **I.O.T.L.** about anything you may need to forgive yourself for. If something comes to mind, say aloud, “I forgive myself for _____

_____.”

2. VIEW SEX AS AN ACT OF WORSHIP.

Sex is a gift from God for celebration, procreation, pleasure, comfort, and protection. As a couple passionately lives out sexual intimacy in marriage, it can become an act of thanksgiving to the Author of sex, and this can open the door to worship. Picture God saying to you and your spouse the same words He said to the married lovers in Song of Solomon—“Eat, friends; drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers.”³

REAL LIFE Challenge: Prayerfully invite God, the Author of sex, to lead a time of lovemaking with your spouse. Begin by **I.O.T.L.**, and do a “heart check.” Ask the Holy Spirit to identify anything that may be inhibiting or blocking your emotional or sexual intimacy. This may include unforgiveness, fear, shame, a past hurt or disappointment, negative sexual imprinting, stress, frustrations, bitterness, hardness of heart, abuse, or anything else God may bring to your mind.

Invite God to help you deal with anything you identified, for example, shame, dishonesty, control, unforgiveness, etc. If necessary, ask your spouse for forgiveness, and forgive yourself. Then choose a good time to initiate making love with your spouse. Focus on bringing your best to your spouse. This includes a loving heart, positive attitude, and emotional/sexual energy. Begin your lovemaking by looking your spouse directly in their eyes and sharing one thing they do during making love that you enjoy—and be specific. Focus on your spouse and enable them to achieve orgasm before you climax. Afterward, take note of how your spouse responded to you initiating sexual intimacy. Also note how you felt after inviting God to lead this experience.

I.O.T.L. and write down any thoughts you may have.

3. REVIEW YOURSELF AS A SEXUAL PARTNER.

We understand that for many husbands and wives the following questions can be difficult. Our desire is not to open the door to shame, but to help you identify potential obstacles in your marriage, and then invite God to help you and your spouse to turn any *obstacles* into *opportunities*.

REAL LIFE Challenge: This challenge is not about how you think your *spouse* feels about the sexual area of your marriage, but about what *you* think about *yourself* as a sexual lover. Find some time to **I.O.T.L.** ... and invite the Holy Spirit to help you honestly answer these questions: *What is it like for my spouse to make love with me? What words might I use to describe myself as his or her lover?*

Here are some questions you may want to ask yourself as you continue to explore this challenge:

- + *Do I understand God's purposes for sex?*

- + *Do I take ownership and responsibility for my part in the sexual dimension in our marriage?*
- + *What attitude (positive or negative) and what energy (positive or negative) do I bring to our sex life?*
- + *Is sex enjoyable for me?*
- + *Am I sexually creative and playful?*
- + *Do I regularly initiate?*
- + *Am I sexually adventuresome, uninhibited, expressive, and responsive?*
- + *Is sex a high priority in my life—why, or why not?*

As you reviewed these questions, what did you conclude? If there are areas in your life that you are not satisfied with, **I.O.T.L.** and invite the Holy Spirit to show you any hurt, anger, shame, fear, resentment, rebellion, or unforgiveness. Ask God to help you process anything you identified.

I.O.T.L. and write down any thoughts you may have.

Next, answer the following questions: *Do I demand, withhold, control, or punish my spouse (or myself) in the area of sexual intimacy? Am I struggling with any of the following: comparison, competition, pornography, shame, fear, control, sinful lust, negative sexual imprinting, anger, or other distortions of God's purposes for intimacy and sexuality?*

I.O.T.L. and write down any thoughts you may have.

As you review your responses to the questions above, what specific steps are you willing to take to address any issues that surfaced?

4. REVIEW THE OVERALL CONDITION OF SEXUAL INTIMACY IN YOUR MARRIAGE.

Remember, advancing in intimacy is a journey, not a destination. Therefore, at different stages of your marriage, you will experience varying degrees of emotional and sexual intimacy. The goal is not to achieve some ideal level of perfection, but to continue to seek ways to *advance*—together.

Maybe your sex life is okay, but you feel it's time to look for new ways to fan the flames, rekindle, or restart the sexual fire in your marriage. Remember, a fire can't be started by placing large logs together and lighting a match. Starting a fire begins by first igniting kindling, then adding small pieces of wood on top of the kindling. As the fire gets going, larger pieces of wood can be added. Before long, you will be enjoying a blazing fire.

As you explore new ways to advance in emotional and sexual intimacy, consider the following questions:

+ *Did I I.O.T.L. (Inquire of the Lord)?*

+ *Is there anything I may be considering that is prohibited by the principles in the Bible?*

+ *Does it involve anyone (imagined or real) other than my spouse?*

+ *Will it increase our intimacy and help us advance in emotional and sexual intimacy?*

+ *Have we implemented the **Traffic Light Principle**? Do we both have "green lights" from the Lord?*

REAL LIFE Challenge: Set aside time to **I.O.T.L.**, and pray about your part of the "WE" relationship in your marriage. Thank God for all the ways you have been a life-giving spouse and sexual partner. Take ownership and responsibility for any ways you may have failed to be the sexual partner God invites you to be. If necessary, repent, receive God's forgiveness, ask your spouse for forgiveness, and truly forgive yourself.

Next, set up a time to discuss your sex life with your spouse. Talk with them about the positive and negative ways you relate sexually. Ask for honest feedback, and together work on a sexual agreement—a realistic plan to take next steps to help you advance in both emotional and sexual intimacy.⁴

If your sex life is in a good place right now, thank God and consider investing in other couples who may be struggling.

I.O.T.L. and write down the names of two couples who come to mind: On the other hand, if you and your spouse have allowed routine and boredom to define your sex life or if you run into sexual issues/concerns that you cannot seem to work past, we encourage you to talk with a pastor, a trained Christian counselor, or a trusted friend who can help you take next steps to advance in intimacy.

I.O.T.L. and write down the name of the counselor/trusted friend you both agree to talk with. Also decide which of you will initiate the call:

5. COMMIT TO ENCOURAGING AND PRAYING FOR YOUR SPOUSE.

The Bible challenges Christ-followers to “encourage one another.”⁵ Are you up for a life-changing marriage challenge? Commit to encourage each other every day for thirty days. First **I.O.T.L.** Then every day look your spouse directly in the eyes, and say one encouraging thing to them. For example, “You are such an amazing leader, parent, provider, homemaker, lover. ... You are honest, humble, kind, generous, hardworking, fun.”

I.O.T.L. and write down two specific things about your spouse that will encourage them:

The Bible also says to “pray without ceasing.”⁶ Prayer contains nuclear-like spiritual power. Are you up for another life-changing marriage challenge?⁷

REAL LIFE Challenge: Make a commitment with your spouse to pray together every day for thirty days. Remember, prayer is simply talking with God. When you pray, look your spouse directly in the eyes and pray a simple blessing over them. For example, you may want to pray. “Thank You, Lord, for the unique ways that You have gifted my spouse” (then share a few specific ways your spouse is gifted). In addition, commit to praying together *before* engaging in sex—and see what happens.

I.O.T.L. and write down a few specific blessings that you can pray over your spouse:

Lastly, if you decide to accept these thirty-day encouragement and prayer challenges, do not wait for your spouse to initiate praying and encouraging. Take ownership and responsibility and step into adulthood—*you* go first. After thirty days, review how your emotional and sexual intimacy has improved. Then covenant to encourage and pray for each other every day for another thirty days. Or maybe every day for the rest of your married life!

I.O.T.L. and write down any thoughts you may have. As we conclude this chapter, remember that from a spiritual perspective, advancing in emotional and sexual intimacy means a husband and wife inviting God into their lives, marriage, intimacy, and lovemaking. As you review how you answered the intimacy-building challenges in this chapter, we have a few additional suggestions.

+ Agree to invest the necessary time, energy, and resources to enable you to advance in sexual intimacy.

+ Consider adding one new experience—and *you* initiate it.

+ Develop a creative sexual vocabulary only for you and your spouse.

Couples can make up their own terms or use some of the sexually explicit terms in Song of Solomon. Another suggestion: Maybe it's time for you and your spouse to purposefully put the *play* back in *foreplay*.

The above questions are similar to the REAL LIFE questions and challenges in the *NAKED: Reclaiming Sexual Intimacy in Marriage Companion Journal* that is available at amazon.com.⁸

CHAPTER 17

DREAM BIG, EPIC ADVENTURES, MARRIAGE IS NOT “IT”

If you sat in our office and invested in a REAL LIFE Marriage Tune-Up or Marriage Intensive,¹ we would begin by going over a number of important points. First, we would read aloud the Bible passage that says *every* marriage experiences troubles,² and we would remind you that having marriage struggles is normal. We would challenge you to view your marriage struggles as *opportunities*—as invitations from God to pursue deeper levels of intimacy and healing—individually and together as a couple.

Second, we would tell you that *life is lived in a story*, and we’d invite you to tell your story. Third, we would remind you about the importance of including God in every area of your life and marriage. We’d suggest one practical way to do that is to begin by **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*). Fourth, we would passionately describe the benefits of living out God’s original co-leadership marriage design. Fifth, we’d look each of you directly in the eyes, and ask you if you are “all-in” and fully committed to your marriage. We’d explain that as counselors it is not our job to care more about your marriage than you do. And lastly, we would end our time together by encouraging you to have *dreams* for your marriage.

DREAM BIG

We love hearing couples express their dreams for marriage. And when they dream, we encourage them to dream BIG. *Why?* Because the Bible declares, “Where there is no vision [revelation], the people perish.”³ We believe God created dreams, He dreams BIG, and His dreams are always connected to *loving* BIG. In fact, Jesus summed up the entire Law and the Prophets in one sentence: *Love* God with *all* your heart-soul-mindstrength, and *love* your neighbor, as you *love* yourself.⁴ Review the life of Jesus; He didn’t just talk about loving BIG—He loved BIG, unlike any person in recorded history.⁵

GREATER THINGS

As we dream BIG about the untapped potential in marriage, we think about the words of Jesus: “Whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”⁶ *What if the greater things Jesus was referring to were not about healings, demonic deliverance, raising people from the dead, global evangelization, or epic life experiences? What if Jesus was describing a time when His followers would return to God’s original marriage principles of Paradise?”*⁷ Furthermore, it’s worthwhile to note that the “whoever” Jesus talks about includes all believers—both women and men.

When we were in our early twenties, we volunteered to be a part of the marriage team at our church, and we began ministering to engaged couples. Their unconditional love toward each other was so life-giving— and contagious. We continue to enjoy meeting with premarital couples even now. Whenever we do, we remind them that they are *relationally intoxicated*, and we tell them that’s a good thing.

A friend of ours colorfully describes a relationally intoxicated couple as *drunk on the fruit of the sweet wine of their intimacy and passionate love*, based on the Proverb that says, “May you ever be intoxicated with her love.”⁸ We believe it’s great to be head-over-heels in love with a fiancée as well as with a spouse. But the reality is, being relationally intoxicated changes. For example, after forty years of marriage, we still consider ourselves relationally intoxicated—but in different ways now. Figuratively speaking, we view our intoxication as not coming from a cheap bottle of Two-Buck Chuck, but from a fine, French champagne. There is a richness that accompanies walking through life together, and that totally reframes being relationally intoxicated in amazing ways.

Life is lived in a story

tim+anne

Awhile back, we counseled an engaged couple we will refer to as “Ashley and Nick.” Both were passionate, peak performers who continually strived to be the best they could be. Everything they invested in—personally, educationally, professionally, relationally, recreationally—they were all-in.

At one of our very first meetings, they referred to themselves as risk-takers and told us how motivating it was for them to read books and watch movies filled with epic adventures. As their wedding day approached, it was obvious they both longed for an epic adventure in their marriage. Neither had grown up in a Christian home or had a model for what a godly marriage looks like. This made them even more determined to passionately pursue *everything* God has to offer.

At one session, Ashley told us that she and Nick planned to take summers off since they were both teachers: “We can hardly wait to travel and experience the world together. Sometimes we just love to dream about adventures like mountain climbing, competing in triathlons, offroad bicycling, and rock climbing.” Nick interjected, “We dream about white-water rafting, fly fishing, going on a safari, and maybe even taking a cross-country motorcycle trip.”

We loved hearing them dream together aloud. Their excitement was palpable. As this session ended, we confirmed our next scheduled meeting and told them we’d love to talk more with them about the epic adventure God offers couples in marriage.

The next time we met, Ashley opened the conversation with great enthusiasm: “Nick and I are counting down the days until we’re married. We are so excited, and we have so many choices ahead of us—so much freedom. We’re wondering ... with you being married all these years, where do you think the best place is for us to start?”

Tim responded, “To begin with, that’s a good question. Starting out in the right place is definitely important— isn’t it? As I recall, the last time we

were together, we talked about living an adventure-filled life and marriage. I've been thinking about the dreams and adventures you described. Looking back, we've met with many couples who were a lot like you. They loved God and each other, and they wanted more than just a good marriage—they wanted a great marriage. I recall couples who longed for epic adventures like the ones you talked about. Of course, there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, adventure awakens the soul!”

Anne interjected, “Whatever you decide to do, there will never be an adventure quite like the one God invites you to in marriage. As Tim and I look back, we could have never imagined the experiences and adventures God would invite us to join Him on. And we believe that the epic adventures God has planned for you and your marriage are richer and deeper than anything you can imagine.”

“But help us understand—exactly what might that look like?” Ashley asked.

Anne replied, “Very early in our marriage, Tim and I made a commitment to God. We said that whenever He invited us to do something, as long as we had ‘green lights’ from Him and with each other, we would say yes. All we asked God for was the courage to take the next step, and the grace to faithfully move forward. Looking back, God’s invitations became opportunities to live in the Larger Story with *God* as the main character. And this became the pathway for us to live what the Bible describes as ‘a still more excellent way’⁹—the way of love.”

The atmosphere in our office suddenly changed. Nick stopped taking notes on his tablet, he reached over to hold Ashley’s hand, and they sat quietly. We sensed in them a teachable spirit and a hunger for more of whatever God might have for them and their marriage. Nick softly asked, “Can you tell us more?”

Tim continued, “Let me tell you a story. More than four decades ago, I pulled a ring box out of my pocket and looked into the twinkling eyes of a beautiful young girl named Anne O’Shaughnessy. I took a deep breath, saying, ‘Anne, because I’m a fireman, we probably won’t have a lot of money, so I may not be able to buy you all the things you want. But I

promise to God and to you that I will try to passionately love you unlike any man has ever loved a woman.’ And looking back, the most epic adventures of my entire life have been first courageously engaging in the battle for my heart. And second, passionately engaging in the battle for my marriage.”

Nick interrupted, “Can you help us understand what that even means?”

Anne replied, “We believe epic adventures can be great. However, when you put too much focus on the next adventure, you might miss out experiencing the day-to-day, *extraordinary-ordinary* marriage adventures that God is inviting you to. For example, what if your epic adventures started with loving God and each other in BIG ways? What if courageously choosing humility, grace, and forgiveness provided your next adrenaline rush?

Ashley interjected, “I think I understand what you’re saying—people tend to look to events and experiences to fill their hunger for adventure. While there is nothing wrong with that, if our adventure is our own idea instead of the Lord’s, we may be missing out on something greater. And it sounds like you are saying that loving BIG, fighting for your heart, and for the heart of your marriage are keys to living an epic-adventure-filled life. Is that right?”

Tim replied, “Yes, when Anne and I talk about loving BIG, that means a husband and wife loving each other unconditionally. It includes loving without expecting anything in return, not having hidden agendas, and placing God and your spouse ahead of yourself. Our real life experience is that loving BIG and living out unconditional love has epic implications. And this becomes the pathway to a lifetime of couples growing in oneness and intimacy—in knowing and being fully known.”

Anne added, “What if your epic goals included fighting for your heart and for the heart of your marriage? What if your life goal included living in the Larger Story where *God* is the main character—and marriage is *not about me*? What would it look like if each of you committed to joyfully love and serve each other as reciprocal servants? What if you took ownership and responsibility for your part in the marriage, received any necessary healing, and risked being vulnerable? And what if you passionately chose to love one another with *all* your heart, soul, mind, and strength?”

“That’s a lot to take in ... can you give us a few practical ways to do that?” Nick asked.

“Remember, always begin with God— **I.O.T.L.**—and commit to intentionally include Him in every area of your life,” Tim responded. “Implement the **Traffic Light Principle** and make sure you are in unity with God and each other—that you both have ‘green lights’—before you make decisions. Another epic marriage challenge is to live out forgiveness. When you are wrong—and you will be wrong—apologize. When you let each other down—and you will—be the first one to say, ‘I am sorry, I was wrong, will you forgive me?’ Think about the epic impact modeling a Christ-centered marriage will have on the Church, and on our culture. And consider the epic marriage adventure in co-leading together—as equals intrinsically and functionally—as you focus on putting your spouse before yourself.”

Ashley softly replied, “Honestly, none of what you are saying is what we were expecting to hear today. We are so focused on our to-do list and our next epic adventure that we’ve never even thought about the kind of marriage adventures you are describing. But in my heart, what you are saying feels so right.”

Nick agreed, “Thanks for challenging us—we both want what God wants for us.”

Tim went on, “Here’s the deal, in a short time you will enter into a marriage covenant. You will declare before God, family, and friends that you will love, honor, and cherish each other through good times and bad, in sickness and in health, until death parts you. We totally celebrate that you are in love and are relationally intoxicated. But hear our hearts. Part of the miracle and mystery of marriage includes an invitation to indescribable adventures—and epic battles.”

“A *battle* for our marriage ... come on, are you serious?” Nick asked.

Anne answered, “Never forget there is an Enemy and we live in a culture that opposes God’s design for marriage. Ashley and Nick—you asked for our opinion about living an epic marriage. Our challenge is for you,

individually and as a couple, to walk in your true identity—who God says you are—and commit to putting God and marriage at the top of your life priorities. This will open the door to epic adventures and battles, and it will provide countless opportunities to passionately live out *two becoming one* as you celebrate being *naked without shame.*”

THE EPIC ADVENTURE OF LOVE

When we meet with premarital couples, as well as couples in all seasons of marriage, we find that deep down they truly want to live epic lives, fight heroic battles—and be victorious in marriage. As simple as it may sound, the key to living an epic life and marriage is love. This includes living out the Great Commandment—love God, love your neighbor (remember your spouse is your closest neighbor), and love yourself.¹⁰

In addition to love, an epic marriage adventure includes living out a covenant. This involves staying faithful and true to your spouse *in good times and in bad, and in sickness and in health*. And passing on marriage generational blessings to your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and future generations.

The Bible describes marriage as a metaphor for Christ and His bride—the Church. As couples look to God as their model, they will see how Christ treats men and women made in His image. Jesus loves and celebrates His bride. He never shames, blames, manipulates, rejects, or controls. He never forces people to do something, compares them with others, demands submission, or looks down on them. Jesus loves, presupposes the best, speaks well of, and is continually blessing women and men made in His image.

Therefore, we challenge every husband, wife, and couple to go and do likewise. Choose the epic adventures of loving, presupposing the best, speaking well of, and blessing your spouse. And always remember that your ability to love, honor, and respect each other is directly related to your ability to receive God's love, honor, and respect for yourself. *Everything* begins with your relationship with an amazing triune God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—who is the ideal model of perfect love, unity, and community.¹¹

MARRIAGE IS NOT “IT”

We love marriage ... and hopefully throughout this book we have shown how wonderful marriage can be. But as much as we love marriage, before we conclude we want to clearly say that *we do not believe marriage is “it.”* The Bible never suggests that marriage should be placed above the kingdom of God. Jesus instructed His followers to “seek first the kingdom of God.”¹² Therefore, focusing on marriage should not be the goal for fully devoted Christ-followers. *Why?* Because *marriage is not “it.”* In other words, don’t desire marriage in such a way that you lose your contentment in—and love for—God. *Why?* Because we believe that only Jesus Christ can fill the deepest longings of a married (or single) person’s heart. Remember, marriage is defined by earthly limits: *until death do us part*. We do not believe there will be earthly marriages as we currently understand them in heaven. The Bible says, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage.”¹³ Our calling individually and as a couple is to minister to marriages. However, our main message is *not* about marriage but about the Maker of marriage.

Life is lived in a story

tim+anne

Throughout this book, we've shared that *life is lived in a story ...* and we talked about the blessings and benefits of living in the Larger Story. We believe that *God*—not a spouse or *self*—should be the main character in every couple's story. In our experience, the most life-giving, kingdom-advancing marriages consist of a husband and wife with hearts that are passionately connected to God. Unfortunately, many marriages are bogged down with the insane pace of life, selfishness, busy schedules, and in some religious circles, never-ending arguments about equality, headship, submission, and authority. We believe limitless kingdom-advancing potential is available through unconditional love, sacrifice, humility, and servanthood.

Counseling couples for decades, we understand that many people believe marriage is dying and in need of "CPR." We have made the decision to invest our lives engaging in the epic adventure and the noble battle for marriage. Therefore, we have decided to renounce, reject, and do whatever we can to push back against hopelessness and grim marriage diagnoses.

To the contrary, we believe we are living in exciting times. We are meeting more and more couples, especially millennials, who are passionately embracing God's original marriage model—a marriage built on love, humility, equality, and mutuality. Marriages are being transformed as husbands and wives revisit God's original co-leadership design. They are advancing in emotional and sexual intimacy—and celebrating that *God is pro-marriage—and pro-sex!*

+ + +

Thank you for reading this book. As we stated at the beginning, we have written about marriage from a traditional, Judeo-Christian, orthodox marriage perspective. Our desire is to offer for your consideration our marriage views based on forty years of marriage, decades of counseling experiences, and our interpretation of a number of Bible passages as we currently understand them. That said, in addition to our beliefs surrounding marriage, we also believe in *tolerance*, which is defined as “willingness to accept feelings, habits, or beliefs that are different from your own.”¹⁴ We recognize and respect that people have a wide range of beliefs, opinions, and feelings—especially surrounding marriage, intimacy, and sexuality.

It is our hope that after reading this book, you understand some of our views about God and marriage, as well as our fallible interpretations of a handful of marriage Bible texts. That said, as much as we are passionate about God’s original co-leadership marriage design, we are even more passionate about reflecting the love of God as we share our personal views, interpretations, and beliefs. Our ongoing prayer is that people who have different opinions and beliefs can humbly discuss them in the context of love.¹⁵

Regarding churches, over the years we have been part of a wide variety of communities of faith—Catholic, Protestant, evangelical, charismatic, and home church. Although each of these churches has particular beliefs, practices, and traditions, we have found that *every* one highly valued marriage.

Furthermore, we resonate with the Bible passage that says “we know in part.”¹⁶ We understand there are things we do not know. But we are absolutely certain that no matter what your feelings are toward God, no matter what your church involvement is, and no matter what your feelings are surrounding marriage, God is head over heels in love with *every* person who has been made in His image—and that includes *you!*

Love and marriage —Can you think of any other words that have such life-giving potential? As we conclude our author-reader journey together, we bring good news. Every husband and wife is invited to live out their covenant with God and each other. Together they can humbly explore the miracle and mystery of *two becoming one* as they passionately celebrate being *naked without shame*.

Every husband and wife has a choice. As volitional human beings made in the image of an amazing God, couples can choose to embrace their true identity—who God says they are. They can choose interdependence over independence, mutual equality over functional inequality, and humility over hierarchy and headship that includes male privilege. Couples can choose to passionately walk through life with God and each other— together ... side by side.

EPILOGUE

TOGETHER ... SIDE BY SIDE

Life is lived in a story

tim

One night the two of us had stayed up late. When we finally went to bed, I asked Anne if she wanted me to massage her feet. She asked if the question beneath my question was *Can we have sex?*

I smiled and said, “Well ... sex would be nice.”

There was a long pause. Anne didn't say yes ... but she didn't say no. So I decided to proceed with the massage and hoped it would lead to sex. I grabbed the lotion and got to work. Soon I noticed that Anne was falling asleep. In a subtle attempt to wake her, I squeezed her feet. Then I paused and thought, *Can I just massage her feet without it leading to sex?* Then I wondered, *Is that even possible?* To which I said to myself, *I can do this!* As I continued massaging her feet, I tried to resist any thoughts of her foot massage being about having sex.

Determined not to think about sex, I let my mind wander in other directions. I thought about the blessings of a lifetime of experiences we have
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shared. I began to reflect on how we have walked together side by side throughout life. As I massaged Anne's feet, I thought about how she likes to wear sandals and walk barefoot. I thought about forty years of marriage and how many times I have seen her taking care of her feet. I thought about the tiny pink sponges she puts between her toes when she paints her nails.

As I continued with the massage, I began to remember all the places Anne's feet have taken her. I remembered growing up in the same town and having a crush on her in junior high school. I remembered her becoming a nurse and me a firefighter and how much fun we had during our dating season. I remembered her walking down the aisle of the church where we were married. I remembered our honeymoon, first apartment, and purchasing our first home. Then I remembered her bare feet in the hospital when each of our four children was born. And I remembered her pushing baby strollers,

following Big Wheels, and running behind our kids as they learned to ride a bike.

Then I began to remember other times Anne and I stood together, side by side. I remembered in our early twenties standing side by side when we were baptized in an old movie theater. Together we publicly declared our desire to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. I remembered standing together raising our four children. We stood together at sporting events, concerts, plays, recitals, and church activities as we supported our kids and cheered them on. I remembered standing together at school assemblies, countless graduations, and at fire department promotion and retirement parties.

As I continued massaging Anne's feet, I began to remember difficult seasons in our life. I remembered standing side by side next to hospice beds in our living room. I remembered Anne standing next to me, practically holding me up, as I spoke at my dad's funeral. And I remembered walking together as we carried parents and loved ones to their graves.

Then I pictured Anne joyfully dancing at our children's wedding receptions. I remembered all five times we walked side by side into hospitals to welcome our grandchildren into the world. I remembered watching her loosen their tightly wrapped newborn baby blankets and tenderly kiss their tiny feet.

I reviewed how we had journeyed together through so many life changes and challenges. Taking an early retirement from the fire department, we moved away from family, lifelong friends, and a great church to serve in a church in western Michigan. Just five years later, we moved again to Pasadena, California, to serve as deans at a new leadership school for twenty-somethings. Moving yet once more to Colorado, we both quit our jobs to step into REAL LIFE Ministries full-time. By God's grace with each transition and all the associated ups and downs, we walked in faith— together ... side by side.

Then I thought about Anne's body connected to the feet I was massaging. I thought about all the pleasure, joy, comfort, and celebration we have enjoyed together. I thanked God for her health and for giving her such an

awesome heart, soul, mind, and body. I reflected on the amazing fact that, out of seven billion people on this planet, this one person, a young girl named Anne O'Shaughnessy Evans, captured my heart. I thought about the Song of Solomon verse that says, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."¹

Then I thought about one of our favorite books, *Windows of the Soul*.² The author, Ken Gire, tells how God gives us windows throughout our lifetime. If we take the time to experience these windows, he writes, they can become a source of wonder. As I massaged Anne's feet, I reviewed

TOGETHER ... SIDE BY SIDE +235

windows of life we have been in together and I thanked God for the wonder, the miracle, and the mystery in marriage of *two becoming one*. Wonder is a short stepping-stone to worship. I found myself worshipping and thanking God for Anne, for our marital oneness, and our emotional and sexual intimacy. I was not worshipping Anne—I was in awe of the God who created her.

About half an hour had passed, and Anne was sound asleep. I finally confessed to myself that, initially, massaging Anne's feet was really "all about me." It may have appeared as if I was serving her, but my real agenda was to have sex. I told God I was sorry, and with a worshipful heart, I thanked Him for this window, for Anne, and for allowing us to walk through life— together ... side by side.

I gently kissed her feet and slipped them into her favorite warm socks, crawled in bed beside her, placed my feet under hers, gently wrapped my arms around her, and fell asleep.

Together—again—side by side.

May the God who is both great and good make your marriage stronger and your hearts braver. May He create not only a willingness to die for your marriage but also a passion to live for it.

APPENDIX A

I.O.T.L.—INQUIRE OF THE LORD

I.O.T.L. is a simple four-letter abbreviation that stands for Inquire of the Lord. **I.O.T.L.** is about practicing the presence of God. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells in you.¹ And since God dwells within you, we believe it is wise to “take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ”² and include Him in everything.

Personally, including God in our lives, marriage, and decision-making process is not something we *have* to do; instead, it is something we *get* to do. In our experience, including God provides wisdom, power, and protection.

+ **I.O.T.L.** is a simple reminder to invite God into your life, marriage, and the decisions you make.

+ **I.O.T.L.** includes putting God first, trusting Him,³ and asking for wisdom.⁴

+ **I.O.T.L.** will provide you with insight that no author, teacher, or pastor/priest can provide.

Remember, **I.O.T.L.** is *not* a religious exercise. It involves a person relating to God. Picture a child saying to a good mommy/daddy, *I trust you, please give me wisdom, and help me to make good decisions.*

APPENDIX B

LISTENING TO GOD

Listening to God is one of the most important things a Christ-follower can do. The Bible says to “see to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.”¹ After sixty-plus years attending church, we have listened to thousands of sermons. Following are questions that are listed in our *TOGETHER: Reclaiming Co-Leadership in Marriage* book² to help a person/couple process making decisions:

1. Have you prayed about what you are considering?

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”³ And “Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”⁴

2. Is what you are considering consistent with biblical principles?

“He who is spiritual appraises all things.”⁵ “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”⁶

3. Is what you are considering affirmed by other godly people?

“Where there is no guidance [revelation] the people fall, but in the abundance of counselors there is victory.”⁷

4. Will what you are considering bring glory to God?

“Whatever you do in word and deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.”⁸

5. Will what you are considering positively impact God’s kingdom?

“Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.”⁹

6. How does what you are considering relate to God’s will for your life?

“Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”¹⁰

7. Do you have peace about what you are considering?

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”¹¹

8. Do you have unity with your spouse?

God’s original design for marriage included mutual equality and mutual authority—what we call co-leadership.¹²

9. Will what you are considering cost you something?

“And He said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time in the age to come, eternal life.’”¹³ Remember, cost does not only relate to money; it often involves servanthood, sacrifice, humility, and taking the road less traveled.

10. Does what you are considering agree with your life’s calling and mission?

“I therefore ... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”¹⁴ And “Who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus.”¹⁵

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11. Does the motivation for what you are considering come from a pure heart?

“The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”¹⁶ We are never to judge another person’s heart. Nevertheless, the Bible says, “The mouth speaks from that which fills [the] heart.”¹⁷

12. Does the reasoning for what you are considering come from a place of love?

“‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”¹⁸ The older we get, the more we believe that love is the ball game. The most mature followers of Christ we have known throughout our lives have been the most loving people we know.

Note that this nonexhaustive list is not based on gender. Each step affects men and women equally. Again, in marriage, three keys to co-leading together and making godly decisions are as follows:

+ **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*).

+ Maximize *both* the husband’s and the wife’s gifts, without any restrictions.

+ Wait for unity (until you both have “green lights” from the Lord).

LISTENING TO GOD +243

APPENDIX C

CO-LEADERSHIP IN MARRIAGE

In *TOGETHER: Reclaiming Co-Leadership in Marriage*,¹ we write about how God’s plurality and nature relate to His original design and purposes for marriage. In *TOGETHER* we unpack the mutual equality and mutual authority—what we refer to as *co-leadership*—that the first husband and wife enjoyed in Eden before sin entered the marriage story. Briefly, we ask, “Why did God create marriage?” We believe God created marriage to tell a story.

In the beginning ... before sin entered the story, the man and woman were both created in God’s triune image and likeness.² They were both (male and female) made in the image of God.³

In the beginning ... before sin entered the story, the husband and wife enjoyed mutuality and shared authority. Both the man and woman were commanded to carry out God’s mandates. They were *both* given the procreation mandate to be fruitful and multiply.⁴ And they were *both* given the dominion (rulership) mandate. *Together* as co-leaders, the husband and wife ruled over the fish, birds, and animals.⁵

In the beginning ... before sin entered the story, there was no inequality intrinsically or functionally. In God’s original marriage design, there

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was no patriarchy, headship, hierarchy, male privilege, or forced female subordination; the wife was not commanded to submit to the husband, nor was the husband designated to be the wife’s leader, authority, or spiritual cover.

Tragically, oneness, unity, community, and co-leading in mutuality within God’s original design for marriage were lost when the woman and man

sinned. One destructive result was the spawning of different marriage views. All of these views came *after* original sin. And they do not reflect the mutual equality and mutual authority—co-leadership—God originally designed for marriage.

Let's briefly review different marriage views:

- + In the male rulership marriage view (Genesis 3:16), *gender trumps*.
- + In the hierarchical/traditional/complementarian marriage views, *gender trumps*.
- + In the egalitarian marriage view as we currently understand it, functional equality and mutuality are highly valued. Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, a passionate egalitarian, offers ten alternatives for reaching “resolution of the decision-making impasses that occur when opinions differ.” Including “defer to each other ... exercise spiritual gifts ... compromise ... pray for guidance ... whenever a decision affects one spouse more than the other, the spouse who has more at stake in the decision should have more say in the process ... initiate joint research projects on the debated issue ... decide to defer the matter to a trusted and objective third party after agreeing to abide by his or her determination (1 Corinthians 6:5); engage in parts reversals.”⁶ In the egalitarian marriage view, *individual gifts and a pre-agreed-upon process trump*.
- + God's original marriage design (what we call *coleadership*) is similar to the egalitarian marriage view because functional equality and mutuality are highly valued. However, a couple's primary focus is including God in the decision-making process. They both **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*), implement the **Traffic Light Principle**, and wait for each other to have “green lights” from God before making decisions. In co-leadership, *God trumps*.

Thankfully, in the fullness of time Jesus Christ took on human form and came to earth. And He came “to seek and save *that* which was lost.”⁷ Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus engaged the Enemy and took back *that* which was lost. Regarding marriage, this included the mutuality and co-leadership God originally designed for a husband and wife.

The good news is that Jesus' birth, life, death, and life-giving resurrection opened the door for married couples to return to the principles of Paradise and reclaim God's original marriage design. Couples can once again co-lead in mutual equality and mutual authority as they reflect and reveal God's plurality and oneness. That said, it's important to remember that humans, who are made in the image and likeness of God,⁸ can never fully reflect and reveal God's essence because men and women are humans—and God is God.

Having lived out co-leadership for forty years, in our opinion husbands and wives don't *have to* live out co-leadership—they *get to*. Practically, in our decision-making process we **I.O.T.L.** And we agree to wait until we *both* have “green lights” from God before making decisions.

CO-LEADERSHIP IN MARRIAGE +247

All that is to say, it is important to remember that our view of marriage—like all marriage positions—is a *preference* not an *absolute*. Our prayer is similar to early church leaders Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, taking Apollos aside and explaining “the way of God more accurately.”⁹ We pray that God provides opportunities for us to lovingly take men and women aside and explain to them what we are convinced is *the way of God more accurately* (in regard to marriage). This involves a husband and wife *becoming one*. And together—*naked without shame*—celebrating emotional and sexual intimacy.

APPENDIX D

THE TRAFFIC LIGHT PRINCIPLE

Making decisions involves a decision-making process. We challenge married couples to implement what we call the **Traffic Light Principle**. This simple tool helps couples advance in intimacy with God and with each other.

The **Traffic Light Principle** begins with a couple wanting to **I.O.T.L.** (*Inquire of the Lord*) and practice the presence of God. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells in you.¹

To **I.O.T.L.** includes putting God first and trusting Him.² Purposefully including God provides power, wisdom, and protection. Here's how the **Traffic Light Principle** works:

Step 1: Couples individually **I.O.T.L.** And they invite God into their decision-making process and seek His wisdom. The Bible gives a great promise: "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."³

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Step 2: Couples share what they sense the Lord may be saying. Figuratively speaking, are they sensing a "green light" (Go), a "yellow light" (Slow), or a "red light" (No)?

Step 3: Couples make the decision after *both* the wife and husband have "green lights" from the Lord.

In addition, we encourage couples to agree on the following principles:

1. Proceed only if you are in unity. If you do not *both* have "green lights" from the Lord, agree to wait because unity with God and each other should

trump disunity.

2. If your lights remain different while you are waiting, continue to pray and listen. The Bible says, “See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.”⁴ If appropriate, include a third party for insight and wisdom. “Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory.”⁵ Keep revisiting your decision until you sense God giving you *both* “green lights.”

3. As you continue to process, it is important to understand that the **Traffic Light Principle** includes three lights and the three steps we discussed above. The middle light represents God, one light represents what the wife senses from God, and the other light represents what the husband senses from God.

Following are questions couples often ask about the **Traffic Light Principle**:

+ *Is a couple’s main goal to be in agreement?*

No. Remember Adam and Eve were in agreement when they ate the forbidden fruit—and we’ve all heard how that played out. Had either Eve or Adam asked God for a light, it would have been bright red. Therefore, a couple’s agreement must be based on what they *both* sense the Lord saying.

+ *With all the time it takes to implement the Traffic Light Principle—taking time necessary to I.O.T.L. and to pray and process—how do you ever get around to making decisions?*

Early in our marriage, often one of us would try to “work it” to get what we wanted, even if we did not have unity. As a result, the decision often ended in a disaster. Implementing the **Traffic Light Principle**, even if it means slowing your decision-making process, encourages a couple always to include God.

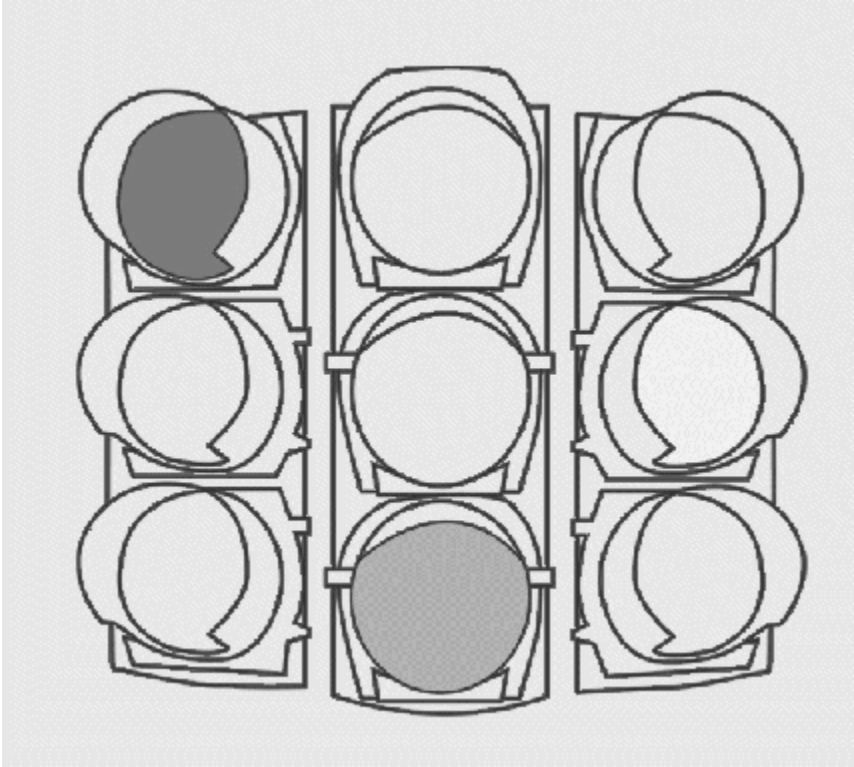
+ *Do you use the Traffic Light Principle on every decision?*

That is a good question; for example, we do not call our spouse from the grocery store and ask, "Do you have a green light on either Granny Smith or Honeycrisp apples?" God created men and women as volitional human beings who have been given the ability to make choices. Therefore, couples can choose not to include God in any given decision—the choice is ours.

Bottom line is, couples don't *have* to include God and walk in unity—they *get* to. The Bible says, "If you want favor with both God and man, and a reputation for good judgment and common sense, then trust the Lord completely; don't ever trust yourself. In *everything* you do, put God first, and he will direct you and crown your efforts with success."⁶

THE TRAFFIC LIGHT PRINCIPLE +251

There is so much untapped protection in marital oneness—in *two becoming one*.⁷ For many decades, we have experienced the blessings and benefits of including God and making decisions when we *both* have "green lights." And we would never revert to one of us having the final say—or the husband having a gender trump card. Looking back over forty years of marriage, **I.O.T.L.** implementing the **Traffic Light Principle** —and living out *unity trumps disunity*—has opened the door to increased emotional and sexual intimacy.



APPENDIX E

CORE REAL LIFE VALUES

In addition to I.O.T.L, Listening to God, Co-Leadership in Marriage, and The Traffic Light Principle (Appendices A, B, C, and D), the following are a few additional core Real Life values:

TRUE IDENTITY

Individuals who understand their true identity—that they are a beloved son or daughter made in the image of an amazing triune God—are people who understand the importance of seeing themselves as their good Father God sees them. We believe a person’s true identity as a human being relates to his or her sexual identity. Review the Creation account; God first created humankind in His image.¹ Keep in mind, the first human (Adam) also contained the DNA of the first woman (Eve). After creating humankind, the text goes on to describe that God created them male and female.²

Undeniably, men and women are different. We recognize and celebrate both masculine and feminine characteristics. We believe differences can become opportunities to reflect and reveal different aspects in our

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triune God. On the other hand, men and women are more similar—as human beings—then they are different as males and females. That said, it is important to realize that God is not a man.³ God’s essence transcends gender and sexuality. As we’ve previously stated, humans, who are made in the image and likeness of God,⁴ can never fully reflect and reveal God’s essence because men and women are humans—and God is God.

MARITAL “ONENESS”

There is so much power and protection in marital oneness—in “two becoming one.”⁵ Every person has a *spirit*, *soul*, and *body*.⁶ God’s original oneness marriage design included:

+ **SPIRIT Oneness**— the husband and wife lived in relationship with God. As human beings made in God’s image, individually and together, they reflected and revealed God’s character to each other and to the world around them.

+ **SOUL Oneness**— the husband and wife were given dominion over every living thing.⁷ They co-led in shared authority, unity, and friendship. Advancing in soul oneness involves advancing in emotional intimacy.

+ **BODY Oneness**—the husband and wife enjoyed the sexual dimension God designed for marriage.

Keep in mind, each characteristic of marital oneness—spirit, soul, body—are invitations for a couple to *become one* and celebrate being *naked without shame*. In our experience, people often approach the mission of marriage from a perspective of outcome: things a person or couple plans to do or achieve. However, the redemptive mission in marriage is not limited to outcome but includes relationship.

Together couples advance God’s kingdom as they focus first on God, second on each other, and then on self. God’s design for marriage includes exclusivity and permanence. A couple is intimately intertwined spiritually (both in relationship with God), emotionally (intimacy and friendship), and sexually (becoming “one flesh”).

GOD'S MISSION FOR MARRIAGE

Stop for a moment and ask yourself this question: *What is God's purpose—His mission—for marriage?* We use a simple **Four-R** alliteration to describe marriage before sin entered the story. Every husband and wife can choose to return to the principles of paradise as they enter into covenant with God and each other. In marriage together they can:

+**R**eflect and **R**eveal: God's plurality and nature; mutual equality; *both* are made in God's triune image. That said, it's important to remember that humans, who are made in the image and likeness of God,⁸ can never fully reflect and reveal God's essence because men and women are humans—and God is God.

+**R**ule: co-lead *together*; mutual authority; *both* are given the dominion (rulership) mandate.

+**R**eproduce: commit to be fruitful and multiply;⁹ *both* are given the procreation mandate.

GOD'S MISSION FOR MARRIAGE +255

LARGER STORY VS. SMALLER STORY

We believe life can be lived in one of two stories—the Larger Story or the smaller story.¹⁰ The way to determine which story you are living in is to ask yourself a simple question: *Who is the main character in my life story?*

If the main character in your life story is *self*, you are living in the smaller story. If the main character in your life story is *God*, you are living in the Larger Story. Living marriage in the smaller story results in a husband or wife making marriage “all about me.” Living marriage in the Larger Story results in a husband and wife making their marriage “*not* about me.” Practically, the Larger Story means including God in everything, individually and together as a couple, making it a top priority to **I.O.T.L.**

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Life is lived in a story ... and writing this book has been a story filled with family, friends, and colleagues. We believe anything successful in life involves a team. Thankfully, God built an amazing team for this project. In reality there are too many team members to list. Nevertheless, we want to extend our heartfelt thanks to the following people:

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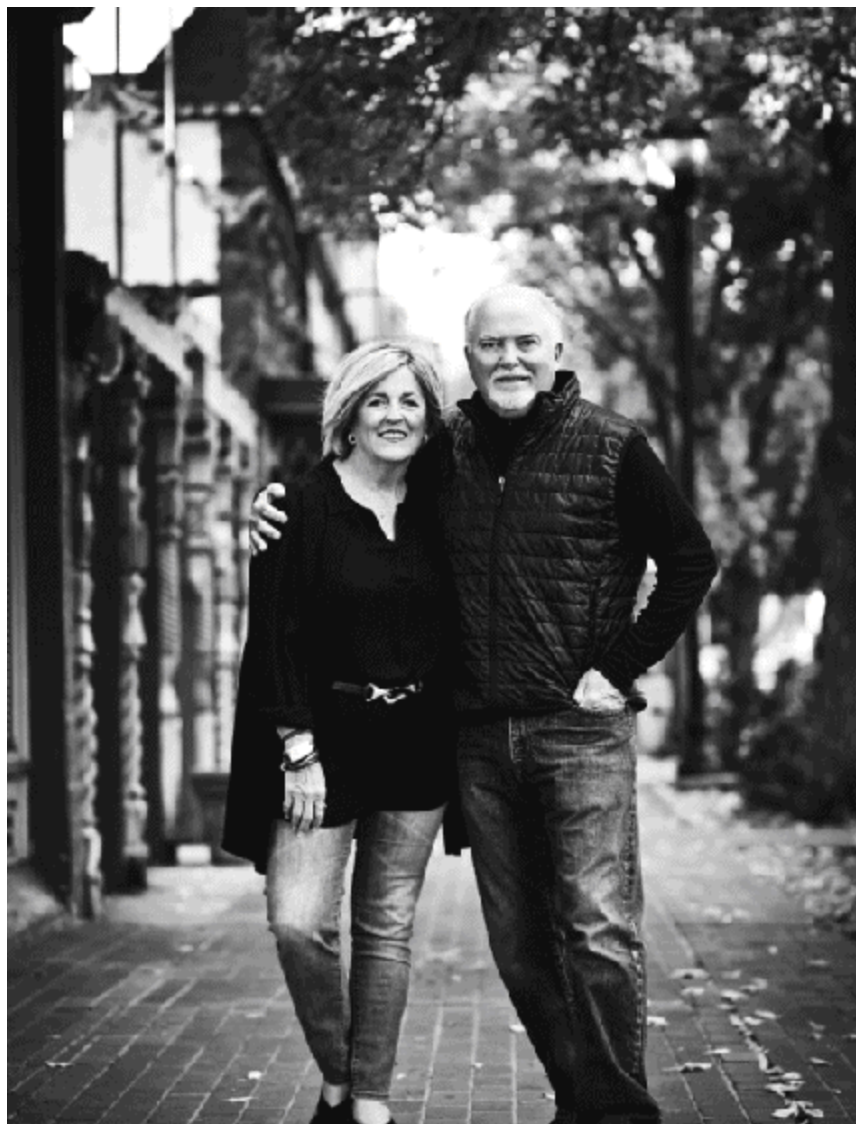
+ A special thank you to those who are represented (anonymously) through the stories in this book; and to the men and women in our marriage groups throughout the decades. Your lives tell a story that points us to God. Thank you for having the courage to share the joys and struggles of your journey. Seeing you advance in intimacy with God and each other inspires us to keep trusting God—and taking risks.

+ We thank God for, and we bless others who will build on what we have written about marriage. Our prayer is God builds a network of relationships united in heart about a mission—God and marriage—that matters. As this occurs, it will lead to marriage transformation.

+ Lastly, we thank God for creating marriage. It's our prayer that Your original marriage design is passionately reclaimed and humbly restored.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Tim + Anne Evans have been married forty years and have counseled couples for decades. They are both ordained ministers, and each has master and doctor of practical ministry diplomas from Wagner Leadership Institute. They are parents, grandparents, spiritual parents, authors, and pastoral counselors. As a retired fire chief and a nurse, they bring a real-life perspective to their writing, teaching, training, and equipping. Together they co-lead REAL LIFE Ministries full time. (www.TimPlusAnne.com)

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REAL LIFE MINISTRIES

REAL LIFE Ministry's mission is to help men, women, and couples advance in passionately loving God, loving a spouse, and loving others (Matthew 22:37-40). The *why* that drives REAL LIFE is ***Marriage Transformation***.

REAL LIFE offers:

- + Pastoral counseling
- + Marriage tune-ups
- + Marriage intensives
- + REAL LIFE Marriage Advance seminars
- + Seven Keys to Advancing in Intimacy with Your

Spouse workshops

- + Forgiveness workshops
- + Communication workshops
- + *NAKED: Reclaiming Sexual Intimacy in Marriage*

workshops

- + *TOGETHER: Reclaiming Co-Leadership in Marriage*

workshops

- + Overcoming Destructive Cycles workshops + Premarital counseling
- + Restoring the Foundations (inner healing ministry) + Men's and women's gatherings

tim+anne evans

REAL LIFE ministries www.TimPlusAnne.com PO Box 6800
Colorado Springs, CO 80934

ABOUT THE AUTHORS +261

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4. Genesis 1:28
5. Genesis 1:28
6. Gilbert Bilezikian, Th.D., *Beyond Sex Roles*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 99-100.
7. Luke 19:10 KJV
8. Genesis 1:26
9. Acts 18:26

Appendix D: The Traffic Light Principle

1. 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19; Romans 8:9
2. Proverbs 3:5-6
3. James 1:5 NIV
4. Hebrews 12:25
5. Proverbs 11:14
6. Proverbs 3:4-6 TLB
7. Genesis 2:24

Appendix E: Core Real Life Values

1. Genesis 1:26-27
2. Genesis 1:27
3. Hosea 11:9; Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29
4. Genesis 1:26
5. Genesis 2:24
6. 1 Thessalonians 5:23
7. Genesis 1:26, 28
8. Genesis 1:26
9. Reproducing includes having biological children, adoption, foster parenting, and

spiritual parenting.

10. The concept of Larger Story/smaller story living is adapted from the teaching and writings of John Eldredge and Dan B. Allender, PhD.

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“For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and felt no shame.”

Genesis 2:24-25