

365 NIGHTS: A Memoir of Intimacy

A 13-Week Bible Study Guide

for Christian Couples

Dear Friends:

Five years ago, I was participating in a wonderful ten-week Bible study with a group of bright, passionate and committed women. The study was focused on the Fruit of the Spirit, which, according to Galatians 5: 22-23, includes Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faith, Gentleness and Self-Control.

I've participated in many Bible studies since, but the study of the Fruit of the Spirit was my first in a long time and it was pivotal, touching me at the right time with the right messages (isn't it amazing how God works?). I was in a time of change. We had just moved into a new house and I was hoping to leave behind the remnants of depression. I was seeking to mature spiritually. I was looking for a calmness and centeredness in my life that I had mislaid years ago.

As women, I think many of us look for ways to balance the chaos of daily life and the need for a focused and deliberate spiritual life. I had been trading quiet time talking with God for what I thought was productive (and necessary!) time: folding laundry, taking calls, loading the dishwasher and picking up after my husband and two kids. It wasn't working, of course.

Please know that, like many of you, I knew I had married a wonderful man, and I felt we had a great marriage, life and family. Still, I sensed something tugging at me, a feeling of loss. Over eight years of marriage, in the hustle of our workaday lives, my intimacy with my husband had waned—there was always something, whether it was work, school, or church, more urgent than our intimacy. We still loved each other deeply, but we, like so many other couples, were tired at the end of the day.

Bolstered by my study of Galatians, the revelation of giving my husband The Gift came crashing down me. The idea of committing to 365 days of marital intimacy was harebrained, adventurous and extreme, but it was also empowering. I was humbled by the notion that there was, indeed, one thing that I, and *only I*, could give to Brad: wholehearted, concentrated, loving and *daily* intimacy with his wife.

The Gift was divinely inspired, of course. Likewise, we certainly couldn't have followed through on that year of The Gift without divine support (and a sense of humor, I might add). The Gift reframed our marriage and our relationship. And having completed The Gift, we both feel that our union has been blessed a thousandfold. We are better parents, better children, better friends, better neighbors, and better Christians.

And we did it all through the intimacy that our very faith teaches us to value and cherish. If the earthly love of one's husband or wife can also help lead us to a greater love of God, there's no better Gift than that!

If you think you may be ready to embark on The Gift, read on. **David Woody**, the Minister of Faith Development at Providence Baptist Church in Charleston, SC, developed what you're about to read and discuss and I couldn't be happier and more pleased. David and I grew up together in Asheville, NC attending church and school together (starting in kindergarten and ending in 12th grade) – making David, indeed, one of my oldest friends. David earned a B.A. in History from Furman University and M.Div. from

the Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond. In addition to his responsibilities at Providence, David writes, lectures and consults with the Center for Christian Education, Smyth & Helwys Publishers and Unidiversity, an inter-denominational summer youth camp.

I think he did a lovely job of understanding the intent of 365 Nights and translating that into a study for couples, creating opportunities for connection, conversation and priority. If you like it, I hope you'll share – with your Sunday School Class, your Bible Study Group, your minister and your friends.

I hope you enjoy and find value in the journey!

Peace,

Charla Muller
Author, 365 Nights

Introduction

Marriage is about two people devoting themselves to each other and promising to love each other for the rest of their lives. Marriage creates a new family from two separate lives. The family might be only the husband and wife or it might include a house full of children. Marriage promises to have its fair share of both celebrations and disappointments. Marriage is a daily exercise in love and acceptance and forgiveness. Hopefully both partners are fully committed to the relationship and give as much time, energy, and effort to their partner as they can. Working together, they love each other unconditionally; support each other during the difficult times; celebrate their spouses success; and work together to build the best marriage possible. In order to do all of this, both spouses must work at being intimate with each other.

When we think about intimacy in marriage, we think about the bedroom. We talk about “being intimate” with our spouse. We share “intimate moments.” We engage in “intimate activities.” Of course, the word intimate is our code word for making love. Intimacy, though, is much more than locking the bedroom door and spending one-on-one time with each other. When Charla began giving “the gift” to her husband Brad, she knew that her marriage was in good shape. She and Brad spent time together. They had their “intimate” moments. They talked about work and life and kids and family. They celebrated successes and comforted each other’s disappointments. Her marriage was good. What she realized through the year of “the gift” is that the sexual intimacy enhanced every level of intimacy with her husband.

Marital intimacy is physical. It is also emotional and spiritual and even routine. Marital intimacy is wrapped in the three blankets of love. We have *philos*—a brotherly, platonic love; *eros*—the erotic, sexual love; and *agape*’—unconditional love. If we can wrap each other with all three blankets, we achieve a deep level of intimacy.

We have *philos* love for most of the people we know. We have great relationships with people around us and we tell them we love them—like our friends and neighbors. That is the brotherly (or sisterly) love we share for each. We also have that kind of love for our spouse. Our *philos* love for our spouse enhances what we see in that person. We see all the gifts and talents they have, and it helps us build a relational foundation that will stand the test of time. When we love in that way, we see our spouse for who they really are. We love them in the midst of the routine moments of life.

Eros, the sexual or erotic love we share, definitely brings us closer together. It is the type of love we most often think about when we think about intimacy. We desire to be together, can’t wait to see each other, and want to share every part of who we are with our spouse. Physically, we become one. We desire what the other brings to us and shares with us. We express our love to each other through *eros*.

The final type of love is *agape*’—unconditional love. *Agape*’ includes *philos*, but is so much more. *Eros* is a part of *agape*’, but only the tip of the iceberg. *Agape*’ is the kind of love shared between two people that says, “I love you, all of you, with no strings attached, and there is nothing you can do to deserve my love and nothing you can do that will make me love you any less. I love you wholly, totally, and completely.” *Agape*’ love is the ultimate in creating intimacy.

The best example we have of *agape*’ love is the relationship that God wants with us. God loves us unconditionally and has since the beginning of creation. God loves us just because. We don’t have to jump through any hoops or travel to any special lands. God doesn’t require us to say certain words or to wear special clothes. All God wants from us is love. God wants us to be in a relationship with Him. God knows that a relationship is two parties sharing mutual love. If only one person has love, the relationship won’t work. God loves us and wants our love in return. God loves us for who we are. We have the opportunity to

love God for who God is. If we return God's love, we enter into an intimate relationship with the Divine. We spend time with God through prayer, we learn about God through scripture and reading, we express our love to God through worship and service. In return, God knows us and loves us and is in relationship with us and wants the absolute best for us. God wants that kind of intimate relationship with us.

Hopefully, we strive for that same type of intimate relationship in marriage. Many couples live a *philos* love and have a great roommate-type relationship. They get along great and cohabit well together, but that's where the love ends. Other couples skip right over the *philos* and go straight to the *eros*. Their sex-life is hot and steamy, but they don't have any other foundation in their relationship. When we can move toward the *agape*' love that God has for us, we combine *philos* and *eros* and begin to love our spouse at a deeper level than we ever had before.

This study is a guide to help couples relate to each other like God attempts to relate to us. After reading each chapter of 365 Nights, take time with your spouse discussing the questions in the guide. If you are committing to each other in the bedroom and also committing to each other with the discussion questions, you will move further along the path toward the *agape*' love that brings an exciting level of intimacy.

Peace!

Rev. David Woody.

Week One

Chapter: July

Love is a great gift from God! We all have the capacity to love. Sometimes we love someone else with a brotherly or sisterly kind of love. Sometimes we love someone unconditionally, with no strings attached. Sometimes we love someone in an erotic or sexual sense. When those three loves are combined together, we love someone else in an intimate way that is beyond compare.

That complete kind of love is a precious gift. It comes in the right size and the right color and never needs to be returned for something else. That intimate love binds two people together in strong ways. It seals the emotional attachment two people have for each other. Ideally, that kind of love, a gift from God for two people, leads to a lifetime of deep intimacy.

An intimate relationship with our spouse is the hope and dream of marriage. Intimacy is more than just the physical act of making love. Intimacy is knowing your spouse on the deepest level possible. Part of intimacy does happen in the bedroom. Intimacy is also found in conversations, sharing dreams and fears, sharing experiences, creating memories, and living life together. When you decided to marry your spouse, you promised to create an intimate life with that person. The minister probably asked you if you would have this person to be your spouse and if you would love him faithfully for as long as you both shall live. You responded, “I will”—proclaiming before God and the gathered assembly your intentions to have an intimate life with your spouse.

As we think about marital intimacy and the Bible, we immediately think of the Song of Solomon. That book is a collection of love poems attributed to Solomon. It is the best biblical example we have of two lovers proclaiming their total love for each other.

I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me. Come, my lover, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages. Let us go early to the vineyards to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened, and if the pomegranates are in bloom-- there I will give you my love. The mandrakes send out their fragrance, and at our door is every delicacy, both new and old, that I have stored up for you, my lover.
Song of Solomon 7:10-13 NIV

The love you have for your spouse prompted you to make a commitment to your spouse when you got married. You committed to love your spouse through the good times and the bad times; through sickness and health; through richer or poorer; and any other vow you came up with. You promised to love your spouse for who that person was then, would be later, and would ultimately become. You promised that the external factors of health, wealth, and security would not keep you from loving your spouse. That is a strong commitment to make.

Your decision to participate in this study accompanying 365 Nights means that you remain committed to loving your spouse. Something about intimacy and “the gift” intrigues you and makes you want more for your own marriage. You are open to giving your spouse a “gift.” It might not be the gift Charla gave Brad for an entire year, but it is a gift of your choosing for each other. Just as Charla’s marriage was not broken, you also realize that there is something more you can achieve in your marriage. The love you share with your spouse is limitless and with God’s help, you can reach a deep level of intimacy.

As you begin this study, include your spouse. Block off time without children around. Turn off the television and the cell phone. Give each other the gift of focused time for each other. Talk about what you read, share what you are feeling, and listen to each other’s stories. The closeness you share during this study

will hopefully bring you closer together as a couple and give you an insight into the intimacy God wants for your life and your marriage.

Share these questions with your spouse:

- What is love?
- What is intimacy?
- How would you describe the intimacy within your marriage?
- What does giving a gift mean to you?
- Are some gifts more significant than others? Why?
- What is the most significant gift you can give? Are you willing to give it?

Week 2

Chapter: August

In the beginning, God created. The book of Genesis tells us about God's creative process. God created light and separated the light from the darkness; and "God saw that the light was good." God created the sky, the water, and the dry ground; and "God saw that it was good." God created seed-bearing plants and trees; and "God saw that it was good." God created the stars and the sun in the sky; and "God saw that it was good." God created creatures of the sea and birds of the air; and "God saw that it was good." God made the wild animals that move along the ground; and "God saw that it was good."

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'"

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day."

Genesis 1:26-28, 31 NIV

Did you read what God said after each piece of creation? "God saw that it was good." Did you catch the difference after man and woman were created? "God saw all that he had made, and it was **very** good." (emphasis added) When God created the heavens and the earth and the sky and the seas and the animals and fish and birds were created, God only saw creation as "good." God creating us tipped the scales into the "very good" category. We completed God's creation. We are very good!

We are also created in God's image, which is a funny concept. We find so many faults with our own image that we can't imagine God looking like us. We complain about being too short, too plump, too thin, having a big nose, having eyes too close together, etc. We try to imagine God looking like us and we laugh. We picture God as being 5'4" and 125 lbs. with pigeon-toed feet, grey hair, and glasses. The truth is we don't know what God looks like. The good news is that God cares so much about us that we are the only part of creation that are created in God's image. If God does care that much about us, then why do we find so many faults with how we look?

We should celebrate who we are and who God is creating us to be. Sure, there are parts of our bodies we would like to change, but God has created us one of us uniquely and wonderfully. For us to deny that basic fact of creation is to deny our special part in creation.

That celebration gets challenged, though, when we take our God-created selves out into the world. It's a scary world out there. Everyone looks at everyone else and finds faults and compares and tries hard to push others down. We get hit with those messages everywhere: the grocery store, the gym, the movies, at the pool, in the neighborhood, from our magazines, from our friends, and even from our spouses. We need to have toned legs; a sculpted body; beautiful skin; colorful hair; defined muscles; etc. Without those, we are not desirable. If we're not desirable, we are nothing.

After a while those messages can defeat even the strongest self-confidence. Those negative messages slowly chip away at what we thought was a very good God-given creation until we're left with nothing more than rubble. We don't like who we are and we're convinced that no one likes what they see in us either.

God is aware of that mentality and warns us against being too caught up in the culture of the world.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

1 John 2:15-17 NIV

We cannot escape the world, unless we are willing to give up everything we own and run off to a cave somewhere far removed from everything. Truthfully, are we really going to do that? We need to recognize that God is aware that the world can be sinful and tempting. When we listen to the worldly messages of “Be Thin!” “Be Strong!” “Be Young and Fit Forever!” we forget who God has created us to be. That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t exercise and take care of our bodies. It does mean that we should love who we are, even if we will never look like the magazine model or the Hollywood star.

Your spouse married you for who you are. Your spouse married you because of who God created. You are created in the image of God and because of that you have been called “very good.” Feel good about who you are and who God is creating you to be. Celebrate your part in God’s creation!

Share these questions with your spouse:

- Scripture says that we are made in the image of God. What does that mean to you?
- What quality do you most like about yourself?
- What do you most like about your physical appearance?
- What quality do you most like about your spouse?
- What do you most like about your spouse’s physical appearance?

Week 3

Chapter: September

Your wedding day. Everyone is dressed up. The focus is on you. Everyone wants to know what they can do for you or joke with you about leaving the single world. During the ceremony, you stand with your love in the center of friends and family. All eyes are on you as you proclaim your undying love for one another. You say your vows, you exchange rings, you kiss, and you are married!

Afterwards, you smile and thank people for coming and all you can think about is getting away from all the hoopla and spend some quality time with your spouse. You are now a legally married couple in the eyes of God and of the state. You and your spouse go off for a day or a week or two for a honeymoon to continue the celebration of life being all about you.

Then, you come home and you realize the world did not stop in your absence. The mortgage needs to be paid. Work waits on you and your desk is piled with unopened mail. Friends understand that you are married now, but they still want some of your time. Not only do you still have your family to relate to, you are now responsible for relating to your spouse's family. Your father-in-law expects you to join them at the theatre on Thursday night. Your family might have grown over the years, so instead of it just being you and your spouse, you have little feet running around the house. Your daughter is playing soccer this weekend. Your best friend from college is coming to stay with you for the weekend. You look around and your life is full and great and busy, but you realize that you miss your spouse.

Your spouse hasn't gone anywhere. Life has gotten so busy and has demanded so much time and energy that the focus you and your spouse enjoyed in those early days of marriage is a distant memory. You love your life, but you've misplaced your marital priorities. Perhaps they're underneath that pile of laundry?

The Israelites experienced a similar substitution of priorities.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' "I have seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

Exodus 32:1-10 NIV

The Israelites loved God but they were tired of waiting for Moses to come down off the mountain. Instead of waiting for him, Aaron convinced the Israelites to give him their gold so he could make an idol they could

worship. Misplaced priorities! They lost the original connection they had with God. God had to send Moses off the mountain to set them straight so that they would reconnect with God again.

Often, we create idols in our marriage that take the place of our original intimacy. We get so busy being busy that we lose the focus we had on our wedding day. We know our spouse still loves us and will still be there, and we take that gift of love for granted. So, we build idols for work and volunteering and driving children across town and social clubs and friends and networking and other great things. Soon, we look around and realize that we don't have any intimacy with our spouse. We're too busy to even sit down and share a meal together. It's hard to have intimacy when we're too busy to spend time with each other.

Those things that take up our time are important. But, we didn't marry those things. We need to regain control of our lives and put the focus back on our spouses. We married that person that makes our head spin and our stomach get that butterfly feeling. We married the person that we want to spend the rest of our life with. When all those other things are gone or have moved on, we will still have our spouse. We can't wait to try to reconnect and discover intimacy then. We need to reconnect and work on our intimacy now. God didn't wait for the Israelites to get a clue that what they were doing was wrong. He sent Moses to them at the first sign of trouble. God wanted to remain close to his people. We want to remain close to our spouse.

Share these questions with your spouse:

- How connected do you feel to your spouse?
- What parts of life do you share that bring you closer to your spouse?
- What parts of life keep you from connecting with your spouse?
- When was the last time you said to your spouse, "I love you" in way that came from your heart?
- How often are you physically intimate with each other?
- What meaning does "making love" have for you and the way you connect with your spouse?

Week 4

Chapter: October

What do you want to be when you grow up? We've all asked and answered that question many times. As children, we gave a lot of typical answers: doctor, nurse, cowboy, athlete, movie star, astronaut, etc. As we grew a little older and better understood the question, our answers became clearer and maybe a little more realistic.

Two responses we rarely gave were: older and married. For all of us, we have gotten older as we have grown up. Getting older is an inevitable part of living. We can't avoid it. We can try to look younger or act younger or even lie about our age, but everyday we live is another day we add to ones we've lived. We all get older.

Getting married is not something a lot of children think about when asked the question of vocation. Granted, some children do think about getting married and taking care of babies and cooking and playing house, but, "married" is usually answered after a litany of other occupations. Even as teenagers or young adults we thought about what we would do for a living before we thought about getting married.

Have you ever thought about marriage as something you are "called" to do? Some people are called to be doctors, some lawyers, some teachers, some preachers, etc. You have been called to be married. God has given you the gifts and the tools to share your life with someone else and create a new family. Your family might be you and your spouse or your family could be the two of you and a houseful of children. It is not a coincidence that you are married. That is what God had in mind for you.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.
Ephesians 4:1-7 NIV

Paul wrote these words from prison and originally intended them for the church at Ephesus. He wrote these words so that they might remain unified in the faith that originally brought them together—the faith they share in Jesus. If we take Paul's words and apply them to marriage, we get a similar message. A "marriage paraphrase" of Ephesians 4:1-7 might sound like this.

Your marriage and the relationship you have with your spouse will hopefully be worthy of the goodness of God. As you go through each day and fulfill the call to be married: be humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Work hard to stay on the same page as God leads you and gives you peace. You and your spouse are together by no accident, God had a special purpose for getting the two of you together. You have one spouse, one family, one totally intimate human relationship, one love of your life all provided by the one God who made all of it happen.

If you are going to fulfill your calling into marriage, you have to work at being married. You need to be intentional about how you treat our spouse. You need to take seriously God's call to live a life worthy of the calling you've received.

You need to be humble and gentle with your spouse. Those two words are sometimes hard to digest. They take the focus off of us and put it on someone else, in this case, our spouse. We like it when things are about

us. A totally intimate marriage is about your humility before your spouse and the gentleness that you express.

Patience is more than a virtue, it's a necessity. When you can be patient with your spouse, everything will flow much smoother. Tempers won't flare as often. You will understand more about what makes your spouse tick. Little things won't get you aggravated. Your life will be filled with smiles and happiness instead of resentment and anger.

A common belief and faith in God helps make it possible. When you and your spouse are unified in working together to seek God and God's love for your lives, humility, gentleness, and patience will come.

Share these questions with your spouse:

- What did you want to grow up to be when you were a child? Did your plan come true?
- Does your vocation define who you are? Why?
- What role does God play in your vocation?
- Have you ever considered your marriage to be a calling from God? Share with your spouse.
- What are some examples of you being humble and gentle and patient with your spouse?
- Does your marriage strengthen your relationship with God? How?

Week Five

Chapter: November

Words have a lot of power. The right word at the right time can make us smile, bring us to tears, and cause us to wonder and ponder. Words are the primary way we communicate with each other. As much fun as the game of charades is, saying “I love you” is so much easier than trying to act it out.

When we were children, someone special in our life taught us the importance of five words. Five simple words unlocked a whole new world for us: Please, Thank You, and You’re Welcome.

Those words were called the magic words. We were told to use the words as often as possible and we were often corrected when we didn’t. Whenever we wanted something, we were told to use the word “please.” When someone gave us something or did something nice for us, we were told to say “thank you.” When someone recognized something nice we did or when we gave a gift and they offered thanks, we knew the polite response was “you’re welcome.”

Those five simple words carried us well throughout our childhood. Somewhere along the way, though, we stopped using those words. We stop short of saying “please” and instead end our request after we state what we want—“Can you help me with my kids on Thursday night?” There’s no please. It’s implied, but we don’t say it. “You’re welcome” has morphed into multiple different responses that reply to “thank you,” but don’t have the same emphasis. Instead of saying “you’re welcome,” we use the less-personal, “not a problem;” “my pleasure;” or “don’t mention it.”

Dropping “please” and morphing “you’re welcome” does something to the verbal connection that destroys intimacy—it makes the exchange less personal. Instead of the conversation or communication being about two people, the conversation is about the transaction—getting the business done. When we drop “please,” we don’t acknowledge the person that we address. When we use other words in place of “you’re welcome,” we remove them (the YOU in you’re welcome) from the equation.

Fortunately, “thank you” has survived. We still use “thank you” or one of its siblings—thanks, thanks a lot. No other word or expression is a good substitute for “thank you.” We say, “thank you at the fast food place, at the grocery store, with our friends and co-workers, and hopefully with our spouse.

Giving thanks for the things that happen to us and the gifts given to us is important. In the Bible, the idea of thanksgiving is so important that entire Psalms were written just for expressing thanks.

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.
Psalms 100 NIV

God does wondrous things and the best way to respond to God’s gifts is by saying, “thank you.” The Psalmist understood the importance of the relationship God has with humanity. Acknowledging God’s gifts of love and grace meant continuing the conversation and relationship on a personal level. The best way to respond to God is to say, “thank you.” The Psalmist didn’t send a simple note or voice-mail message, instead the Psalmist poured out his heart and emotions so that all who read the words would see and hear how thankful he was for God’s role in his life.

Your spouse does some wonderful things. Think about it for a minute. If you were to list all the great things your spouse does, what would go on the list? Your spouse buys groceries, mows the lawn, cooks dinner, pays the bills on time, attends company dinners, hosts parties, plays with the kids, supports the family financially, supports the family emotionally, walks the dog, loves your mom, etc. And then, there are the gifts your spouse specifically saves for you—a regular date night without children or friends, a night out with just the girls (or guys), a “just because I love you” card, remembering your anniversary, a quick kiss before work, a long kiss in the evening, etc. While none of those simple gifts is as big as something the Psalmist would praise God for, those simple gifts make a difference in your life. Be thankful. Say, Thank You!

Share these questions with your spouse:

- Get a piece of paper and make a list of all the things you are thankful for in your spouse. Read your list out loud to your spouse and then give your list to your spouse.
- Write a Psalm of Thanksgiving to your spouse.
- Do you say, “thank you” to your spouse with words or with deeds? How often do you say thank you?
- What are you willing to do to be a better partner for your spouse? Give specific examples.

Week Six

Chapter: December

Family. We all have one and we all brought one with us to our marriage. Our family might be mom and dad and a couple of siblings or our family might be some incredibly close friends we've picked up along the way. Regardless, those individuals support us, affirm us, and help shape who we are. We spent a lot of time with them and they are important people in our lives.

One time of the year when we yearn to be with our family is around the holidays. Something inside of us wants to get together with our family. As we got together over the years, we developed certain special holiday family traditions. When you were a small child, you began doing things a certain way around the holidays. When December came around each year, you knew the weekend before Christmas your family would pack up the car and travel over the river and through the woods to your mother's parent's house. You would exchange gifts, eat a large meal together, and enjoy being family. On Christmas Eve, after church, everyone would gather around the Christmas tree and open all the presents. On Christmas morning, more presents were under the tree because Santa Claus came. The next day, your family would load the car again, but this time travel over the river and through the woods to your father's parents' house. You would exchange gifts, eat a large meal together, and enjoy being family.

Then you got married.

All of a sudden, your holiday traditions got challenged by your spouse's holiday traditions. You opened gifts on Christmas Eve. He opened them on Christmas morning. You wanted to go see your grandmother. She expected you to go visit her grandfather. One set of parents expected to see their grandchildren at the same time the other grandparents expected to see their grandchildren. You put your foot down and claim your traditions as holy and sacred. Your spouse puts her foot down and claims the same thing.

It's enough to want to call the whole thing off!—not the marriage, just the holidays that must endure the marriage.

A marriage is the joining of a man and woman in holy matrimony. But it is also more than that. Yes, you and your spouse stood before God and witnesses to proclaim your love for each other, but you also brought with you the family they grew up with, your own special family traditions, and your expectations on how this special person will fit into your life. Rarely does one or both spouse enter into a marriage with a blank slate.

In the beginning, God knew that man and woman needed each other. God also understood the power and influence that family would have on a marriage relationship.

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Genesis 2:18-24 NIV

The passage from Genesis states that “a man will leave his father and be united to his wife.” It works the other way, too—God also wants a woman to leave her mother and be united to her husband. At that point, when both man and woman have left their families, they will become one flesh.

A new family is created out of two existing families. This meshing of two families brings with it incredible opportunities for intimacy and understanding. You might think that some of your spouse’s family traditions are ridiculous and you can’t imagine participating in them. Believe it or not, your spouse might think the same of yours! Sharing with each other what is important to you is a beautiful expression of intimacy. Listen to each other with an open, non-judgmental ear. You might learn a lot about your spouse and your spouse’s family. You might not want to eat sweet potatoes with colored marshmallows with your turkey, but you will know why it is important for your spouse.

As you and your spouse spend more time together, inevitably you will begin to create your own traditions. Share with each other what you would like to start together, separate from your family of origin. You might make the bold decision to spend Christmas Eve at your house, not your parent’s house. It might seem weird and a little like your hurting your parent’s feelings, but you’re not. You are being your own family with your own ideas of what it means to be family.

Share these questions with your spouse:

- Even if your spouse already knows the story, tell your spouse the story of your family and your growing up years. How has that experience shaped you?
- What do you like most about the family you grew up with?
- What have you learned the most from the family you grew up with?
- What do you like most about the family you are creating?

Week Seven

Chapter: January

One of the greatest gifts God gave us is our individual ability to choose. Adam and Eve started the “free will” movement while they were walking around the Garden of Eden. God gave them a beautiful place to live with all the amenities they could ever want. God sat them down and gave them the ground rules. Adam and Eve could choose to follow God’s instructions or they could choose a different path. As we know, they chose a slightly different path than God intended.

We continue to have the opportunity to make our own decisions. We choose what shoes to wear, what food to eat, how to act, how to react, when to sleep, what hope for, and how to live. We are not programmed to think or act a certain way. That freedom is a good thing. That freedom contributes to our individuality and uniqueness. But, with the freedom to choose, comes the responsibility of consequences.

Adam and Eve ignored God’s instruction and ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge. God punished them and banished them from the Garden of Eden. They had to account for their decision. We are accountable for our decisions, too. Every decision we make brings with it some type of consequence.

Life and love and marriage would be so much easier if we had an instruction manual that told us what decisions to make in each situation we face. We could read about the situation and review the consequences of each decision before we made up our mind. But, there is no complete instruction manual with all the answers in it. We have to do the best we can with what we have to build a life of love and intimacy with our spouse.

One biblical couple that experienced the trials and tribulations of doing the right thing in their marriage and with their relationship with God was Abraham and Sarah. Their story is found in Genesis 12-23. Abraham and Sarah were faithful to God. God knew Abraham and Sarah to be good and faithful servants and told Abraham that he would be blessed and that God would make him a great nation. Abraham was a chosen one. He was to be the father of God’s chosen people. At that time in the biblical story, no one else was as close to God as Abraham.

Following God and doing the work of God should have been easy for Abraham. But, Abraham didn’t always do what God intended. Abraham decided to do his own thing when faced with a difficult situation. Instead of trusting God and having faith that God would provide, Abraham tried to take matters into his own hands.

As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you." When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels. But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

Genesis 12:11-20 NIV

Abraham thought he knew what was best in the situation. Abraham lied about Sarah. He took God totally out of the equation. He pulled this same trick later in Genesis 20. How often do we do that in our lives—we think we know best and ignore God's influence on our lives when we make decisions?

God already told Abraham: *"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."* Genesis 12:2 Yet, Abraham seemed to forget that fact when he faced Pharaoh and Abimelech. He didn't trust God to see him through the situation.

God wants us to trust Him with our life, dreams, and decisions. We should have the courage to trust God with all of who we are and all of what we do. Proverbs 3:5-6 states the case: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.* A life lived with God is more abundant than a life lived without God. We still have the ability to make our own decisions, dream our own dreams, and live out our own future. Choosing to include God in our decision-making process and in our lives enhances the journey we are on.

Including God in your marriage enhances what you already have. A God-filled marriage will help the good days become better, the conflict a little less conflicting, and the bond you share with your spouse a lot stronger. By adding God into your marriage, you are joined with your spouse in an intimate way that is pure and holy and divine and that stands for something bigger than the two of you. Combined, you claim God's role and purpose in your lives.

Follow God and trust God with your marriage, your dreams, and your decisions. Abraham tried to do it, but ended up messing things up on the way. God still loved him and made a great nation out of him. We can learn from Abraham's faults. God loves you and wants to make greatness out of your marriage.

Share these questions with your spouse:

- How often do you and your spouse pray together?
- How often do you and your spouse worship together?
- Where is God in your life?
- Where is God in your marriage?
- How can you and your spouse include God more in your marriage? What steps are you willing to take?

Week Eight

Chapter: February

Sports Highlights. Greatest Hits. Photo Albums. All are wonderful collections of the “best” moments. At the end of a busy sports day, you can tune into ESPN’s SportsCenter and in the span of one hour, watch all the important plays of every major game. You don’t have to sit for hours on the sofa, clicking from channel to channel, enduring a boring game in hopes of seeing something spectacular. If it’s spectacular, ESPN will show it at 11:00 pm.

Music is the same way. Musicians learned that a great song can be sold more than one time. Gathering all their great hits together into one album, artists re-sell their songs as a Greatest Hits collection. If we are patient, we can wait for that one album and not have to buy 5 albums for the 10 songs that we really like. We don’t have to wade through the so-so songs to have the songs we really like.

Photo albums are perhaps the most personal example of the “best” moments. We take pictures of vacations, holidays, our children, etc. and either wait for the prints to be developed or download the images on our computer. Immediately, we start editing. We get rid of the images we don’t want or don’t like and keep the good ones. We organize them the way we want and we have our photo album.

Listen! My lover! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice. My lover spoke and said to me, "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me." My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely. Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom. My lover is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills.

Song of Solomon 2:8-17 NIV

The passage from the Song of Solomon reminds us of young, exciting love—a time of love from ago. The tone of this passage is light and airy. “Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me...” If we were reminiscing about our lover, those poetic words would flow from our mouths as we wax eloquent with love and adoration about our lover.

There are no bad memories in that passage. But as we all know, life is full of both the good and the bad. When we look back and re-live different moments in our life, we like to think about the good times. Marriage is no different.

We all have stories about the times we fought and didn’t speak to each other. We have our moments when we thought we were making a good decision, but our spouse didn’t. We wanted to go one place, our spouse wanted to go in the opposite direction. We have our “not so great” married moments.

We also have our “greatest hits”—those times when the stars align and you find yourself so caught up in the moment that you lost track of time. Those moments when you and your spouse finish each other’s sentences. Those trips when everything goes smoothly. Those romantic nights out when everything goes as planned.

Those are the moments that help foster intimacy and sustain marriage. Remembering the “greatest hits” is a gift from God that helps us move forward together as a couple. God wants us to live a joy-filled life. Dwelling on the bad things does not foster a lot of joy. Reminiscing the good moments makes all the difference.

Carve out some time and space to spend with your spouse to reminisce your marriage’s “Greatest Hits.” Talk about these questions as you remember the good stuff.

Share these questions with your spouse:

- Spend some time making a list of all the great moments you recall in your marriage. Read the list aloud to your spouse and give your spouse your list.
- What made those moments special?
- What meaning did those moments have for you?
- What do those memories say about you? About your spouse?
- How often do you work to create new special moments for your spouse? Are those moments recognized and appreciated?

Week Nine: Chapter: March

Think back to the beginning of your relationship with your spouse. It might have gone something like this: You met and started dating. You felt butterflies in your stomach and couldn't wait to see her again. You wanted to call and talk constantly, but you didn't want to frighten him off. The more time you spent with each other, the more you fell in deep like with each other. Finally, you admitted to yourself and to others that you were in love.

Giddy with excitement and convinced this person was "the one," you decided to get married. Friends rejoiced with your decision and then immediately began giving you advice about what to expect during marriage. "You know, eventually the spark will run out."

"No way," you told each other. "We'll feel this way forever. Our love will never get stale or grow cold." If life were a song, that could be true. The Beatles told us that all we needed was love. Captain and Tennille reminded us that love will keep us together. We want our love for each other to be a love for the ages—to be in love always.

A part of most wedding ceremonies is the exchanging of vows. Sometimes, couples spend an inordinate amount of time writing their own vows to each other. Other times, couples use the traditional vows:

I, Barbara, take you, Derek, to be my wedded husband. To have and to hold from this day forward. For better and for worse. For richer and for poorer. In sickness and in health. To love and to cherish. 'til death do us part.

In other words, "Derek, I promise to love you, always!"

Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth, wrote some strong words about love and its enduring quality.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

1 Corinthians 13:1-7 NIV

Love always perseveres. Wow! That's asking a lot of love. But, love is up to the challenge. Those butterflies you felt when you first started dating your spouse might have disappeared over the years. The number of phone calls or text messages might have dropped off since you first starting being together. With careers and friends and children and busy schedules, your time with each other has probably dwindled since the beginning. Do you still have love in your marriage?

Love and intimacy, if they are going to endure, need time and intentionality. Every relationship will experience some mountaintop highs and some dark-valley lows. The key is to keep focused on each other through it all. When two partners work together and recognize that the other person needs what you have to offer, love will endure. Intimacy will continue.

Love happens when you sit down at the end of the day and talk to each other. Love happens when you hold each other during crises. Love happens when you stand up and support your spouse. Love happens when you take the time to be with your spouse, even if it means watching football or shopping at the mall. Love means recognizing that the person you fell in love with has grown and changed as much as you have, and that you can't imagine spending the rest of your life with anyone else.

Back in the beginning of your relationship with your spouse, you fell in love. The love you felt was exciting and real and fun and maybe even a little scary. Now that you are married and have some time and experience, the love you experience might not feel the same. That's okay. The constant from the beginning to right now is the love you have for your spouse. Love was in the beginning. Love is in the now. Love is for always.

Share these questions with your spouse:

- How would you rate the feeling of love in your marriage right now?
- What are some ways you can focus on your spouse and share the love you have in a way he or she will know how you feel?
- What is one example in your marriage when you had to work hard for love to endure in your relationship? What was the situation? What did you do? How did you feel when it was over?
- When times get tough, do you reach out for help or do you try to go at things alone? How does your spouse react to you?
- What are some difficult issues you see coming in the future with your marriage? How will you endure?

Week Ten

Chapter: April

Do you remember when love was easy? It happened quickly and didn't last very long. For most of us, the easy love happened in elementary or middle school. It started with someone from the opposite sex. One day, you couldn't stand that person, and the next day, all you could think about was that person. He or she consumed every waking thought and most of your dreams. You couldn't imagine life without that person. To make sure your love was real and the relationship would work out, you did the natural thing—you passed a note.

You passed the note that most every child has passed at least once in their life. The message on the note is short and simple. It gets right to the point and does not let anything get in the way of what you need to know. The note goes something like this: "I like you. Do you like me? Check a box." Under those words are three boxes: a "yes" box, a "no" box, and a "maybe" box.

Love was simple then. All we wanted to know was if someone like, or even loved, us in return. The love in the note was unconditional and pure. We weren't concerned with anything but how someone felt about us. Those were great days to be in love.

Now, if we wrote a similar note, the question would be the same, but the answers would be more complicated. "I like you. Do you like me? Check a box." The boxes might include answers like: I do like you, but you're going to have to change your friends if we're going to date; I would like you if you were smarter; No, you're not cute enough for me; No, my friends say you're a creep; Maybe, let's see how much money you're worth in 10 years; etc. Instead of it being about love between two people, it's about what one person can get out of the relationship.

Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth, knew simple love was best.

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

1 Corinthians 7:3-5 NIV

Paul tells us the wife's body belongs to her and to her husband. The husband's body belongs to him and to his wife. There are no conditions about it. There are no maybes about it. The wife is her own person and is to give herself totally to her husband. The husband is his own person and is to give himself totally to his wife.

How often do we forget that message in our marriages? How often do we play the "if, then" game with our spouse. We've all played it whether we want to admit it or not. We have the internal conversation that goes something like this: "If he will go shopping with me, then I'll go to the football game with him." "If she will host my boss and his wife for dinner, then I'll take her out to dinner tomorrow night." "If my spouse does this, then I'll do that."

That game works great when the "If" part is fulfilled. When the "If" happens, then we come through with what we say will happen. But, when the "If" doesn't happen, things get messy. "If my spouse would have

come to the soccer game, I would have taken the family out to dinner.” “If my spouse would help set up for the garden club, I would have gone to his company party.”

When we get something we want, we are eager to give in return. It’s a game we’ve played since birth, but it’s a dangerous game to play in a marriage relationship. When we play the “If, then” game with our intimacy, we deny our spouse the gift of our unconditional love.

“If he compliments my new hair cut and doesn’t complain about the cost, I’ll give him a night in bed he won’t soon forget.” “If she will take my side in this argument, I will treat her like a queen when we get home.” “If my spouse would only do this, I will do whatever they want me to.” We put conditions on our physical intimacy, which then hurts not only the physical intimacy, but all the other ways we are intimate, too.

Giving ourselves totally and wholly to our spouse is what we need to do. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. We love who we are and we give ourselves to the one that loves us, totally and wholly.

Share these questions with your spouse:

- When do you catch yourself playing the “If, then” game? How does that affect your relationship with your spouse?
- Do you consider you spouse a teammate? Do you treat him or her as a teammate?
- Would you consider you and your spouse to be on the same team, working from the same playbook in all aspects of your marriage? Why?
- Do you play any games with your marriage? Which ones? Who wins? Who loses?
- Describe to your spouse your mindset when you make love with each other. Do you play a game so that you get what you want?

Week Eleven

Chapter: May

When we think of marriage and love and intimacy, we often think of the dozen roses—a beautiful gift with deep symbolic meaning. The deep red color, soft petals and pleasing aroma appeal to all the senses. Women love receiving them. Men love the reaction to giving the gift.

Flowers are a curious gift. They are absolutely beautiful and can fill a room with incredible fragrances. Flowers can say, “I love you,” “I’m sorry,” “I was thinking about you,” and many other messages. A dozen red roses can bring out individual passion matched by the fiery red of the rose petals. A fresh vase of assorted blooms liven any setting. A small boutonniere or corsage completes a formal ensemble. A tightly wrapped bouquet thrown at a wedding elicits a mad scramble for the prize. Flowers are beautiful, but when they are given as a gift, they will die. Soon. Even after putting them in water.

Isn't it odd that one of the most romantic and versatile gifts used in a relationship will not survive? A dozen red roses means “I love you.” But, those roses will die very soon. The petals will fall off or lose their color as they cling to the stem. The soft, silky petals turn hard and crunchy when the moisture dries up. The once beautiful flower shrivels into a dried up reminder of better days. The rose bush, however, is a better symbol of an intimate marriage relationship. The rose bush is full of life. It will produce blooms year after year. The rose bush, like love, is built for the long haul.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
1 Corinthians 13:8-13 NIV

Love is the greatest and by the grace of God, love never fails! God is the ultimate example of love. God loved us before we were born. God loves us more today than yesterday. God knows everything we've done and still loves us. God loves us so much that he sent his only son to live among us so that we could have a tangible relationship with the divine. God loves us so much that he sent Jesus as our living sacrifice so that we will have an abundant and everlasting life. God has a lot of love for us.

We have the choice to love like God—wholly and unconditionally. The love we shared in the beginning remains strong and fresh today. It's like planting the seed and cultivating the plant. Love is a long-term process. We begin with the idea of something great and appreciate what we have and can't imagine life without it. We plant that seed in good soil and give it water and nutrients and light. We might even give it great music to encourage growth. Soon, a tiny sprout pops through the soil and we know this plant has life.

We continue to water and feed and take care of the plant and watch it grow. During the growth process, before full maturation, we can get fooled into thinking our work is done. We are tempted to leave the plant alone and let it grow by itself. If we're not careful, our neglect will lead to disease and insect infestation which can quickly destroy what we've worked so hard at creating.

Taking the time to work through disease and bugs and re-focusing on watering and feeding and caring will eventually produce and strong, vibrant, blooming roses. The blooms off this bush will survive any calamity

and are a visible witness to a labor of love. We don't give up on the plant. We continue working and feeding and caring for it so that it will thrive.

The love we share with our spouse needs work and feeling and caring, too. Love is the greatest. Love is for always. Love never fails.

Share these questions with your spouse:

- If you compared your marriage to a vase of flowers, would it be fresh-cut and smelling pretty; nice to look at, but lost the aroma; drooping buds with petals on the table; dried up and crunchy flowers; rose bush with strong blooms? Why do you say that?
- How do you care and nurture and feed the love in your marriage and for your spouse?
- How often do you talk on a deep level to your spouse? Does that need to change? How?
- How often do you spend quality adult time with your spouse? Does that need to change? How?
- How often do your actions show your love for your spouse? Does that need to change? How?

Week Twelve

Chapter: June

Marriages, like life, are a journey. Some moments on the marital path are filled with joy and excitement and it feels like you are the only two people on the face of the earth. You can't imagine being anywhere else with anyone else. Other moments of marriage go on and on and you feel nothing other than the space that person keeps taking away from you. You wonder how you got yourself into this mess and want to know when the ride is over so you can get off and find the exit door. Both feelings are normal and natural and part of the marital journey.

Your marriage has probably had its moments of highs and lows and middle of the roads. When you began this study, you wanted something more for your marriage. You wanted a deeper level of intimacy with your spouse. That intimacy might have been physical, emotional, or spiritual. You wanted intimacy because you knew something was missing in your marriage. Your marriage was not broken. You just wanted more. Good for you!

You have given your spouse, yourself, and your marriage a gift by taking the time to think about, talk about, and share with your spouse. The conversations you have had might not have happened without your commitment to the process. You have taken intentional steps into creating or re-creating intimacy in your marriage.

Hopefully, you have also taken time to include God in your talking and sharing. While there might not be specific scriptures about how a man and a woman are to achieve a deep level of marital intimacy, we can gain a lot of insight by examining the stories of God's interaction in our lives and how God wants to relate to us. You have taken time to think about God's image and your creation; thanksgiving; focus and idols; free will and including God in your life; and love. All of those relate to God and to you. Hopefully you and your spouse have been able to make those connections.

As you come to the end of this study, treat it like a graduation of sorts. This is the end of the study, but more importantly, it is the beginning of a new chapter in your marriage. You have learned a lot on the journey and now it is time to take what you've learned and apply it to your life and in your marriage. God is the ultimate giver of second chances. Take this opportunity to take a second chance with your marriage.

As you and your spouse make plans to move forward from this moment, plan your re-wedding. You don't have to actually hire a caterer, photographer, and buy a wedding dress. Instead, sit down with your spouse and plan your wedding. When would you like to have your re-wedding? Who would you invite? What would the ceremony look like? Who would participate? Most importantly, what vows will you exchange?

Knowing what you know about your spouse and the shared experience of marriage, you are prepared to write vows that are more applicable to your married life. Sit down and actually write out vows you'd like to share with your spouse. What are you willing to promise your spouse? How are you willing to love your spouse? What vows are you prepared to declare before God and the gathered assembly of family and friends?

After you write your vows, share them with your spouse. Commit to each other to never take each other for granted. Promise to love each other more and more everyday.

Share with your spouse these questions:

- What have you learned about your spouse through this process that you didn't know at the beginning?

- Do you feel more connected with your spouse now than in the beginning? Why?
- What can you do, individually, to continue total intimacy with your spouse?
- What can you do, together, to continue total intimacy with each other?
- What steps are you willing to make together? Write out some steps or an action plan on what you can do together to remain closely connected and intimate.

Pray together and ask God for His blessing on your marriage. Thank God for the partner God provided for your life. Thank God for the joy your spouse brings to your life. Thank God for the time you've already had as a married couple and pray for the future you'll spend together. Pray for your physical intimacy, your emotional intimacy, and your spiritual intimacy.

Week Thirteen

July: A Note from Charla Muller

Are you ready or interested in participating in The Gift? Only you and your spouse know the answer. But I encourage you to prayerfully consider it, especially if you have children, have been married for awhile, and you miss the powerful emotional bond that only the blessed gift of marital intimacy creates.

Before embarking on The Gift, I knew I was missing out on many other gifts that God promises us, because I hadn't slowed down to embrace them and pray for them. I cannot express how deeply the study of the nine fruits of the Spirit affected me. It led to a year of incredible change, prayer, deliberation, and searching, and it culminated in a joyful and life-affirming change in my marriage.

With God's guidance and your prayers, it's possible to transform an already solid marriage into a truly marvelous one, to reclaim that feeling of joy that only your husband once inspired in you, and you in him. We all know why intimacy is important to a marriage, don't we? If you haven't reviewed scripture that supports the role of intimacy in marriage, I encourage you to review some of these passages while considering The Gift for your marriage.

Making The Gift Work: Five Keys to Success

Talk, Talk, Talk – and Pray! While deep intimacy might seem to make words unnecessary, that's not true at all when it comes to The Gift. It's critical that you and your spouse talk through the pros and the cons (and there some cons, of course) to the Gift and whether you both are prepared to make the commitment. Now is a time to discuss and embrace your thoughts (and those of your spouse) about intimacy and marriage. Please be sure to prayerfully consider whether the timing is right, if your relationship is in a good place, and if you are both ready to commit equally to the goal? Truly, The Gift is probably something that you will only do once in your life (I think it was for me!), so it's okay to decide that now is not the best time and to figure out when you might better begin.

Outline Your Gift Agreement. Have an open and honest conversation about what you hope the Gift will bring to your relationship. Discuss what could deter or derail your efforts, both individually and as a couple. Discuss logistics and details, including under what circumstances you might miss a day of The Gift during your year. Not many people make it to the gym every day; in a similar manner, it can be difficult to schedule daily intimacy without a serious plan of action. It might seem like a mood killer, but in fact having a game plan will simply enhance your success.

Relax, Laugh and Forgive. The Gift is intended as an earnest attempt to connect with your spouse in a meaningful and intimate way. Go easy on yourself and your spouse. The Gift is not a race nor a prize nor a contest and there are certainly not meant to be winners and losers. The Gift is meant to enhance and to elevate your relationship in a special way – so enjoy it, take pleasure in connecting with your spouse, relax into your time together and remember to laugh when it doesn't always go as planned (and, believe me, it won't).

Reach for Some Fruit. Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faith, Gentleness and Self-Control. I needed every one of these in spades over the course of the year of The Gift (and, of course, every day since then). I suspect others might, too. For me, The Gift required a cushiony generosity with Brad, and with my family. So on those crazy days when I could barely get through my "to do" list (which, yes,

included intimacy), I reached for some Fruit. On those days when I was tempted to get snarky with my husband, I reached for some Fruit. Forbearance is crucial! After all, it's hard to create meaningful intimacy if you're peeved with your spouse.

Honor Each Other: It's not brain science—true, honest, mutual respect in a marriage is vital. The Gift relies heavily on honoring each other as a spouse and as an individual. The Gift is *never* about what one spouse “owes” another. The Gift is *never* about one spouse “getting something” no matter the circumstances. The Gift is best realized in an environment of shared respect and common goals. That means both spouses making changes to accommodate the gift. It probably means less television or more collaboration on housework (or both), so each spouse can come to The Gift feeling respected and honored. Unless both partners are willing to make a full commitment, The Gift probably won't work for you.

Are You Ready for The Gift? A Quiz

The Gift can bear fruit for couples of all ages, it seems to strike the most resounding chord among those of us in our 30s and 40s who have been married more than five years and have children. How many kids you have and their ages should be taken seriously into consideration: The Gift and a baby under two or three years of age are not really compatible. And while most of us assume our spouse would leap at the idea, that may not always be so. If one spouse is a great deal of stress at work, for example, they may not feel ready to enter into the commitment with a full heart.

To see if you're ready as a couple, try the quiz below, which is rated on a sliding scale, and see what happens.

1. Do you work outside the home? (Volunteer work counts!)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I'm a fulltime homemaker.					I work part-time.				I work fulltime outside the home.

2. How often are you and your spouse intimate on average?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all.			Once or twice a week.			Three or four times a week.			Like we're newlyweds.

3. Do you feel like you *want* to give The Gift?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Yes! I would love to.			Sometimes.			Not particularly.			Not in the slightest.

4. Do you feel like you *should* give The Gift?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Yes, my spouse would be thrilled.				I think it would be good for my marriage, but who has the time or energy?					No, intimacy every single day is just too much.

5. What kind of impact would The Gift have on your marriage?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
It would bring renewal, harmony and joy.					It might be a struggle but I think the results would be worth it.			It would not have much of an effect.	

Interpreting Your Score:

41-50: You're probably thinking "No." Even if The Gift might be good for you at another time in your life, right now is probably not best.

21-40: You're on the fence. You're leaning toward doing The Gift but the commitment level is a little intimidating. Pray about it and also listen to your heart, as well as what your husband thinks.

5-20: You're ready to give The Gift! Now is probably a good time in your life and your mind and heart are in tune with the subject. If you and your husband are also in total agreement, work out the details of your own approach, sign The Gift Covenant together, and begin the celebration of your commitment to one another.

The Gift Covenant

We, _____ couple's first names here _____, after prayerful contemplation and discussion, mutually agree to give one another The Gift of daily intimacy for _____ as a sign of our deep, abiding love for one another as well as of our commitment to the natural and just pleasures of our holy Christian union as created by God.

Our Gift will begin on _____ insert date here _____

and will continue until _____ insert date here _____.

The Specifics of Our Gift

(note terms, details, schedules as needed—including days that The Gift might be skipped, such as work, travel, illness, or any other mutually agreed reason):

We agree to enter into The Gift with open hearts and minds, out of love, respect and honor for one another, and in an effort to rekindle and burnish the unique and loving intimacy between husband and wife that is the true blessing of marriage.

Signed this day, _____ insert date here _____,
as a vow between ourselves and God and no other:

Wife

Husband