

The Covenant of Marriage Study Guide

A Guidebook for Couples and Singles

*How to Build the Best Marriage,
the Best Life, and the Best You!*

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PLEASE READ THIS FIRST

Dear Reader,

If you are reading this, you want a better Marriage. There are likely many things about your husband or wife and your Marriage you are delighted with—which is why you are married. You see wonderful things in another person and you want to build a wonderful life together. In many ways you are doing just that.

So, how can we make it better? The thoughts that guide this study need to be clear up front so you understand what we are trying to accomplish, and why. One approach is to try to make good things better—working on better listening, more consideration, deeper understanding, or more sensitivity. Many resources take this approach. Instead, we want to do something very different.

For decades Mark has been a surgeon. This trained him to approach problems in a particular way. The best surgeons *properly diagnose* and *successfully treat* significant problems. People who sought his care did so because they knew something was wrong. Some knew exactly what—a kidney stone, a prostate infection—and the answer was obvious. But others came with just a symptom. Something did not look right—a little blood-tinge in the urine, or did not feel right—a little pain they never felt before. His job was first to figure out what was wrong. Then to tell the person. Then to do something that hopefully would resolve the issue. Often none of these were straightforward. Some problems are difficult to sort out. Some people did not deal well with the truth, even when stated as tactfully as possible. At times the cure involved something more extensive, challenging and threatening than anticipated.

Over many years working through such issues he gained a deep appreciation for a precise and comprehensive understanding of physical problems, for communicating clearly—if gently—the truth about the problem, and most of all a profound gratitude for the ability to remedy issues that were at times much more serious than anticipated. That tinge of blood in the urine could be a small asymptomatic kidney stone or a cancer that led to removal of a kidney—from which the person fully recovered with no ongoing issues; or a bladder cancer treated by removing this organ and building a replacement out of intestine—which involves a lifetime of maintenance and tinkering. He also noticed that patients, and even physicians, often stop short of exploring a problem to its root cause. Patients want, and physicians may offer, a band-aid for what proves to be a life-threatening, perhaps life ending cancer. The key to the *best outcomes* is to *ask the right questions*. Make sure you find the most important answers, then do the right thing to fix the problem—even if it hurts, or the cure initially seems as unwelcome as the disease. This is the path to the best physical life. Another reality also became clear. In the end it is the person's body and their life. One can offer truth and the path to a better life, but people are free to choose this path or any other.

How does this relate to Marriage if we are trying to build the best one? Holley and Mark's other passion has been building a deep, rich and powerful Covenant relationship with God, and building the deepest and best Marriage possible. We found this surgical mindset to be really helpful to build these relationships. How, and why?

We all have a lot that is good about our Marriage, but there are those other things... Something does not look quite right. Something does not feel quite right. Sometimes these are simple to understand and correct.

We see an answer in Scripture and make a different choice—issue resolved. But there are those patterns, those recurring conflicts, those growing feelings about our spouse we do not want, or maybe that crisis of moral compromise. We can focus on the positive and keep trying to grow that part of our relationship. We may believe we are being loving, gracious, and Godly by ignoring or compartmentalizing whatever does not look right or feel right. And sometimes this works. The problem is not really that serious. We overlook, move on, and continue building. But as we look around and see a 25%+ divorce rate among Christians, we also realize that just putting a bandaid over it and hoping it heals on its own does not always work. What can we impart that would improve every Marriage, and get ones on shaky footing onto solid ground—if, of course, people actually followed the plan?

We discovered something over the decades so important that we want to help everyone understand it. God's plan for our lives and our Marriages is far better than we can imagine. Let's repeat that—in each of our minds, when we think about the best-case scenario for our Marriage, God has a working plan to create something beyond our dreams. We can rock along, row hard, enjoy the good times, bail water out of the boat that comes from all the leaks, and hope the thing doesn't sink beneath us; or we can let God do something He deeply desires to do. We can let Him build, or rebuild, our Marriage His way. Actually, we do the building, but according to His plan instead of ours. If we do this, we will find our Marriage takes us places we never dreamed it would, and builds things within us that allow us to live our best lives. So...how do the nautical theme and the operating room picture come together?

We do not need to fix what works well. We do need to look more carefully at what is not working well. Issues, conflicts, problems, and our unpleasant inner experiences—disappointments, unmet expectations, and many other things—all of these are the doorway to ***a problem-solving journey God intends us to take.*** We may find what is needed in our Marriage is different from what we thought. God wants to show us the true nature of Marriage and how it is built into the best possible relationship. He wants us to understand our new identity and nature, and how to build the relationship so *both people grow to their God-given potential.* He wants us to learn how to transform those things about ourselves that hold us back from building the life and relationship He intends for us. As you might imagine, this conversation is deeper and more involved than one about how to be nicer to each other. But this conversation and the powerful changes it is intended to produce may be the best things that ever happened to your Marriage. If you agree to open this door and take this journey. These are not our ideas and our plan. These are God's ideas and His plan. We have just proven their amazing benefit.

Happy Reading!

PLEASE READ THIS NEXT

Two people are madly in love, feeling things they have never felt, doing loving things for one another they have never done, convinced they have found “the one” and true love. They want to spend their lives together. So they marry. In their Marriage they want this blissful state to continue till death do us part. And great Marriages do happen.

ALL ARE EQUALLY MARRIED, BUT ALL MARRIAGES ARE NOT EQUAL

But non-great Marriages also happen. Everyone begins in love, determined to make the relationship work, with deepest feelings and highest hopes. Why do some find enduring love, while others find something very different? How does a great Marriage happen? In this study we are going to explore vital lessons from a source you may have never considered—from *the nature of the marriage relationship itself*.

Our culture has lost the historic understanding of Covenant relationships; instead we try to transform marriage into whatever the latest cultural viewpoint says it should be. However, the Covenant of Marriage was the second gift of God to humanity, after life itself. Marriage is found throughout history in every culture, and is largely unchanged through history—until lately. What about Marriage has changed? Marriage is being entered far less often and is failing in unprecedented numbers. Why? Because current approaches are not in synch with the actual nature, structure, and function of this relationship. These innovative and progressive approaches fail to build this relationship to its potential. On the other hand, if we do understand...

...the **underlying reality** that makes the Covenant of Marriage a covenant;

...the **practices and principles** that flow from this underlying reality;

...that marriage is **not just a tie that binds**—instead,

it is a **plan designed by God** to build the **strongest love relationship** and the **best working relationship**, and to **grow and transform** the participants into people capable of building not only good marriages, but good families and good societies...

If we understand these things we are now poised to embark on one of the greatest adventures in life: building a great marriage, and **building the best version of ourselves in the process**. Welcome to the journey, and bon voyage!

My wife Holley and I have a decades-long love-for-a-lifetime Marriage, a relationship built firmly on the underlying reality of marriage, then on everything that flows from this reality. This understanding is the key that unlocks every good thing Marriage has to offer. It also explains much of what goes wrong in Marriages. A Marriage built in accord with these realities turns out one way. If, instead, we try to make marriage *what we want it to be*, that is *out of accord with what it is*, the relationship *will not be...cannot be...built to its potential*. We want to share with you what we have learned—how to understand and build the best marriage by following God's plan. In order to fully grasp God's plan, though, we must learn something else first. We must learn *what a Covenant is...and why it is the heart of God's plan for our Marriage and our life*.

WHO DO YOU SEE WHEN YOU LOOK ACROSS THE BREAKFAST TABLE?

The answer to this question may be the most important of all in determining the ultimate quality of your marriage, and the answer may not be what you think.

LOVE VS. SELF-INTEREST

We are going to examine two things that often compete in a marriage, but should not—for a reason that may surprise you.

TRUE LOVE...

Is it *found*, or *built*?

Is love-for-a-lifetime something we just fall into?

Or, do we simply find the right person?

True or false: Our heart toward someone over time is most powerfully determined by how he or she treats us.

ACTIONS...

DIRECTED BY *THE GUIDANCE SYSTEM ACQUIRED FROM OUR CULTURE*

MOTIVATED BY *LOVING FEELINGS*

DIRECTED BY *OUR COMMITMENTS*

Which is the path to building love-for-a-lifetime?

GOD'S GOAL FOR OUR MARRIAGE:

To consistently build, vs. building with one hand while we are neglecting or tearing down with the other.

THE SCRIPTURES ON MARRIAGE AND LOVE:

An impossible to-do list, or God's plan to build the best marriage and life?

COVENANT...

...takes these Scriptures and organizes them into a plan that makes sense—not only what we are to do, but *why*, and even *how* we can do all these things. In fact, Covenant—this relationship designed by God—is the very heart of God's plan for each of us, for our Marriage, and for all of humanity.



LESSON ONE

THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

WHY DOES THE NATURE OF A RELATIONSHIP MATTER?

INTRODUCTION

To truly understand God’s Word we must understand the words that are used. But the meaning of some words has changed over time. It is important to understand a word in the way it would be understood by the one who wrote or spoke it. When God uses the terms *Covenant of Marriage*, or *New Covenant*, what do we understand a covenant relationship to be? When asked about Marriage, Jesus looked back to the *original understanding*. Should we not do the same? Christian teaching about the nature of covenants in our day is different from the way this relationship was understood in first-century Israel. And even then, Jesus had to refer back to the understanding originally conveyed by God because His first-century audience also had misconceptions about Marriage. If we want to understand *our* Marriage would it help to do what Jesus said? Should we also consider the original nature, structure and function of this relationship?

The Covenant Series and Study Guides are based on a definition of Covenant which comes from a book referenced by Kay Arthur in her *Covenant* study¹—*The Blood Covenant*², written by H. Clay Trumbull in 1885. Trumbull was a prominent Christian leader, teacher, author, and editor in the last half of the 1800s. He is termed the “Father of the American Sunday School movement” and was a good friend of D.L. Moody. Trumbull examined covenant relationships in many cultures in his day and throughout history, for this relationship is found in many ancient cultures. He identified the common element in three covenants—a blood covenant, the New Covenant, and Marriage. Each is entered by an exchange of identity between the parties. The parties are joined thereafter by a bond of shared identity and nature. Also, the identity—the fundamental nature of each participant—changes when the identity of the other enters them.

God gave us two of these relationships, and likely the third. If these are the same *type of relationship*, anything we learn about one sheds light on the others. God often uses the imagery of Marriage in the Old and New Testaments to describe His relationship with His people. Thus, we can reasonably pool our understanding of all three relationships to better understand all three. We must emphasize that in doing this

we are in no way trying to understand Scripture in a new or different way. Instead, we are trying to find the *original understanding* of this form of covenant relationship. If you have read the Covenant Series, you know the New Covenant is a form of Blood Covenant, and you understand that those in Covenant with Christ—the Body of Christ, or the Church—are also in a Covenant relationship with each other. Thus, lessons about Marriage offer insight about our relationship with other Believers, and vice versa. The ultimate goal of these three relationships is the same—love-in-action toward our Covenant partner, Partner, or partners. God created this *form of relationship* with a specific purpose: to develop our capacity to love. If, that is, we properly understand this relationship and follow God’s plan to develop it.

IS A COVENANT A FORM OF CONTRACT?

Today many people view Marriage as a type of contract. Current Christian teaching echoes this view, often describing Covenant as a *contract written by God*. Trumbull’s examination of these identity-changing Covenants showed that these are *definitely not* contracts. Instead, these are an entirely different form of relationship. Why does this matter? A contract is entered between two separate individuals, only determines *what we are to do and not do*, and is held together only by the continuing agreement of the individuals. No contract can change *who we are at the deepest level*, or *join two together in a bond of shared identity*, as these Covenants do. This may seem an odd thing to discuss, but misunderstanding the nature of this relationship leads to many problems as we try to build our own Marriage, as we will see.

God’s intends that two joined in the Covenant of Marriage build many important things in heart and life *through the relationship*. He knows how our hearts and minds are wired, how relationships grow, how personal growth and transformation occur, and what needs to be built within us so we can meet the challenges of Marriage and life. Again, there is no contract which could accomplish any of these things. God designed Covenant to do all of these things and more. But how? What is His plan?

Scripture has many things to say about Marriage, and regarding love in general. How do we view these Scriptural injunctions? Many see these only as a list of things we are to do to the best of our ability. They believe this list represents the entirety of God’s plan—here is the contract, these are the terms, do these things. But some items on this list appear to run cross-grain to our best interests and perhaps to our very nature. Thus, people often reduce the list to “just be as nice as possible.” Even if we take God’s plan seriously, but still see these things only as a to-do list “because God says so,” we are poised for frustration. Some items are things we cannot simply decide to do—like love consistently. If this relationship is a contract, it is one we are unable to fulfill. This *mis-reading of God’s plan* does not make sense to us, which leads many to look to other sources for guidance to build their most important human relationship.

In sharp contrast, if we understand the Covenant of Marriage everything falls neatly into place. Marriage is not just a tie that binds. It is also a remarkably detailed, powerful, and multifaceted plan, one that is perfectly designed to accomplish all of God’s goals for us—if we understand and implement the plan. Instead of a to-do list, what if we realize that God’s injunctions are a blueprint for growth and transformation? If we see this, we will also see the genius of God on full display. The very *transformation* and *joining* that occurs as we enter this relationship is *how we become able* to do these things. If I become a new and different person, what about the way I live? Will a new and different being live the same old life, or a new and different life?

Our new self, now joined to another, is the beginning point for every other thing we are called on to do, to be, and to build. Our newly conjoined life is the beginning point for the deepest and most intimate love.

Based on the results of this plan in our own Marriage, Mark and Holley want to convey an urgent message to everyone: God has a plan—and the plan works. We want to share this plan with you!

FOUR ELEMENTS CHARACTERIZE THIS FORM OF COVENANT

*That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united
with his wife, and they become **one flesh**.*

GENESIS 2:24

1.) EXCHANGE OF IDENTITY = NEW BEINGS WHO SHARE AN IDENTITY

In Scripture a Marriage relationship is termed “one flesh.” The word translated “one” in Hebrew or Greek does not refer to a singular item, but to two or more things which share a nature or identity. We find this same word in the phrase “God is One” (Galatians 3:20), referring to the Trinity—three distinct beings who are joined by a bond of nature and identity. Each is fully God, all together are God. Each has a distinct personality and role; all share a common identity.

...so that they may be one as We are one.

JOHN 17:11

How does this relate to Marriage? Marriage is characterized by an exchange and merger of identities. It is intended to mirror the Trinity. Marriage also mirrors the relationship between God and the church, which mirrors the Trinity (John 17). Entry into the Covenant of Marriage occurs as the identity of each literally enters the other and remains. Since “my identity” describes the very core of my being, if a new element of identity is added, what happens to *who I am*?

This picture is graphically presented in Scriptures describing the New Covenant, using terms such as “**born again**” (John 3:3), “**new creature**” (2 Corinthians 5:17), “**new creation**” (Galatians 6:15), “**our old self was crucified with Him**” (Romans 6:6), “**buried with Him through baptism into death**” (Romans 6:4), and many others. Since the Covenant of Marriage and the New Covenant are the same form of relationship, we can look to New Covenant imagery to better understand *the process involved* in becoming “one flesh,” and *the result*—the joining and transformation of natures. The “old” person ceases to exist. A person with a new, altered identity and nature comes into being. In Marriage, the “single me” is replaced by the “married me,” but now we understand the true nature of this replacement. Why does this matter?

If we do not understand Covenant, how can we understand the reality described by “one flesh”? The transformation and joining of Covenant are *the foundation for everything* God intends to happen in

Marriage. These realities are *the reason* for everything God tells us to do and be in Marriage; and *how we become able to do and be* these things.

Contemplate this reality for a moment. What does this mean for you?

Who do you see when you look across the breakfast table? Do you see the other person, or do you see a person who is now an extension of yourself, whose identity you share?

How might this matter?

All I have is yours, and all you have is mine.

JOHN 17:10

All the believers were together and had everything in common.

ACTS 2:44

2.) SHARING OF LIFE IN COVENANT

If two share an identity and are joined at the deepest level of their beings, it makes sense that everything in their outer lives is also shared. The historic practices of Covenant reflect this. Each enters a family relationship with the family of the other. What does it mean to become part of the family of your beloved?

There is sharing of assets and debts, friends and enemies. All obligations become joint obligations. There is no more “mine” and “yours,” only “ours.” This sharing even includes our bodies: *The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have*

authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. (I Corinthians 7:4) In sum, external lives are completely joined and shared. Is this reality reflected in our culture's view of Marriage? Why or why not?

This sharing applies to more than material things. God intends there to be **mutual sharing in every aspect of life**—there is to be another who sees, knows, understands, helps, builds, shares, appreciates, and cares. This new, conjoined life is to be shared equally and built by collaboration. **Everything about the two is equally important.** What is built is to reflect the real needs, the inherent potentials, and the life-purpose of each. Covenant is the ultimate all-in relationship—each offering all of their attention and strength to the relationship, their total devotion and complete commitment. All the elements of Covenant work together to teach us how to collaborate, and how to build something that most benefits both. But this pooling of resources and abilities is about more than the couple. It is intended to build a family that enriches lives on all sides.

Is the equality inherent in Covenant a feature in your Marriage? Why or why not?

...each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself...

EPHESIANS 5:33

In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you...

MATTHEW 7:12

This is my command: Love each other.

JOHN 15:17

3.) LOVE IN ACTION IN COVENANT

In Covenant, we are called first of all to love our husband or wife **as we love ourselves**. The historic practices of covenant include many specific things we are to do. A very similar list is found scattered through Scripture in verses about either Marriage or love in general. A third, similar list is found by compiling the historic vows from Marriage ceremonies. All three sources paint essentially the same picture of how we are to be toward our spouse. The historic practices of Covenant are a beautiful picture of love in action, as are the Scriptures and these vows. But in *the nature of a Covenant relationship* **we learn something else** that is very important: we find not only **what** we are to do, but **why** we are to do these things, and even **how** we can

become able to do these things. We are all familiar with the difference between what we should do, or would ideally do, and what we actually do. God has constructed this relationship to help us actually do and be the things that build the deepest love, the best working relationship, and the most satisfying and gratifying experience of Marriage.

Even if we love another as we love ourselves, might there still be a problem? **How perfectly do we love ourselves?**

If we love imperfectly, why?

In Covenant we are presented with a **definition of love beyond our own—God’s definition**. Covenant has many elements that **motivate us** to love-in-action, starting with *the love we feel for each other*. But there is more. We will love imperfectly for many reasons. Covenant *motivates us to choose better things*—God’s version of love, things that build the relationship—and to do these with increasing consistency. What is our reward for following this plan? Our Marriage gets better and better.

Historically, the primary responsibility of Covenant is to ***faithfully love the other in every way***—in thought, word, and deed. It is our highest honor to do so, (and our deepest dishonor to fall short). This reality is reflected in the Covenant of Marriage in vows spoken in our wedding, but these are an abbreviated version of all the things we are to do and be. We vow the fullness of these when we “take each other in holy matrimony.” **We commit ourselves to the entirety of God’s plan for marriage**. Throughout history vows have been considered the most binding commitment we can make. In our culture there is a...sometimes loose relationship...between commitments made and things that are done. In Covenant, *the nature of the relationship* and the *vows we make* strongly motivate us to actually follow through, to choose to consistently love our husband or wife in thought, word, and deed to the best of our ability.

What does “love in action” look like?

In brief, we are to honor our spouse above all others, we are to protect, provide for, and defend the other as we would ourselves. We are to cherish, be loyal, be devoted—in every way to love the other as ourselves. There are many more aspects of such love. We will cover these in detail in Lesson Four. **God makes it easier to love another as we love ourselves by making the other literally an extension of ourselves**. God is the One who transforms and joins us in Marriage, reflected by the words of Jesus, “...**what God has joined together, let no one separate.**” (Mark 10:9) It is up to us to recognize these realities, and build our new to-

gether-life on these things. These are the foundation upon which **consistent love** is built—the foundation for **love-for-a-lifetime**.

Covenant is more than a to-do list, more than a list of terms in a contract we are supposed to fulfill. There is no list that encompasses **what it means to love**, no list of things to do *that can create love*. The overall sense of Covenant is to care about another in the deepest way possible, to use **any resource we have** and **any potential we can develop** in service of our beloved. Covenant is **the ultimate blank check**—whatever you need, whatever it takes, whatever I have, am, or can become. *Isn't this exactly what our hearts want to do when we are head-over-heels in love? We will do anything for our beloved.*

What have you been motivated to do by love?

But how can we do **loving things consistently**? For many of us, behavior is driven by our feelings. Feelings change day to day for many reasons. We have good days and bad days. What about how we treat each other? God wants to shift our **guidance system**, the part of us that determines our behavior, from our feelings to a much more stable and constant foundation. This must happen in order to make consistent love a way of life in a Marriage. We all enter Marriage with a guidance system which produces inconsistent behaviors—building one day, tearing down the next. **God's Covenant plan can re-build and re-direct this system so our behaviors become uniformly constructive**. But we must understand this process, and choose to go through it.

What causes love to **grow deeper over time**? Is it not **how the two treat each other**? Is it not *growing respect* for each other, and *deeper trust* in each other—all of which are **a direct result of our choices and our behaviors**? God's plan produces things which lead to deepening love. Is this how love for a lifetime is actually created?

Have you seen behavior impact hearts, then the course of a relationship?

4.) WHERE DO MY BELOVED AND OUR COVENANT FIT INTO MY LIFE?

If the other person occupies the very core of our being, if we freely inhabit each other's lives, if our highest honor is to fulfill every role inherent in Covenant, where does our beloved and our Marriage fit in to our life? There is only one thing more important than a relationship between a husband and wife, and that is a Covenant relationship with God. **Everything else is less important**. Is this easy or hard to live out in your life? Why?

We can view Marriage as getting what we want on our terms, or we can understand that **we have received a gift from God that comes with an instruction manual.** The secret to building the best Marriage lies in *the transformation that has already taken place when we enter Covenant.* But we must understand some other things if we are to make the most of this reality. We must understand that God *knows more about building hearts and relationships than we do.* Therefore, we are wise to listen to Him. He loves us more than we love ourselves or our beloved. **We do well to attend His School of Love.** We want to be loved for who we are. We want to be authentic. How do we *authentically live* out the new being we have become?

What do you think an authentic life would be for you?

We have now become a different creature, a new self now joined to another. So...who are we? **Do we rely on our perception** to figure out who we are? We will perceive some changes within ourselves, but only some. Initially, much that God tells us about ourselves and His plan *must simply be accepted as true.* Later these will be proven true to our satisfaction—by our satisfaction, in fact. We face a task made much more difficult by a culture that teaches us to trust our own perceptions above all. Also, our culture has *inserted much into the guidance system* we use to build our lives and relationships. Some of these ideas cause problems. Yet, this is the guidance system we bring into Marriage. **God's plan is to substitute a solid foundation of truth and a working plan for this cultural mis-direction.** Changing our guidance system is one of the keys to building the best Marriage and the best life.

This first lesson presents an overview of **the historic realities of Covenant.** Going forward we will see how the realities of *this God-created relationship* combine with *elements He created within us, and with truth He offers to us.* This plan ultimately relies on one thing: **our choices.** We must choose this plan as a whole, then in every detail day after day. To make the best choices we must first see *all the big pieces of God's plan* (Lessons 1-4). Then see *how these pieces fit together, and build* according to God's plan (Lessons 5-9). Then, we will look at **the relationship produced** by this plan (Lessons 10-12).

So far, what changes would you like to see in your Marriage?



LESSON TWO

NEW IDENTITY, NEW BOND IN COVENANT and PERCEPTION = REALITY or REVELATION = REALITY?

WHY IS MARRIAGE SUCH A BIG DEAL?

People want many things Marriage offers—deep friendship, someone always there for you, someone with whom to play, work, have sex, even have children—yet there is an oddly widespread and powerful reluctance to marry. This reluctance even has a name: “commitment issues.” Most people understand Marriage is a very big deal. But why? Have we begun filling in this blank? But why the fear? People perceive Marriage to be an infringement on *their life*. In fact, Marriage does more than infringe on our old life, doesn't it? For the best of reasons—to give us a new, better one.

Let us think for a few moments about the fundamental reality of Marriage. Who is the person who sits across the breakfast table? Who are you? And why does this matter?

HOW WE SEE OURSELVES MATTERS

Early in Marriage I discovered a curious reality. I loved deeply and wanted to show it. But something pulled on the other end of the rope in a kind of tug-of-war. My desire to do loving things had a **stopping-point**, beyond which I found it hard to go. What was this stopping point? If something I felt *called to do for the sake of love compromised what I viewed as my self-interest* beyond a certain point, which priority won? Often my view of self-interest won. Then something dawned on me: in Covenant my *self* changed. If so, **what happened to my self-interest?** Did this also change? Of course. My self now includes my wife. Her interests became my interests, and are now equally important with my own. Things that were important in my single life may be completely out of place in my new life. Thus, what I *felt was important* for my life might actually have no place in my new life. So, I decided to opt for love and ignore this old-life-based resistance. What happened next was fascinating. I became a better friend to my wife as I did things I had

been reluctant to do. To my surprise, though, I found that these new things felt like what I wanted to do all along. I just hadn't realized it. These loving things *felt like an authentic expression of me—of my new self*. Based on this new understanding and my new choices, my guidance system—that inner voice that tells us something is right for us or wrong for us—**began to shift**.

How does your view of self-interest impact your decisions about your spouse?

Has our discussion raised questions about your own sense of self-interest?

BEING ONE FLESH MATTERS

We **change how we live** if we correctly understand our new identity. We will shift the ways we think, believe, act, and even how we feel. What about the way we are now *joined to another*? What practical changes flow from this understanding? Let us consider one of these: **accepting each other**.

Is accepting each other ever an issue in Marriage? If you are married, do you ever not feel accepted by your spouse; or do you sometimes have trouble accepting him or her? Do you feel you are somehow *never enough*? There is a close connection between **feeling accepted and feeling loved**, and between **accepting and loving**. We cannot have the fullness of one without the other.

Do you ever not feel accepted in Marriage, or have trouble accepting your spouse?

Do you notice the correlation between feeling accepted and feeling *loved*? _____
What makes you feel accepted and loved; and what makes you feel neither?

We live in a world that says, “You will be **accepted if**, or **loved if...**” We often bring this viewpoint into Marriage. Our behavior does matter, and does impact our relationship—obviously. Some behaviors need to change for best results—on both sides. Things that can range from mildly annoying to criminal. Different misguided behaviors require different approaches. To be clear, some behaviors should not be accepted, period. But some people **use lack of acceptance to motivate others** to do better, or to give them more...and more. Others were told they **cannot be loved because...**, and spend a lifetime *trying to prove they deserve to exist*. But the view of themselves they embraced means **they will never feel they are enough**. There are many issues surrounding acceptance in Marriage. Does it matter how we handle these questions?

Which of these patterns do you see in your Marriage?

...the kindness of God leads you to repentance.

ROMANS 2:4

We love because He first loved us.

JOHN 4:19

In Covenant we are to help each other in every way. One important way is to **help each other become the best version of ourselves**. But how can we do this? Do we most powerfully motivate someone to change by withholding love and acceptance? God shows us a paradox—He accepts us and loves us as we are, but does not want us to remain as we are. We learn to live and love best *in the context of a loving relationship—because* we are loved and accepted. A loving relationship offers **the strongest motivation to become one's best**. Many issues surround this statement, which we will discuss in later lessons. But consider the converse: would the best motivation to learn to love be to experience a *lack of love*? **How does Covenant address acceptance?** The other person *literally inhabits the core of our being*. **We accepted** our beloved *within us*, and were **accepted within them**. So, is our acceptance already a settled question? We were accepted permanently, in the deepest possible way as we wed. **The most beneficial approach to our spouse reflects this Covenant reality**. If someone is literally *part of you*, how could you reject them? Like you would amputate your arm? God created a relationship that can form the ground from which our greatest personal growth can occur, if we follow His plan. Isn't this what we all need?

Does the way your spouse *treats you*, or the way you *feel about yourself*, impact whether or not you are *actually accepted* in your Marriage? How does this matter?

How we deal with counter-productive behaviors is another question, as well as how the couple can develop the best approach to dealing with each other's need to grow and transform. The foundation necessary for all of this is full acceptance of each other—reflecting the spiritual reality of the relationship—and a corresponding commitment to love each other fully, completely, and consistently. We first accept each other as we are, then urge each other forward. **If we grow together, we will grow together.**

PERCEPTION = REALITY OR REVELATION = REALITY?

...for we live by faith, not by sight.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:7

A problem we all encounter with the realities of Covenant is our perception—and its limits. **We perceive these changes only partially, if at all.** One of the most significant issues we confront—in this Study, in our Marriages, and in life overall—is our inability to clearly perceive things that are *spiritual in nature*. The joining of Covenant is something *God has joined together*—a reality just as sure as gravity and the chair you are sitting in—but beyond our ability to directly see, measure, or conclusively validate. Our culture aggressively dismisses anything of a spiritual nature. But **it is only by understanding the spiritual realities superimposed on our natural world that we can make any sense of our world**, for these unseen realities deeply affect the realities we can see—like relationships. What does it mean to “walk by faith”?

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

JOHN 8:32

Sanctify them by the truth. Your word is truth.

JOHN 17:17

The mismatch between our perceptions and reality is one of the most common sources of problems in every marriage. **Moving our perceptions into line with the truth**—about the Covenant of Marriage and about who we now are—is **one of the most powerful tools we have to improve our marriages**. But this raises another question: “What source of information can offer **correct information about these spiritual realities**?” Hold that thought, for it is a very important one. For the moment, I am simply going to lay out the realities about Marriage drawn from Scripture, read in light of the historic understanding of Covenant. **If God’s truth sets us free, from what are we set free?**

SOME REALITIES OF MARRIAGE

As we consider these realities, pause after each and **share your thoughts** with your husband or wife (if possible) **about what these realities mean for your relationship**.

1. The **identities of a man and woman are exchanged** via **the physical exchange that occurs during sexual intercourse**. This act creates a Covenant of Marriage between the two, regardless of the intent or understanding of the participants...*Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh."* (I Corinthians 6:16). Historically, we publicly celebrate this Covenant, then have intercourse for the first time on the wedding night to create it.

2. Once this joining occurs, **the two now become a reflection of the Trinity**, the author of this relationship. The two remain distinct in some senses—with personalities, needs, and capabilities unique to each—but are joined by a bond of shared nature and identity. This may be reflected by changing the wife's last name—a deeply symbolic act, for one's name has always been associated with one's identity—as well as in legal matters, such as joint ownership of property. If the Trinity are all God, what are two united in Marriage? They are a *family*. **How do you see your family? Why did God made you two to reflect Himself?**

3. This exchange of identity creates a **new identity for each**. New identity = new creature, new nature, new life. This language is used explicitly to describe what happens when entering another closely-related covenant, the New Covenant. Much of Scripture is written assuming we understand certain words and concepts. Things widely understood at the time these Scriptures were written did not need exhaustive explanation. But 2,000 years later, some of these do require explanation, like Covenant relationships per se. How does the reality of Covenant impact your view of your Marriage? **What opportunities do you think your new life offers you?**

4. The identity/being/nature/life that defined us prior to Marriage no longer exists once we are married. **The single me is replaced by the married me**. This change brought about by Marriage is far more than a legal distinction involving a license. It is a spiritual reality which impacts every aspect of our being, every aspect of our life, and every aspect of the relationship we now have with the love of our life. What impact do you think God intends this change of identity to have? We spoke of things

brought forward from the old life that do not fit in our new life. If you noted some of these things, **what should replace these things in your new life?**

5. Think about how you started out in life, when your identity was first present on earth. You were a single cell with a unique combination of nucleotides in your DNA—three billion or so unique pieces of chemical data in an order never before seen. At this point you contained every potential you will ever have. But how much of this potential was expressed as a visible creature, impacting other people and the world? So it is with the new creature we have become. We obviously bear many similarities to the person we have been—athletic potential, brainpower, artistic talent, and other things. But we are new and different in other ways. You started as a cell that grew into a body with unique DNA, but you are also a distinct conscious being who will exist for eternity even when separated from this DNA-directed physical body that has grown around you. It is at this deeper level, **the spiritual level, that our identity is altered and joined by Covenant.** Over time, you will see evidence of things shared with your husband or wife. Some are amusing, others important. And you will see new elements which reflect the “new you.” **Which of these new things within you are part of God’s plan for your best future?**

6. Another truth I want to begin discussing is **the difference between our true self—our identity—and the optional add-ons** that accumulate within on our journey through life. There is a part of us that needs to be unconditionally accepted—and is to be once we are joined in Covenant. Then, there are parts of us we *also think of as self, as part of our identity*, that are NOT part of our actual identity—such as habits, preferences, and character qualities—aspects of which can damage relationships. These in turn reflect ideas—that form beliefs, values, goals, and priorities—drawn from our culture or other sources, ideas we embraced. And, as we will see, ideas we can un-embrace. For now, think about **who you are.** Who have you become in the Covenant of Marriage? Also, what might it mean to be confused about who you are? We all spend our lives trying to figure out who we are, and may get only a partial answer over a lifetime. So, **how do we know we have found the right answer?** Our goal is to live an *authentic life*. We want our lives to accurately reflect who we are in the core of our being. All of us want the unique being we are to impact the world, and leave behind something significant. We want our lives to have meaning and purpose. **All of these can only flow from our true identity, and only occur as we express our true nature.** Authentic lives create satisfaction and gratification that occur in no other way. For posers, or those somehow forced to live out of accord

with their nature, such satisfaction is impossible. A deep and intimate relationship requires that we first know the truth of our deepest being, then share this true self with another. But there are voices in our schools, our media, our culture, our families, and even in our churches that misinform us about who we are. This mis-information may or may not be intentional and malicious—as some of our cultural influences certainly are—**but misinformation about our self always robs us of a piece of the abundant life God intends for us. Where are you in your journey of self-discovery?**

7. Our **optional add-ons** are *decisions we have made* about values, priorities, preferences, and goals. These form our view of many things, such as: the best life, the things most desired, the things to be avoided, and the path to our best life. These also **largely form our character**, the overall way we approach life—the things others expect of us and the things we expect of ourselves. These also **form our guidance system**. Can you distinguish between your authentic self—your true identity—and optional add-ons? We ultimately **want to identify all the add-ons that cause problems in our Marriage**. See how many add-ons you can identify and list at this moment.
