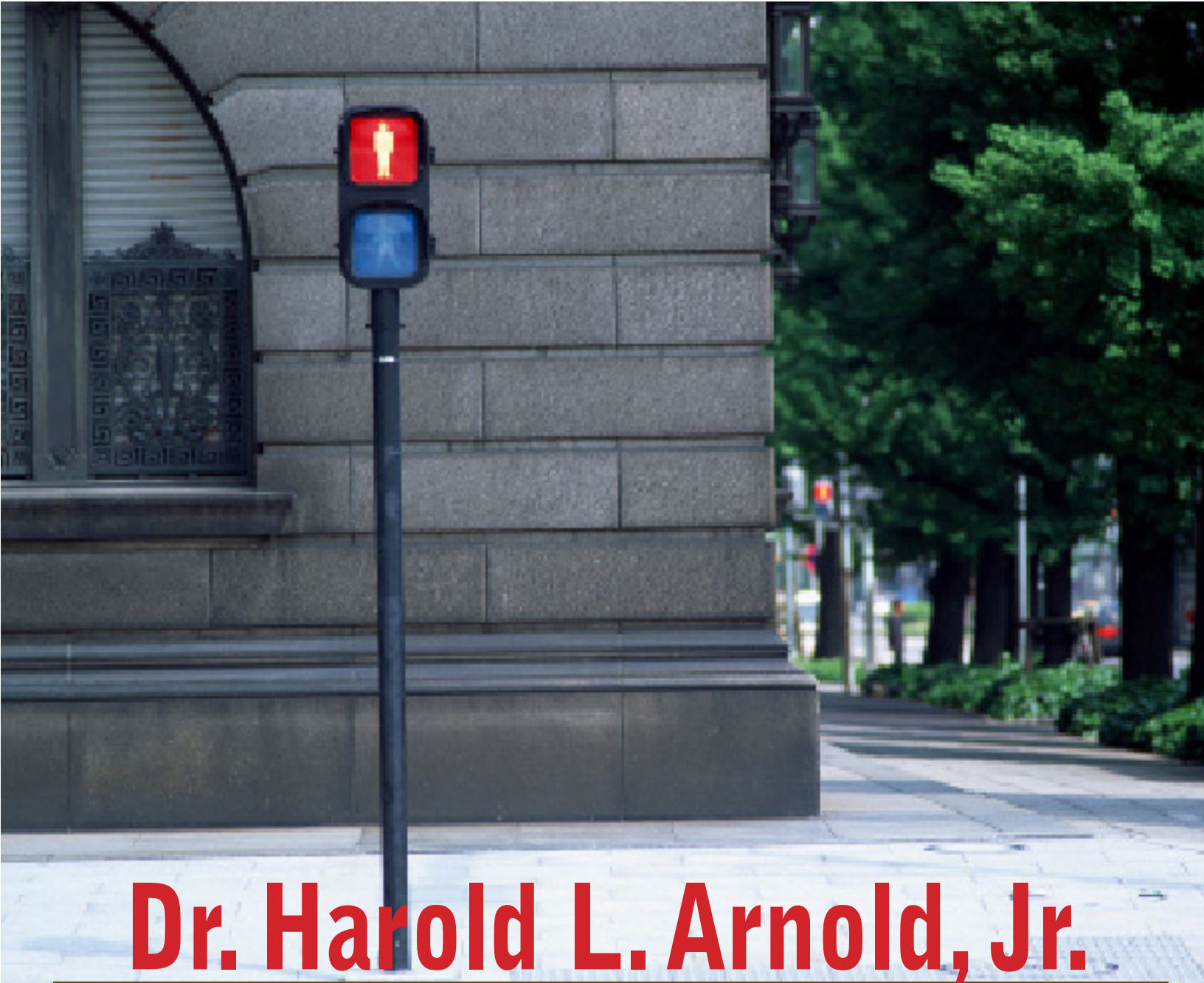


# The Restoration of Marriage

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A Collection of Spiritual Insights



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A Discovering Family International Resource



## Introduction

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# A Call to Rebuild Marriages

Rebuild! As I listened to the married couples gathered at the monthly marriage fellowship, the word “rebuild” kept coming to my mind. While some of the couples were paragons of strength, others were floundering in troubled marriages. For some marriages, I sensed desperation in their testimonies of infidelity, loneliness, disrespect, devalued self-worth, and communication failures. Still others seem paralyzed in mediocrity and satisfaction with the status quo. The emotional wounds and disappointments had left many of these couples feeling broken without any clear path to restoration.

As I addressed the group, I asked for their patience to examine about a biblical story that on its face seems removed from the subject of marriage. It is the story of Nehemiah as recorded in Nehemiah chapters 2-4. And, I started with a question. It was the same question

in fact that the Persian king Artaxerxes asked Nehemiah, his trusted Jewish cupbearer in Nehemiah 2:2, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart?”

The king’s observation was accurate. Nehemiah’s heart was burdened by a call that God had placed in him to rebuild the shattered walls of Jerusalem, which had been destroyed when the nation was taken into captivity. In response to Nehemiah’s request, King Artaxerxes permitted Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to assess the state of the walls and eventually to begin repairs. God had obviously stirred Nehemiah’s and the king’s heart to begin the difficult work of restoration. But, as Nehemiah soon learned through the mocking and ridicule of neighbors, enemy attacks to undermine his efforts, and the waning confidence of his own people, obeying God’s

call to rebuild was going to require remarkable perseverance, faith, and obedience.

Like Nehemiah, many of you also are experiencing a great sadness of heart. And, for many this emotional state is directly connected with the struggles in your marriage. The disappointments, frustration, and anger have left your own emotions in shambles, much like those broken walls of Jerusalem. My message to you is to have hope that God hears your cries just as He heard the lament of the Hebrew captives. God is calling you to rebuild the walls of your marriage. This call to rebuild is about prioritizing God’s desires for your marriage over your own desires—in a pursuit of holiness. It is a call to marital intimacy that is built on selflessness, trust, and respect. It is a call to extend grace as you unconditionally love the spouse to whom God has joined you. And, it is a call for an investment of time to allow strained emotions to heal.

You should be prepared, however, for attacks on your efforts to rebuild your marriage. In a culture that values individualism and self-satisfaction, your efforts to exemplify godly stewardship, humility and grace in marriage will be mocked—sometimes from your own family. With half of those around you opting for divorce, your unconditional commitment to an abundant marriage will be met with sarcasm and envy.

All of us experience attacks on our marriage—often leading to our own sadness of heart. God, however, has made provisions for you to withstand these negative influences. Strengthening the walls of your marriage is not simple. However, this series of articles is designed to provide insight, encouragement and practical advice to those seeking to protect their marriage from the external stressors that threaten it.



# Finding Stability in Marriage

Have you ever seen a gyroscope? In terms of physics, its purpose is to maintain orientation, by providing stability. You don't need to understand this in depth to be fascinated by watching a gyro at work – frantic, multi-directional rotation, spinning on three axes, with a fixed center. This center, using the force of inertia, creates a stable force.

We can use this metaphor to help us understand one purpose for which God designed marriage – to maintain orientation in three ways: husband and wife toward Him, husband and wife toward one another and, by example, others toward God. Without God's stability, our marriages risk spinning out of control.



Couples struggle to maintain this godly orientation and can feel disoriented by the magnitude of marital destabilizers. Let's briefly review five stressors that many couples struggle with, so that you may equip and prepare. These stressors, all consequences of our broken world, distort the orientation of the marriage from God to ourselves.

## **Compromised "Truth"**

Western culture gravitates towards truth that is relative to human desires – what philosophers call humanism. Humanism is a commitment to find truth in human rationale rather than the absolute Word of God. Humanism seeks to replace God's divinity with human ingenuity.

Increasingly, our culture relies on media moguls, political pundits and erudite educators to define the structure and purpose of marriage. This secularization of marriage has led to the promotion of self-gratifying behaviors that weaken the pursuit of shared identity, the acceptance of divorce as a solution for marital unhappiness and the legitimization of same-sex unions as a civil right. However, God-oriented marriages refuse these distortions, relying instead on God as the bearer of truth.

## **Cultural Values**

Fueled by humanism, much of Western culture compromises marriage by promoting values that weaken re-

liance on God. These values are most evident in the decision-making processes that reek of consumerism and convenience. Western culture values decision-making that is individualistic (what works best for me?); fear-based (how can I protect myself?); and short-term (how soon can I have it?).

But, the ultimate difficulty that this value system imposes on marriage is that it places individual interests as the focal point rather than a mutual sense of God's direction for the marriage. Contrarily, a God-oriented marriage prioritizes decisions based upon mutuality over individualism, faith over fear and long-term over short-term thinking.

## **Family Interpersonal Patterns**

Your interactions with your caregivers in your youth are arguably the most influential factors in the self you bring to marriage. Your sense of appropriate behavior, communication style, conflict resolution and relational boundaries are impacted by what you learned from your caregivers.

If you had a positive model of marriage in your life, you may have transferred positive qualities into your own marriage. Unfortunately, many marriages have at least one partner who grew up in an abusive, neglected or conflicted marriage. Couples in a God-oriented marriage seek to extend grace to one another, allowing the marriage to serve as divine healing to these emotional wounds.

## **Indebtedness**

Marriages are struggling under the weight of financial obligations and indebtedness. With record home foreclosures, excessive credit card debt and dwindling portfolios, marriages are reeling with fear and uncertainty.

Couples in a God-oriented marriage prioritize modesty over extravagance, saving over spending and giving over getting. Regardless of the current state of your finances, it is important to make financial stewardship a shared goal around which you and your spouse rally.

## **Time Sinks**

Spending time together is the key to marital intimacy.

Few couples, however, communicate well – that is, going beyond what's necessary for day-to-day functioning to the deep sharing of emotional worlds.

One reason that couples interact so infrequently is their endless activities. After days and weeks of busyness, couples are surprised and disappointed that intimate encounters don't just happen.

Couples in a God-oriented marriage learn to draw boundaries that preserve their time together by looking for reasons to come together rather than excuses to remain apart.

## **The Gyroscope Revisited**

Marriage stressors wreak havoc on your commitment to God and to one another. Marital discord tears at your very identity as a couple. In the mist of these stressors, however, God provides a way of escape from every temptation.

Your marriage's purpose is to orient others to the Lord as the liberator from these stressors. Like the center of the gyroscope, your God-oriented marriage offers stability in the midst of storms. You know your marriage is in the center of God's will when you and your spouse feel nearer to God through the union, when your partnership shapes you into God's image and when your union draws people into relationship with God.

# Defending Marriage From Mediocrity

Sandy are like many married couples who say, “We’re making it” in marriage. Recently I asked Sandy, “Do you ever feel great about your marriage?” She paused, clearly uncomfortable with the question, and replied, “My husband doesn’t abuse me, doesn’t cheat on me and hasn’t left me. I would say that I am blessed.”

Indeed, God has blessed Chip and Sandy. But, Sandy’s response left me ponder-

ing the meaning of “great” marriage. God wants us to have not only life but to experience it abundantly (3 John 2). Yet, Sandy seems more aware of what is thankfully absent than nourished by what is abundantly present.

Maybe I should have asked Sandy a different question: “Does God occupy the center of your marriage?” After all, a God-centered marriage assures God’s blessings upon the marriage covenant, fosters authentic partnership and models genuine love for others.

Many couples fall short on this point because God is pushed to the margin of the relationship. These couples have a sense of God, but they may compromise on obedience to His Word. They may pray for God’s presence in their decisions, but lack the patience to wait for God’s timing. They may seek more godly influences in their lives, yet their jam-packed schedules leave little room for meaningful relationships. The Apostle Paul describes this phenomenon as a form of godliness, but one lacking its power (2 Timothy 3:5). These power-deficient marriages are mediocre. Are you settling for the mediocre in your

marriage?

## Avoiding the Threat of Mediocre Marriage

The secular influences that surround us can exact a toll on marriage. Protecting your marriage against these stressors requires effort in five areas: unconditional commitment to the marriage, trust, respect, healthy boundaries and protected couple time.



### Unconditional Commitment.

Secular western culture defines individual happiness and satisfaction as the endpoint of marriage. While these are good things, we may have lost the equally critical concept of commitment. Despite culture’s prioritization of pleasure and convenience, God expects us to be committed to Him and to our marriage regardless of how satisfied we feel at the moment. This requires an abundance of forgiveness, grace and humility between husbands and wives, even in the face of difficult circumstances.

**Increased Trust.** Many Christian marriages lack godly trust yet fail to realize it. Similar to Sandy’s response, many Christian couples think of trust only in the context of marital fidelity. However, when God is marginalized in your marriage, trust deficits are also characterized by blaming, suspiciousness, power plays, jealousy, secrecy and hidden agendas.

Increasing the level of trust in your marriage requires a commitment to care for the needs of your spouse more than your own needs. This also requires trusting that your spouse knows what they need more than you do, and honoring them. Trust, like marriage in general,

only works as both you and your spouse agree to move forward together.

**Increased Respect.** Husbands feel respected when their wives express appreciation for what they do. Women, by contrast, feel respect when they are supported for who they are. Marital disrespect, however, almost always derives from one of three types of issues: delusions of grandeur, devalued self-worth or unchecked fears. These selfish tendencies push God into the margin — resulting in an unbalanced marriage where spouses behave defensively. Increasing respect necessitates understanding how your spouse feels respected, assessing your own control issues and praying for healing in this area.

**Healthy Boundaries.** Boundaries are an imaginary and internal line where your self ends and another’s self begins. There are three types of boundaries: rigid (unhealthy because they are inflexible and disinterested in the perspectives of others); enmeshed (unhealthy because they are so weak that they cannot guarantee safety); and permeable (healthy because they are strong and flexible; able to accept a learning posture while restricting influences which are unsafe for the marriage). God-centered marriages work to maintain marriages with permeable boundaries.

**Increased Couple Time.** Time is your most valuable asset. The value that you place in your marriage can be assessed by how much of your time is spent cultivating it. Couples voice a desire for intimate companionship. Yet, most couples spend more time microwaving dinner than investing in their marriage. The commitment, trust and respect so vital to healthy marriage are only fostered with a primary investment of time.

### An Abundant Marriage

The Holy Spirit emboldens couples to resist the stressors that erode their marriage only if they move God to the center of the marriage. Abundant marriage is within your reach as you allow the Holy Spirit to reveal and heal your strengths and weaknesses. In healthier marriages, this may just require additional insight. More troubled marriages are likely to require intervention by others who are committed to the health of your marriage.

# Shaving Planks



Jim and Irene sat at opposite ends of my couch, as far apart as possible. The tension between them so charged the room that I knew we were in for a rough ride even before this first session began. After some small talk, Irene dove right into the reason for their visit: “No matter what I do or how hard I try, it is never good enough for him. I’m sick of trying anything anymore.” Jim quickly retorted, “Funny, I feel the same way.” Sadly, Jim and Irene seemed to have only two things in common: Each believed their own negative behavior was a justified response to provocation by the other..

Jim and Irene each had important perspectives on their relationship, and what they described was actually a very common negative pattern of interaction. The details of that pattern are not nearly as important as the manner in which it was described to me, though. Irene explained in detail what Jim was doing wrong in the marriage, while Jim described with equal competence just how Irene failed him.

In other words, Jim and Irene demonstrated mastery of the “blame game.” They were just getting warmed up with their finger pointing when I interrupted as gently as possible while challenging them: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your spouse’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” As Christians, Jim and Irene recognized this slightly altered version of Matthew 7:5. I let them know that our emphasis, if a marriage is to become what God intends it to be, should be to work on our individual planks while saving our partner’s sawdust for later.

## Plank Warfare

Jim and Irene’s situation is not unique. We all have planks that limit our ability to see another person and circumstance the way God sees them. Planks foster despair in situations where God could pronounce hope. Planks reflect obstacles where God offers opportunities. And where the Holy Spirit causes you to look within for change, planks make sure you continue blaming your spouse.

These planks are blinding. They hamper a couple’s ability to assess and take responsibility for their individual negative contributions to the deteriorating marriage. These planks represent an accumulation of unmet needs and expectations. As these disappointments mount, the planks become more destructive.

## The Making of a Plank

How large is the plank in your eye? We are all inclined to underestimate our own limitations while overestimating those of others.

With this in mind, here are five questions to help you be objective about the size of your plank. Each question, except the last one, is designed to point us to some of the family-of-origin issues that become the planks in our eyes in marriage. The last one simply assesses selfishness. As you respond honestly to these questions, ask the Holy Spirit to allow you to accept that plank at face value.

If Jesus offered immediate healing to your most troublesome personal flaw, which one would you choose?

What relationship in your childhood or teenage years caused you the most pain? What similarities are there between how you handled the conflict then and how you deal with it in your marriage right now?

What do you do when your spouse disappoints you?

Who or what informed your current expectations about what your husband or wife should be doing if he/she really loved you?

Last week, how much time did you spend praying for the well being of your spouse?

Planks are stressors on your marriage. And, they are progressively destructive as a result of dysfunctional family patterns that you mimic from your family of origin, unrealistic expectations that you pick up from popular culture, latent fears that keep you in a defensive posture, sparse time in conversation and unrepentant pride.

## Removing Your Plank

As Jim and Irene reflected on these questions over several sessions, their postures gradually changed. While several transformations occurred in the relationship, Jim captured it best. “We are shaving our planks,” he said humorously.

There are no gimmicky tricks or painless solutions to protect a marriage from these marital stressors. But, you can have miracles if you pursue an unconditional commitment to place God’s will as the point of focus.

We are all broken, and therefore neither you nor your spouse is perfect. Husbands and wives will inevitably detect the specks of sawdust in one another’s eyes. We can honor God with an atmosphere of grace in marriage, which will allow Him to shape us into His image. But, God can only transform your marriage as both partners shift their focus inwardly.



# Commitment: The First Defense Against marital Stressors

God cannot love you less than He does. Consider two people – a priest who has devoted himself to the Lord for the last fifty years, and an evolutionary biologist who has dedicated himself to proving God does not exist. To which of these people is God most committed?

Intellectually, we know that God loves them equally. But, emotionally we struggle to understand how that is possible; it is beyond the comprehension of our conditional, emotional worlds. As evidenced by the parable of the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), this concept speaks to one of God's most basic characteristics: His unconditional commitment. It is the cornerstone of God's relationship with us, and, by extension, it serves as the centerpiece of marriage in two ways.

## Marriage: Commitment by Design

First, God designed marriage to center upon an unconditional commitment to Him. This requires a daily sacrifice of replacing your own desires for your marriage with God's plans for it – a reminder that your marriage belongs to Him. When life's stressors beset your marriage, your greatest assurance is that God's commitment to your marriage is sufficient to contain any problem you may face (Romans 8:35-38).

Second, God designed your marriage upon an unconditional commitment to one another. This unconditional commitment requires agreement between spouses to cultivate what God has planted in them. It requires an assumption of good will to care for each other's vulnerabilities. Finally, it requires a vow between spouses to reserve their best emotional, psychological and physical selves for one another.

## The Power and Peril of Unconditional Commitment

Unconditional commitment is the only secure foundation as family pressures, financial struggles, health chal-



lenges, work demands and church obligations mount. Your marital health depends on your ability to keep these pressures at your back rather than between you. From behind, these forces push you towards one another – creating intimacy in the struggle. Conversely, when wedged between you, they push you apart – nearly always fostering emotional, if not physical, separation.

Of course, unconditional commitment is not without its risks. Many spouses fear such a commitment because of the vulnerable position in which it places them – possibly being taken advantage of by a self-centered spouse. If your spouse exhibits a pattern of spousal abuse or blatant disregard for your well-being, it is vital that you protect yourself first and lean on God for reassurance.

## Three Keys to Marital Commitment

Keeping marital stressors at your back requires unconditional commitment to a three-step process. When maintained, these iterative steps engender a climate of trust and respect that honors God and protects the marital relationship.

**Keep Facing One Another.** You are most likely to move in the direction that you are already facing. Frustrated couples often look outside of their marriage for answers to their emotional needs. Then, as difficulties push them, it is only natural that they move towards that which meets their

need rather than towards the spouse. Spouses who make a decision to satisfy their emotional needs (especially romantic ones) only within the confines of their marriage satisfy the fundamental requisite of unconditional commitment.

**Communicate Honestly.** Effective communication is the glue that binds marriage. Conveying your needs, wants and feelings with your spouse, even in stressful situations, creates unity. Always remember that the complementary aspect of communicating honestly is listening actively. Active listening relies more on your heart than your ears.

**Encourage Each Other.** Many couples fail to encourage one another either because they do not think it is needed or because of their own insecurities and shortcomings. God, however, placed you and your spouse together to shape each other into His likeness. Encouragement soothes the pain of this molding process. Encouragement provides validation and legitimacy in discouraging and distressing circumstances. Look at how God offers you encouragement in Deuteronomy 31:6: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." I doubt there is any clearer model of unconditional commitment.

## The Transforming Power of Commitment

Inspirational speaker Zig Ziglar says, "Many marriages would be better if the husband and the wife clearly understood that they are on the same side." Think about the military force or sports teams that unite to defeat an opponent. For victory, the "me" focus of the individuals must yield to the "we" focus of the unit.



## Finding Your CORE Marriage

“How did I miss two calls?” Susan wondered as she risked a quick glance at her cell phone during the emergency sales meeting. The school nurse had promised to call if her child got worse. Staring at the “voicemail waiting” message, Susan strategized how to gracefully exit this meeting.

The first message was from her husband, Bob, reminding her about tonight’s theatre tickets. After more than three months of excuses, they were finally going on a date – alone. Susan and Bob barely had down time together anymore, and, when they did, the coordination of activities between kids, house, church and work dominated the conversation. Susan often feared that their season of intimacy as a couple had passed, though she never spoke this aloud to Bob. They both felt the strain. But Susan dared hope that tonight’s date would be a turning point. At least, that had been her prayer.

The second message was the dreaded call from the school nurse. “Calvin’s temperature is 101 degrees. Please call the school as soon as possible to let us know how soon you can pick him up.”

Susan’s own anxiety temperature rose, too, as she worried about Calvin’s health, the consequences of leaving the sales meeting, how she was going address other critical work responsibilities and whether the elu-

sive date was ever going to happen.

### Time Crunch

Bob and Susan are struggling with marital stressors that are common to dual-income homes. Like many couples in their situation, they converse less than an hour a day. Disturbingly, most of this conversation entails negotiating the activities of the next day. Nearly every aspect of their interaction is exacerbated by fatigue that accompanies their harried lifestyle.

### Signs of a Time Crunch

Contemporary marriages lack quality and quantity time for several reasons: an endless pursuit of things, requiring money and therefore more work; busyness, disguising relationship rifts; and couples’ lives running on parallel tracks. Three questions will help you discern how well time is managed:

In the past week, how satisfied were you with the emotional and physical intimacy you and your spouse shared? Emotional and physical intimacies are intertwined, as increases or decreases in one directly correlate with changes in the other.

How aware are you of your spouse’s current emotional needs? You only know your spouse’s needs by spending time with him/her. You cannot just assume that you know. If you think your spouse has no emotional needs,

you’re wrong! You might not know the needs because he/she does not trust you with them.

In the past month, how much time have you spent seeking God’s direction for your marriage? Your marriage is a spiritual relationship positioned to impact lives for Christ. But, this direction can only be discerned through time with God and one another.

### Finding the CORE of Marriage

Susan’s prayer for a “miracle” date is understandable. However, it is unlikely that a single date will reverse what has been lost. The good news, however, is that restored intimacy is within their reach as they make time the CORE of their marriage. CORE, an acronym for a four-step intimacy-building process builds trust, respect and mutuality.

**Commitment.** Commit to a specific day and time each week when you and your spouse will engage in one hour of conversation with one another without any other distractions. And, unless there is an emergency, stick to this commitment.

**Openness.** God created marital interaction for vulnerability without shame. Increasing your marital intimacy requires using your time in honest dialogue about your needs, desires and fears. If this is a difficult area for you, start with something small and gradually open up, as your spouse proves trustworthy.

**Repent.** Many of your spouse’s needs, desires and fears are directly associated with your past behaviors. Your marital trust will grow as you and your spouse make the time to pray together (and individually) with a repentant heart.

**Empathy.** The willingness of your spouse to share openly is contingent on his/her sense that you really understand and love them unconditionally. This is shown in your willingness to make time to listen non-defensively and speak unselfishly.





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