

BOOK TWO IN THE COVENANT SERIES

The Covenant of Marriage

GOD'S PLAN
TO PRODUCE DEEPEST LOVE,
STRONGEST RELATIONSHIPS,
PERSONAL GROWTH AND
TRANSFORMATION

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Carpenter's Son Publishing

The Covenant of Marriage

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Published by Carpenter's Son Publishing, Franklin, Tennessee

Published in association with Larry Carpenter of Christian Book Services, LLC
www.christianbookservices.com

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Interior and Cover Design by Suzanne Lawing

Edited by Robert Irvin

Printed in the United States of America

978-1-949572-52-0

This book is dedicated to my wife Holley, my best friend,
lover, teacher, and so much more.

HOLLEY'S SONG

September 1999

*First but a motion, a heart in a form danced before my eyes.
A brush of emotion, a hint of a smile; I walked up and stood beside.*

*Like dancers sweeping across the floor, engaging and pulling away,
Our souls circled slowly, eyes softly touched, watching, day after day.*

*Second, a voice sweet as an angel created a comfortable place.
Growing awareness, lovely eyes, near her I wanted to stay.*

*Like dancers circling on the floor with carefully concealed fire,
With gentlest grasp our eyes held each other with flickerings of desire.*

*Third, admiration of carriage and action gave confidence to inquire.
Truth spoken plainly of mind and heart, the doors of our hearts opened wide.*

*Dancers now facing, fully attentive, wait for the music to start.
Eyes gently probing opening souls saw worthy lives and hearts.*

*An offer was issued, and offer accepted, ears strained to hear the first chord.
Anticipation changed into delight as the music carried them on.*

*Like dancers just paired, whose lives have prepared them for each other's every move.
Each step was joy, each move celebration, harmony, fluid and smooth.*

*Teaching each other life lessons of dance, passion like lightning explodes.
Hearts, minds, bodies and lives intertwined as new life is born in the soul.*

*Like a tango danced to thunder by passionate birds in the sky,
Love of dance, dance of love carries them on till two lives merge slowly toward One.*

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Foreword

Marriage is a vehicle. Two people get in and go somewhere together. They want to be transported ... to a better future, to the raptures of love, to the joys of family life, to the fulfillment of their dreams. They want to be moved ... to feel, to grow, to move forward in life, to build something worth having for themselves and the one they love. But what is this vehicle they have entered? What is marriage?

We know several things about marriage. It is as old as human history, and a vital integrating point for every person in every culture throughout history. And, throughout its long and important history, marriage has remained pretty much the same all over the earth, doing the things it has always done—building something important for the couple, building the next generation, and being the focal point of cultural continuity. Marriage and family are the most fundamental social unit in every culture, and many would say the most important. And we know something else about marriage. In our culture it is increasingly challenged.

Anyone picking up this book is probably interested in marriage, and anyone interested in marriage is especially interested in having a good one. But what does a good marriage look like? How does a couple come to have a good marriage? In a culture where marriage failure rates have skyrocketed during my sixty-five-year lifetime, where couples who love each other are refraining from entering marriage in unprecedented numbers, how can one approach marriage with any real confidence? Who can tell us how to take something with such a successful track record and make it a success in our own lives? Frankly, how did we manage to turn good marriages into an endangered species in a handful of decades in our culture?

The first thing we need to learn to build a good marriage is what marriage is. Then we need to realize that this vehicle we are getting

into must be constructed. There has been a plan in place throughout history for building a good marriage—a vehicle that takes us where we want to go. But, in recent years, many new plans have shown up all around us. People are building a huge array of different things that are not working nearly so well. To build something that works well, one needs a working plan, the right materials, and the willingness to do a good job of building.

Our underlying assumption now is that marital success is about finding the right person and true love. The current plan used by most is a large sheet of paper with a few words written on it: “what adds to my life, and advances what I think is my self-interest.” The building material most often employed is “what I feel like in the moment.” And, using this guidance and this material, two people who are strongly attracted to each other and who care deeply about each other begin to build. One day one of them feels like they can fly, so a wing is added. The next day, slowing down a bit, a wheel; when slowing down more, a seat. The next day things are going sideways, so another wheel is added pointing sideways. The other person is also adding things of their own, as they like. Then these two get in this vehicle and try to go somewhere. Where is the steering wheel, or is there one? How many are there? Are people looking forward, or backward? The point being, if there is not a carefully laid plan to build something so important, if the couple just hops in and plans to figure it out as they go—meaning they have no real plan—what kind of vehicle will they build? How strong and resilient will it be? Accidents happen. Life happens. What happens then? What are the odds that this thing will take them where either wants to go? And where do they want to go?

In case you think this picture is not real, look around. A good marriage is a well-built thing. It is carefully fashioned according to a working plan. It is built of solid and resilient material. It is up to the task and will get people where they really want to go. A really good marriage is like the most beautiful, highest quality, best designed vehicle on the road. Clearly designed by an expert, carefully handcrafted, lovingly assembled, and highly capable in every situation. Except that a good marriage cannot really be compared to a car. Marriage is a vehicle

that is vastly more important. So why are most cars built with more of an eye toward function and quality than most marriages? How many marriages today are frustrating struggles, going in circles, stuck beside the road, broken down, or broken apart? How many are careening toward where only one person wants to go? Instead of a huge part of the solution to the problems of living, how many marriages are the problem? Is this a problem with marriage? Or is this a problem with our understanding of marriage? Is the problem that the institution of marriage is a relic that should be discarded, or is the problem how we are attempting to build marriages?

One clue: marriage has not changed. It has been the same from the beginning, for thousands of years. What has changed in the last few decades are a lot of things about us. We, as humans, have not changed in a fundamental way. What has changed resides in our decisions—how we choose to see things, how we choose to do things, what we choose to see as important. These decisions can be revised at any time. If we can learn how to *not* do something well, we can also learn how to do it well, especially if there is still a working plan available to us and every resource we will need is still at our disposal.

Let us think for a moment about the difference between how one builds something carefully and skillfully designed, and something thrown together on the spur of the moment. One difference is a blueprint. How does a blueprint help us build correctly? First, as we look at one, we see a clear picture of what we are trying to build. Then there are detailed diagrams of each element. A blueprint gives us both the big picture and every needed detail. If the design is appropriate and effective, one can take the blueprint and build step by step to completion. You will notice the terms “covenant plan” and “God’s plan” repeated throughout the book. I want you to begin thinking of marriage as something very specific that must be built. To build the best car or house, much less the best marriage, we need the best plan; then we need to carefully follow this plan and build step by step. What do you want your marriage to become? What elements must be built into marriage so that it works best? Where did your plan for marriage come from? Or, do you have a plan at all?

The most important initial understanding, as noted, is what marriage *is*. This understanding in our culture, even our Christian culture, has gone missing almost entirely. Hence this book, which looks at marriage in light of this historical understanding. The beginning point of building a marriage to its potential is being able to define marriage correctly. We must first understand what makes this type of relationship the special thing that it is.

Fortunately, we do not need to consult friends, media, or culture about this relationship. We have another source for the definition of marriage, a source that explains every aspect, every detail that makes it so unique, so special, so powerful, so beneficial. Beyond the particulars, marriage is a special kind of relationship, termed a *covenant* relationship. We may also have heard this term applied to another relationship, the one God offers each of us with Himself through Jesus. He terms this relationship the *New Covenant*.

Most people today think of marriage as a make-it-up-as-you-go-along kind of thing. It is all about love. We simply love each other as best we can. We find someone so special that we want to spend our lives together, and perhaps raise a family together. So, do we marry? Or not? Do we even need marriage after all? Isn't this just about the love of two people? Isn't this about finding the right person, finding true love? If we find this person and this love, doesn't love for a lifetime inevitably follow? Isn't marriage, with all the rules and religious overlay, about as likely to stand in our way as to help us?

If this is what we think—and many in our culture think just this way—this means we do not understand covenant. A marriage covenant is a relationship, but more than just a relationship. First, it is a gift of God to the human race—the first gift He gave us after life itself. If you have not read the first volume in this series I strongly recommend you do so, for in this book the historic understanding of

covenant is fully explained. In this first volume we also see why our culture, including the Christian community, is confused about the basic nature of covenant, most often likening it to a *contract*. A covenant is nothing like a contract. It is not an agreement between two people to behave in certain ways. If our current understanding of covenant is challenged, might this explain why marriages in our culture, including our Christian culture, have become increasingly challenged in the last few decades?

We will see in this book that marriage is all about love. But God does not just tell us to love, then leave us to figure out what this means. Nor are we just given a list of rules. Love is not about rules. At the same time, our hearts and relationships do work according to certain principles. Our hearts respond predictably to being treated well or badly. A wedding ring does not alter this equation. If the person on the other side of the relationship displays certain character qualities, love and relationship grow. If other character qualities are displayed, love cools and relationship is damaged. In covenant God defines loving actions and loving character. Once any of us sees the full spectrum of what it means to love, we realize how far we are from being able to be all of these things, or do all of these things. Not to worry. Inherent in covenant is a plan for learning, for growth, and for the transformation of each of us. In covenant we find the motivation to do and to be our best toward our beloved. But our best will still fall short of building the best relationship or fully loving our covenant partner. Again, not to worry. If we realize this, God has us right where He wants us. Our relationships cannot grow beyond a certain point if we are not growing. In order to build the best relationship we must grow and mature, and we must grow together in specific ways as a couple.

While learning and applying God's covenant plan over the last thirty-five years, I have been amazed most of all by the love and wisdom of God. The covenant of marriage is fueled by many of our deepest drives: the desire to join ourselves to someone in a lifelong relationship; to love and be loved; to find our happily-ever-after, a deeply committed relationship that endures through good times and bad; to raise children, building a family and a legacy; and, overall, to devote

ourselves to something good and noble that is larger than ourselves. God's plan also draws from the ways our mind works, the ways our heart works, and the ways that relationships work. He knows all about these because He created them. He combines every element together to create a certain outcome—the growth of love between two people. Aside from just doing what we know we are supposed to do in marriage, God's plan transforms us so we want to do these things. We understand the reasons behind these things and enjoy doing them because they are the most beneficial in the long run for everyone, including ourselves.

If we *understand and follow God's plan* for marriage, we are given everything we need to build love for a lifetime. Two people in love can come together in a way that uniquely joins and merges their natures and identities—a covenant. It is from this merger—the defining characteristic of covenant—that everything else flows. This alteration and joining of nature and identity logically changes the ways we treat each other. Because our nature and identity change—our true selves change—our true self-interest changes, and thus our priorities, values, goals, and many other things shift dramatically. But we must realize and embrace this transformation. We must learn to live out these details. Everything we do in covenant according to God's plan builds love, builds relationship, and authentically expresses who we now are. This is the perfect combination with which to build love for a lifetime.

We will predictably express these new selves imperfectly. We must grow into living out these new selves. This is not a simple process, nor is it inevitable. We must choose to conform our lives to this new reality, or we may hang on to our old status quo and try to be someone who no longer exists. Growth is slow and messy; it was when we grew up the first time, from infants to children, to teens, and to adulthood. It will be messy as we begin to grow up the second time within our marriages. But the outcome is worth the effort and aggravation.

In God's plan for growth one of the most important things we can do is rid ourselves of things in our minds and hearts carried forward from our single lives. These patterns—actions, beliefs, values, habits, and character—no longer reflect who we are, and they will predictably

But these problems are not a terrible thing. They are not even bad things; such “problems” actually identity opportunities for learning, growth, development, and transformation.

create problems in our life together. But these problems are not a terrible thing. They are not even bad things; such “problems” actually identity opportunities for learning, growth, development, and transformation. If we deal with these issues according to God’s plan, we are on the path to maturity, the path to learning to truly love across the spectrum of life.

God’s plan is larger than a relationship between two people. It equips us to handle the challenges of living. Marriage is not always easy; neither is life. If we follow God’s plan we will build a strong and deep relationship

with our covenant partner and with God. With these resources to draw from as well as God’s plan to guide us, every circumstance we encounter along the way—even adversity and tragedy—can become the ground from which grows even greater strength and maturity and a deeper capacity to love. Jesus summed up God’s desire for each of us: we are to love God and love each other. We have all heard this. But have you heard His plan for developing us into people who can actually do this consistently and well, and enjoy doing so? *His plan is covenant.*

There is nothing complicated and significant we humans learn that does not involve an exacting, disciplined, and challenging training process—surgeon, professional athlete, artist, pilot, and many, many more professions. Building a great marriage and family, and becoming a good covenant partner or a good parent, these are among the highest-skill jobs of all. Do we think any less would be required if we are to do something so complex and important—and so greatly rewarded? Marriage is a much more complex and wonderful plan than most of us realize, but in order for us to benefit from this wonderful plan we must be devoted to it. To choose to devote ourselves to this plan we

must see and understand this plan. Then we must have sufficient reasons to choose such devotion. That is the purpose of this book: to gain this understanding so we may reasonably choose to devote ourselves to the plan of the Author of marriage, and the Author of ourselves.

What if you had a direct and clear communication that was undoubtedly from God? There is simply no question that the God of the universe is speaking directly to you. He asks you to do something very important, something that will impact many people in partnership with Him. He provides the resources, power, overall plan, and moment-by-moment directions as needed.

How would it feel to be working with God to build something significant—learning from Him, drawing from His resources, watching His power work in and through you to have a significant impact? What would this be like for you? Would you want to do this? Would this situation not, in fact, be one of the high points of your life? Maybe the most important thing that ever happened to you? Achieving something significant as you fulfilling the purposes of the Creator of the universe?

Guess what? God is making precisely this offer to you in your marriage. See if this does not become clear as you read these pages.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Real Questions

If you are picking up a book on the Covenant of Marriage, odds are you are looking for ways to improve an existing marriage or looking forward to building a new one. If you ask around in the Christian community or in the culture at large, you will hear a huge array of advice and approaches. Underlying this variety are various views of marriage and goals for marriage.

If I want to get from my home to a location on the other side of town, and I ask a half-dozen people how to get from point A to point B, I will get a half-dozen potential routes. And this is fine, because any path I choose will get me where I want to go.

On the other hand, if I, as a surgeon (my profession for decades) consult with the nation's leading expert on a complex, technically difficult operation, there will be one way to get the job done—an extremely exacting approach involving a huge number of specific details. Each detail matters, and beyond this, strict adherence to the principles of surgery is imperative if one is to deal successfully with the unexpected things inevitably encountered during an operation. Especially in an operation with no margin for error.

On the surface, marriage appears more like getting across town than a complicated operation; any way we feel like choosing will do. Many people just wing it, with no plan whatever. “We love each other; we’ll figure it out.” Since two people thinking about marriage or already married have already built a strong love relationship by doing whatever they have been doing, the idea of a specific plan does not seem at first glance to even make sense.

However, God knows something about marriage that we may not. He created it and conveyed it to humanity. He created us to desire a certain quality of relationship—to love and be loved—and not only for a while. Those of us who are married yearn for a certain outcome for our marriages: happily ever after. Are we aware that God also wants this for us? And that He knows how to make it happen?

What we do not realize in the midst of our head-over-heels, this-is-the-one experience is how hard it is to sustain and grow love for a lifetime as we wade through all the challenges and changes of life. But God knows. He sees all of this coming. He has fashioned a plan with us in mind, and I am convinced that He fashioned us with this plan in mind. His plan is to teach us how to love for a lifetime. The multi-tool He uses to do this is called the *Covenant of Marriage*.

My wife and I are living out a decades-long, very intense, extremely close, deeply intimate love affair. We have learned much. We have built many things together. We have grown in many ways together, and therefore we have grown together in many ways. We have been transformed in many ways since our journeys and lives were joined. And we are far more passionately in love with each other than when we each decided we had found “the one.” Throughout our marriage, about once a month we have been asked by perfect strangers how long we have been together. People are always shocked to hear the answer: decades. Or someone mentions our palpable love, a connection they see from across a room that is unusual enough to merit comment. I am often not sure exactly what they notice, but a large number of people over many years have seen something between us that is apparently uncommon. What do they see? I believe they see something God wants to build for every married couple—a relationship in which the joining and merger of identities is manifested so strongly that it becomes visible, palpable. Love, chosen and built into the relationship per God’s plan for decades, is formed into a power that can be felt across a room.

Did we just pick the winning number? Simply choose right? Were we fortunate enough to find true love? All of these are partly true. Holley is wonderful; I got lucky. We made good choices, both

Did we just pick the winning number? Simply choose right? Were we fortunate enough to find true love?

in our objects of affection and in how we built a strong love relationship from the beginning. But luck changes, people drift, and love fades. There is much more to this story. Holley and I have been following God's plan for marriage enthusiastically and wholeheartedly throughout our relationship. That has made all the difference.

The more marriages I see over the decades, the more convinced I become that the quality of a marriage directly reflects how closely that relationship corresponds with, or does not correspond with, God's plan for marriage. Holley and I started marriage where everyone else begins. We cared about each other and we had a strong relationship, but we also had no idea how *different* we were. We thought differently about many things, felt differently, wanted different things, and had different ways of dealing with issues. Though we felt this amazing oneness, this did not translate into a unanimous approach to nearly anything in our lives. We had our agendas and viewpoints, and each thought we should steer the ship. We all start there. The question is, how will we handle these differences? What happens next? God's plan outlines certain approaches to these differences, while the world's plan commends an entirely different set of approaches. The plan each couple chooses, selected from these two options—because these are the only two available to us—makes all the difference.

Few people realize that God has a well-defined plan to build a marriage. Those who think God might have a plan usually think this plan is about *following a set of rules*, rules that war against our inclinations and may not even be good ideas. But God's plan is something altogether different.

Is a marriage more similar to a drive across town, or does someone having your heart and mind and future in his or her hands call for a more careful approach? Do you want to be handled with the care of a passing stranger who offers you a ride—placing your very life

in his or her trembling and inattentive hands—or would you prefer someone who knows how to love in every situation, someone with high-level relationship skills, and someone who is totally committed to your well-being? When the storms of life descend on you, who do you want by your side? A mature adult and careful surgeon, or a wing-it, self-absorbed overgrown adolescent?

God's plan is designed to offer us every possible motivation to do what we want to do anyway. At least on a good day, which is to consistently love our covenant partner. And it is designed to do one other very important thing: *to change us*. To change us from the inside out, to grow us up, to tap into every potential within us to become the best person we can be. God knows how to tap into our ideas, beliefs, priorities, senses of self-interest, ideals, goals, motivations, feelings, and even our identity (and our understanding of our identity, which may be a different thing), to shape us into people who can actually do what we most want to do. We want to be loved for a lifetime, and we want to give love for a lifetime—and not just the superficial thing the world calls love, but love in action, love from the core of our being.

God's plan is extensive and detailed. Marriages are extensive and detailed, so His plan is scaled for the size of the task. As we examine the entirety of this plan, it becomes obvious that God intends to build more than a lifelong love between two people. This plan is about building people who are capable of new and different things; who know how to understand the needs of others and meet those needs; who are mature; who have developed their gifts, potential, and people skills to high levels. It is about taking these developed people and building families, communities, and cultures.

God's plan is doable. It is about going through daily life and making a certain set of choices that we are capable of making. It may involve learning and studying, thought and soul searching, and trying new things. Learning how to be a good covenant partner is just like learning any other skill or developing a special talent. While we often have invested a lot and gotten very little for it—say, in school or some other training process—if we are following God's plan we can be confident

our efforts will be abundantly rewarded. I can certainly testify to that, as can my wife.

Before we can carry out God's plan, or even decide that we want to do so, we need to see His plan. The beginning point of His plan is to understand covenant. If you read the first volume of this three-volume series, you can already define this word. You know something about the three related forms of Covenant—marriage covenant, blood covenant, and the New Covenant. You understand the defining feature of covenant—*an exchange of identity between the parties*, which joins the two in a unique way. This new, merged identity means that the natures of the two have been joined and merged. You realize that as this new, merged identity and nature comes into being, each person's old identity and nature ceases to exist. The two literally become new and different creatures by entering covenant, by becoming, as the Scriptures term it, "one flesh" (Genesis 3).

In covenant people are to regard each other and treat each other in specific ways. The sum of these things is an excellent definition of love in action. But the most important insight of all about covenant is *why* we are called to do these things. We are told to treat each other in every way as well as we would treat ourselves ... because in a very real sense, the other person now is myself. Every consequence of this sharing and merger of identity is illustrated by the duties, responsibilities, obligations, and opportunities of a covenant relationship. All of these behaviors are simply the logical response to this new reality—these new, merged identities. This reality and its many implications was the subject of Volume One, in addition to examining the historic basis for this understanding. We will retrace some of this information in this volume, but the first book covers this topic in a way we will simply not have space to repeat in this volume or the next. This more complete explanation is vital if one is to derive the most benefit from either marriage or a relationship with God.

Why, then, does everyone not simply follow God's plan? We covered this extensively in Volume One and will speak to this question a bit more in this volume. It is vital that we understand and cut through the confusion surrounding this question. And the confusion sur-

rounding marriage. A clear understanding will inform better individual choices about following God's plan. One thing we will clearly see: following God's plan is a choice, a choice each of us faces in a global sense, then at every step, in every detail. In order to follow this plan we must choose to do so. And we must reaffirm this choice on a daily basis. We must find compelling reasons if we are to make these choices.

In this volume, in addition to laying out God's plan, I hope to provide sufficient reasons to follow that plan. Keep in mind that to not make a choice about this issue is, in fact, to make a choice. As you read this volume, please do not merely seek information. Keep asking yourself what you want most in your marriage, how you are most likely to get what you want, and what you are willing to do to have the best possible marriage.

In Volume One we discussed an important reality: alternative ideas about marriage throughout history appear, on the surface, to be exercises in human creativity or practicality or preference. But there is something more going on. Throughout history people have been deceived about the path to the best marriage, just as they have been deceived about the path to the best life and many other things. Our world is awash in deception and confusion. This confusion will find its way into every person's initial approach to marriage. Where did this confusion come from?

Since the first couple, covenant has been the heart of God's plan for individuals and for humanity. At the same time, humans inhabit a spiritual battleground. This was first noted in Scripture in Genesis 3 in the conversation between Eve and Satan. An excellent case can be made that this worldwide, history-long confusion about marriage comes from precisely the same source as Eve's confusion about the path to her best life. We can make this inference because confusion ever since follows the same pattern. This war of ideas is not just about true versus false, but about truth versus deception. Deceptions are false ideas made to look true, but they are more. These are ideas that promise great benefit if embraced. When we are faced with such an idea, our focus shifts from discerning truth from falsehood to desire for an outcome. If we are persuaded to want the outcome badly enough, we

become willing to bend the truth or make other compromises to pursue this outcome. Promised benefits of this type always have a specific price tag: to obtain the promised benefit we must somehow depart from the plan of God. Thus, we offend Him in the process of seeking something He does not offer us. We are told that we need something different from the life God offers, then sold on the idea that this new offering is a crucial thing if we are to live our best lives. We are invited to brush past the One who truly loves us and is trying to lead us to our best lives, and reach out for . . . However, just as in Satan's initial interaction with the human race, these promised benefits never materialize—for that was never the point. But in obeying these ideas, we are now obeying the ones behind these ideas, enemies of God who have been engaging with humanity throughout history. We join them in their rebellion even if we are not aware such a rebellion exists. This is the point. These ideas are offered to do damage to us and our relationship with God. And in the process to wreak havoc in our own lives, even as we are now convinced we are on the path to our best life.

Thus, in marriage there are not many paths we might take to get from here to there. There are literally *two* paths: God's plan and "other." The reason God is so insistent on fidelity to His plan and only His plan is the ultimate source of competing ideas that we might try to synthesize with His. Thus, part of our journey is learning to distinguish the plan of God from competing ideas. We need to recognize the sources of various ideas, to spot the fingerprints on one idea or another.

This we can do *if* we understand the underlying principles of God's plan and those of the plan of His enemy.

In order to fully appreciate God's plan we need to look at the alternative, at the way our world teaches us to do relationship. We must

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examine these ideas in practice, and we must look at the outcome of these ideas with false optimism stripped away. Only if we understand the world's plan, and the predictable outcomes of this strategy, will we properly appreciate the plan of God. Then we must see the plan of God in action, and look at the kind of relationships this plan will build, and the kind of *us* this plan will build. Then we need to look at this plan as it builds families, communities, and culture.

GOD'S PLAN FOR THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

1. Recognize the Author of the Covenant of Marriage, and therefore His authority.
2. Understand the unity of identity and the union that occurs between covenant partners: *what God has joined together*.
3. Understand the personal transformation that occurs as one enters covenant.
4. Understand within covenant the imperative of loving one's partner in every sense of this word, and the reason we are able to do so—the transformation and unity of identity created by covenant.
5. Understand God's functional definition of love as seen in the principles, priorities, obligations, and responsibilities of covenant, which correspond perfectly with the definition of loving, virtuous behaviors in Scripture versus our various definitions of love.
6. Understand the role that choice plays in the growth of our relationships—loving, faithful, obedient choices versus everything else. Understand the motivational system in covenant that aids us in choosing loving behaviors toward our covenant partner. Understand that faithfulness to our covenant is synonymous with perfectly loving our partner. Understand that faithfulness to our covenant—our partner and our obligations—is our highest duty.

7. Understand God's plan for dealing with predictable failures to love: learning, personal growth, and personal transformation.
8. Understand God's use of issues in the relationship to motivate growth and transformation; in God's plan these are not problems, they are opportunities.
9. Understand our roles in growth and transformation and the role played by a properly built relationship.
10. Understand that learning to love well and consistently through covenant is the path to continued growth of affection and passion over our lifetimes—our happily-ever-after.
11. Understand that learning to love our partner as covenant directs is the foundation for loving our families, for good parenting, and for playing the most constructive roles in our communities.
12. Understand the big picture of covenant: God's plan is intended to teach us to love as He loves, beginning with our beloved, then extending outward to reach the world.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. Why is the institution of marriage in so much trouble today?
2. Why do people want to be married? What benefits derive from this relationship?
3. What roles has marriage historically played in the lives of individuals?
4. What roles has marriage historically played in society?
5. What are the most important things you want in your marriage?
6. Are these things a part of your marriage now—occasionally, often, always?
7. What do you want from a book on marriage?
8. What would you be willing to do to have the marriage you really want?
9. Do you think it is possible to have the marriage of your dreams? Why or why not?
10. What do you think God wants for you in your marriage?

Next we will look at an outline of God's plan. This outline will not mean much at this point until we more fully understand all the terms used. Once we lay out, for instance, God's definition of love, it will be clear why His definition works so much better than ours over a lifetime of marriage, and why our hearts predictably grow toward each other when we are loved in these ways.