



Preparing to Succeed

A Pre-Marriage Preparation Plan

Mike and Diane Constantine

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Introduction

Malaysia: a wonderful, progressive country. A country filled with happy smiles. A country that takes pride in its people and their accomplishments.

But Malaysia is other things, too. Look beneath the prosperity, below the smiles, and you will find many broken hearts– bitter, angry, and dejected. Of course there are various reasons, but one of the most serious is the breakdown of marriages and homes.

Some counselors and pastors believe that premarital counseling is wasted, since the couple is caught up in the romance, excitement, and tension of the upcoming marriage. All the more reason to do it, and to do it at the right time.

Better preparation does lead to a better outcome. Here is just one comment, from a pastor that confirms this truth:

“Does it (premarital counseling) make any difference in the marriage? I can only answer in terms of the track record. I began requiring premarital counseling twenty years ago (no counseling; no wedding ceremony). Since that time, I have probably performed between 40 and 50 ceremonies and I know of only three couples who have divorced.” – Norman Bales

Premarital counseling is like pre-med for doctors, or basic training for soldiers. In every sphere of life, we know that training and preparation counts. Preparation is good stewardship. It is like counting the cost before you start the building. More than that, it’s evaluating who you are, what is important to you, and what you want your marriage to be.

Preparing to Succeed doesn’t address every possible challenge you might encounter on your journey together. Rather, it helps you to begin well so you will have a *loving, lasting marriage*. The topics you will discuss are the ones that cause the most conflicts in most marriages.

Preparing to Succeed is designed to be used with a pastor, counselor, or a mentor couple. A couple could do some of the series on their own, but the experience is greatly enhanced when you have someone to lead you through it.

As you begin *Preparing to Succeed*, promise yourselves that you will remain open, honest, and loving as you look at your lives and your future marriage together.

Some couples who go through this plan will decide to delay their marriage, or perhaps cancel it altogether. If you are one of those couples, be thankful that you discovered it before you married, not after. And know that this isn’t the end. There is a better person or a better time.

To the rest, have a great future together, knowing that you are preparing to succeed!

Marriage By the Book

What The Bible Says About Marriage

The Bible is a history of God at work , bringing his redemptive purposes to fulfillment. It is also a handbook for living life as God intended. In this section of *Preparing to Succeed* we will see what the Bible tells us about marriage.

1. Marriage is Designed by God - The principle of Origin - Genesis 2:24 -

The creation of Adam and Eve became the divine model for a marriage relationship.

2. Designed for Covenant Intimacy - The principle of Connection - Genesis 2:25

Adam and Eve experienced complete intimacy without shame

3. Designed so that both man and woman become better people because of their marriage - The principle of Development- I Thessalonians 5:11-

God wants us to encourage and help one another. Because of our marriages we should become better people.

4. Designed to be a witness to the world - The principle of Influence- Matthew 5:14

How can a marriage be a light to the world?

5. Designed to last a lifetime - The principle of Permanence- Matthew 19:6

Permanence is neither modeled, nor encouraged in present day Malaysia.

6. Designed for child-bearing - The principle of Reproduction - Genesis 1:22, 1:28; Psalm 127:1

From the biblical perspective, bearing children is the normal expectation for a married couple. In cases where they cannot, for legitimate medical reasons, adoption is a loving choice. Know, too, that many couples have seen God bless them with children, even when having children seemed physically impossible.

7. Designed to pass on a legacy - The principle of Future Impact - Psalm 44:1-8

Children may or may not inherit wealth from their parents, but the most important thing parents can leave their children is a spiritual legacy for successful living.

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Think About It

1. Look at each of the seven purposes of marriage again. How does your thinking about marriage compare with those discussed here?
2. Look again at the statement under point five: "Permanence is neither modeled, not encouraged in present day Malaysia." Do you agree or disagree with this statement. Why?
3. Look into the future. What would you like to be able to say that you, as a couple, left as a legacy to your children?

Are You Ready for Marriage?

"There is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven."
— Eccles. 3:1 (NLT)

You don't have to be perfect to get married, and you can't marry a perfect person. But both of you can know you are ready to make this life-long commitment. This section will help you to know.

1. Why do you think you are ready for marriage?

2. Why do you think your friend is ready for marriage?

3. Why do you want to get married? (Please see *Marriage For All the Wrong Reasons*)

4. Have you ever been in another relationship that was moving towards marriage? If so, why was it broken off? What have you learned about yourself and about the nature of commitment from the break up?

5. What do you believe are the reasons you should marry this person?

6. How important is your relationship with God to you? Do you share a common faith in Christ, and do you both love God?
 - How could someone else know that your relationship with God is important to you?

 - Can you see that your friend's relationship with God is important to him or her? What do you see that helps you know that?

7. Are you moving in the same direction and in general agreement about your goals? Take some time this week to discuss your goals.
"Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction?" – Amos 3:3 (NLT)

8. Do your parents approve of the relationship?

- If they disapprove, what are the reasons?
- Is there anything you could do to help gain their approval and blessing?

"Honor your father and mother. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the Lord your God will give you." – Exodus 20:12 (NLT)

9. Are there any other important people in your lives who think you should not get married to this person, or that this isn't the right time? What are their reasons?

10. Do you find this person you plan to marry attractive– physically, emotionally, and intellectually?

11. Do you respect the person you are planning to marry? Here is what respect looks like:

Reliable: A person you can always trust

Ethical: A person who knows what is good and does it, no matter what the personal cost.

Sensible: A person who has gained wisdom through being teachable.

Patient: A person who can wait, and is not moved by every impulse.

Economical: A person who knows how to manage money.

Caring: A person who is not self-centered

Tested: A person who has faced challenges and become better because of them.

We are all growing, and no one is perfect. But you should see most of these qualities developing in a person you plan to entrust your life to. If you see any serious problems, please discuss it with your counselor.

Your pre-marriage counselor will discuss this section with you at your next meeting.

Marriage For All The Wrong Reasons

from www.internetcampus.org

Some unwise, or at least questionable, reasons to marry:

- for security
- for money
- for sex
- they may never get another chance
- pregnancy
- their parents want them to
- pressure from a partner
- they want to move away from home, or escape an undesirable situation
- they are depressed and assume marriage will be a solution
- to acquire citizenship
- to have children
- they are lonely
- they need a mother or father for existing children
- "If I don't get him or her someone else will"
- it is the expected thing to do
- marriage is "romantic"
- for social status
- their present life is dull
- they need someone to structure their lives
- they feel guilty about their single lifestyle
- for peer, social, or professional approval
- they are infatuated with someone
- they have been dating someone regularly for a long time and it would be hard to back out of things now

— Are any of these reasons, *your* reasons?—

Evaluating Your Desire to Marry

from *Building A Successful Marriage, by Landis and Landis*

1. Are you comfortable and at ease with him or her? Are you able to be yourself without strain?
2. Since you have been in this relationship, are you more inclined to live up to your best conception of your self and your abilities?
3. Are you conscious of a continuing stable bond between the two of you, even when you have no romantic feelings?
4. Does this person matter greatly to you regardless of emotion or lack of emotion at the moment?
5. Would you love him or her just as much even if he were sick instead of well, or even if his handsomeness or her beauty should be marred or disfigured?
6. Is he or she physically attractive to you so that you have no inclination to be apologetic or defensive about his or her physical characteristics?
7. Are you proud to be seen together?
8. How well do you agree on the things worth sacrificing for in life?
9. Do you find it easy to talk over points of disagreement and reach an understanding? (Have you known each other long enough and well enough so that you have discovered your inevitable points of disagreement?)
10. Do your disagreements result in a better understanding of each other? (For disagreements to result in tabling and blocking off the issue, or in the same one always giving in, is a danger signal.)
11. Do you have confidence in his or her judgment? Do you respect his or her general mental ability?
12. Do you confide in this person freely, with complete confidence that what you say will be understood, judged kindly, and never divulged no matter what the temptation?
13. Are you happy and satisfied with the way he or she shows affection for you?
14. As you look toward the future as realistically as you can, do you feel that the two of you have in your relationship the elements that will enable you to cooperate and if necessary sacrifice for your continuing unity?
15. Does your relationship draw both of you closer to God? Do you both believe that this relationship is good and pleasing to your Heavenly Father?

The Three Ds

What Do We Want Our Marriage To Be?

To understand the importance of preparation, consider a garden. When you see a beautiful garden you know that the gardeners have three qualities: *desire*, *design*, and *determination*. With only one or two of the three, beautiful gardens never happen. They certainly aren't automatic. No gardener will leave the process to chance, because *chance has never produced ordered beauty*.

Loving, lasting marriages are the same. They don't happen automatically. So let's consider those *Three Ds*.

Desire:

1. Please answer Yes or No: Both of us expect this marriage to last the rest of our lives. Do you have any reservations about your answer?

Design:

1. Think of a marriage you greatly admire. What qualities (characteristics) do you see in that marriage that you would want to have in your own marriage?

2. What qualities have you seen in other marriages that you never want to see in your marriage?

Determination:

Determination means *persistent effort for positive results*.

1. Thinking again about the marriage you said you greatly admire, how do you think the couple built that marriage?

2. Would other people think of you as a determined person?

3. Is the person you are planning to marry a determined person? How do you know that?

4. What are some goals you have reached through determination? What kept your determination strong?

5. Is determination ever a bad quality? Is it the same as stubbornness?

6. What are some of the greatest challenges you have overcome? Write some down and talk about them this week with each other.

6. Is the goal of a strong and lasting marriage important to you right now?

7. Do you believe it will always be important?

8. What could cause that goal to become less important to you?

9. What can you do to make sure that a strong and lasting marriage is always important to you?

— *Remember: What we neglect will decay. What we nurture will develop.*—

Keeping Love Alive

Please complete these questions before you read the article, *The Three Loves*.

1. How would you define love?
 - A. Love is a warm, positive feeling for another person.
 - B. Love is a commitment to another person's welfare.
 - C. Love cannot be defined.
 - D. Do you have another definition?

2. How do you know your future marriage partner loves you?

3. What do you do, on a regular basis, to demonstrate love for your partner?

4. What could your partner do, (more or in addition) to demonstrate love for you?

5. Can love die?

6. What can make love die?

7. If love dies, can it be brought back to life?

Now please read *The Three Loves* on the following pages.

After you have read it, go back and look at your answers again. Are there any you would change?

The Three Loves

Behold the word love! For that word armies have marched, fortunes have been squandered, and perfectly normal men and women have made total fools of themselves, often in front of complete strangers.

Preachers preach about it. Singers sing about it in every possible language, and with every possible rhythm. It has inspired operas and rock songs, poems and graffiti, little notes and long novels.

Love has cured people and, some would say, killed others! Love composes the theme of thousands of movies and television shows. Yet much of our acting and singing, writing (and even some preaching) comes from confused and disappointed hearts.

In marriage the confusion continues. Do we marry for love? Is love important?

Fiddler on the Roof is a superb musical about a man of tradition and the pressures that threaten his traditions. In one scene Tevye, the husband, asks his wife, Golda, "Do you love me?"

Now, they have been married for twenty-five years, and this is the first time the subject has come up. Their marriage was arranged by their parents. But after some thought, they discovered that they really did love each other. Love was alive, though the word was never spoken.

Can we develop the kind of intimacy a marriage needs without love? It isn't likely, for love is the substance of all true intimacy.

To help us understand the link between love and intimacy, consider three different expressions of love. As you will see, each is vital to an intimate marriage.

The Fence

Marriage is a relationship with a unique potential for intimacy. *It is the only relationship referred to as "one flesh" in the Bible.* (See Genesis 2:24) However, intimacy needs protection, and that is what this love provides. As a fence, love has nothing to do with attraction, or liking, or sex, or feelings, or even getting anything in return. It is a love of decision and commitment.

"That's not very romantic," you might be thinking. Exactly. Romance has its place, and a great place it is. However, couples don't sustain their marriages, exclusively, by romance. Love as a fence promises to love, no matter what happens, no matter what changes. *Such love protects intimacy.*

Love like this is in rare supply in these days of disposable marriages and temporary commitments. In the United States we have had, for years, something called a pre-nuptial agreement. Couples who choose one of these weird arrangements preplan what they will do with their assets if (when?) the marriage fails. Fence love will have nothing to do with such plans for failure.

When I was a boy I remember hearing a cowboy song called, "Don't Fence Me In." It was a cry for life without boundaries or commitments. That could be the theme song for many modern marriages. True love, intimacy-building love, says, "*We want a fence around this relationship. Let's build it with vows and keep it strong through unselfish sacrifice. Let's promise that nothing, and no one, will ever come between us.*"

What about all the couples who have taken such vows and still have unhealthy marriages? Marriage vows do not create some kind of magical force field around a married couple. This isn't Star Trek we're talking about. Vows alone can never prevent

marital failure because *promises mean nothing without actions*. A man and woman must *live* their vows. A favorite song writer of mine, Don Francisco, describes this dedication beautifully and powerfully:

So you say you can't take it,
the price is too high.
The feelings have gone,
it seems the river's run dry.
You never imagined
it could turn out so rough.
You give and give and give
and still it's never enough.

Your emotions have vanished
that once held a thrill.
You wonder if love
could be alive in you still.
But that ring on your finger
was put there to stay.
And you'll never forget
the word you promised that day.

Jesus didn't die for you
because it was fun.
He hung there for love
because it had to be done.
And in spite of the anguish
His work was fulfilled.
Because love is not a feeling.
It's an act of your will.

Now I know it isn't easy
when you're trying to stand.
And Satan's throwing everything
that's at his command.
But Jesus is faithful,
His promise is true,
And whatever He asks
He gives the power to do.

*(Love Is Not a Feeling, by Don Francisco
Used by permission of Brentwood Publishers.)*

Don understood that the power to keep promises comes from God. He has been making *promise breakers* into *promise keepers* for centuries.

Within the protection of promises, intimacy grows securely and authentically, and a husband and wife feel safe.

The Friendship

A question. Did you like each other before you decided to marry each other? Most people do. In other words, they marry a friend. As our son and daughter-in-law's wedding announcement read:

"Today I will marry my friend; the one I laugh with, live for, dream with, and love."

Friendship *develops* intimacy. Most couples began their friendship before marriage. The question is, will you continue to develop it within your marriage? Couples who do not maintain a healthy friendship find their marriages become empty.

It's like the difference between a living garden and a dead one. When you walk in a living garden your soul feels refreshed. Let that garden die, and walking through it will depress you. Marriage without continued friendship is the same.

On a visit to Northern Ireland I had the privilege of meeting an old saint, James. He and his wife, Sophia, had served God in Africa for almost forty years. Sophia had died some years before I met James. As he told me of their life together he paused, looked into the distance, and said, simply, "I liked that woman."

You expected him to say he loved her, didn't you? He could have, surely. Yet with one profound statement James painted a lifetime of friendship. I could picture them enduring the difficulties of Africa together— laughing, crying, talking, listening— glad to be together whatever happened.

Friendship is the common ground of our marriage relationship. We build it from all the shared joys and sorrows of a lifetime. Friendship develops mostly in the ordinary days and times, not the unusual ones. Companionship lies at the heart of it.

Couples get busy. Life is complicated. Demands are many. That puts great strain on their friendship and without constant care and planning, common ground will disappear. When that happens, one, or both, will be tempted find their friendships elsewhere, and often their intimacy, too.

The Fire

At the very center of an intimate marriage, protected by covenant love and enriched by friendship, there lives an expression of love so intense, so involving, that we only safely experience it *within the protection of a covenant*. When a husband and wife give themselves to one another in mutual, satisfying sexual surrender, they *celebrate* their intimacy. We will devote a whole section to this important topic later in our series. For now, let's just remind ourselves of some significant truths:

God created both man and woman with the ability to give and receive sexual pleasure. We are designed to arouse and to be aroused. Therefore, our sexual relationship should bring pleasure to both husband and wife. The Creator never intended sex to be a pleasure for one (usually the husband) and a problem, or pain, for the other. It is His will that it be a shared joy.

Giving sexual fulfillment to our spouse is both a delight and a duty. A delight, because making love with our spouse stirs us, touches us, and releases us in ways that nothing else can or does. A duty, because we sometimes need to make love when we do not feel like making love. We need both understandings to develop a healthy sexual relationship. (See Song of Solomon for delight, and I Corinthians 7 for duty.)

Like the rest of marriage, developing mutually satisfying sexual love means that a couple adapt and adjust to each other. Sexual gratification is a gift they give and receive. They learn how to do that in each stage of their marriage, but never let the fire die because of neglect or distraction. They are the keepers of the flame.

In the sequel to George Bernard Shaw's play, *Pygmalion*, he describes a feeling that many married people will understand:

"She is immensely interested in him. She has even secret, mischievous moments in which she wishes she could get him alone, on a desert island, away from all ties and with nobody else in the world to consider, and just drag him off his pedestal and see him making love like any common man."

The woman he speaks of is Eliza. The man is a stuffy, pompous professor named Henry Higgins. Many husbands and wives want what Eliza secretly wished for. They

long for times to forget other roles and responsibilities, if even for a few moments, and just be lovers.

Here's a true story. A husband and wife climb into bed. The wife snuggles up to her husband, hoping to arouse his interest in making love. But the husband, a workaholic, lays there, hands behind his head, eyes focused on the ceiling, puzzling over some work-related problem.

The wife has had it! She pokes him in the ribs to get his attention, then exclaims, "Kick your company out of bed, Mr. CEO. It's just your wife in here!"

Keep the fire alive! Celebrate your intimacy.

Three expressions of love— a fence for protection, a friendship for development, and a fire for celebration. God is the author of them all. Ask him to make you a lover, in all three ways. If you do, intimacy will thrive.

But What About Now?

If you are taking this course, you are not yet married. Since you are not yet married, it is not good for you to be sexually involved with each other. *Sexual involvement means any touching kissing, or fondling of breasts, buttocks, or private parts, whether leading to intercourse or not.* All of that must be saved for marriage, regardless of what the movies, songs, TV shows, and your own hormones tell you.

By restraining yourselves sexually during courtship and engagement, you develop self-control and sexual trust. You will need those qualities in your marriage.

- We are NOT involved in sexual activities.
- We are involved in sexual activities.
- We will stop all involvement in sexual activities until our wedding night, and help each other overcome sexual temptation.

Spiritual Life: The Core of Successful Marriage

Please read *The Power Core*, on page seventeen, before completing these questions.

1. Do both of you love God and believe in Jesus enough to trust Him with your life and decisions?
2. If you are from different churches, whose church will you attend after marriage?
3. How will your marriage affect your involvement in church ministries and activities? Do you agree about this? What adjustments do you think you might need to make in your church activities?
4. What will you do to help each other develop a strong spiritual life?
5. Do you foresee any other challenges to your spiritual life after marriage?
6. Do you have any important differences in your beliefs or doctrines that could cause tension and disagreement? How will you handle those differences?
7. Do you respect the spiritual integrity of the person you plan to marry? *Spiritual integrity means that a person is honest with himself and God, not a play actor.*
8. Every home has a spiritual leader, and that leader is usually the husband. As a husband, how will you demonstrate spiritual leadership in your home?
8. As a wife, how can you help your husband as a spiritual leader?

The Power Core

All your life as a couple will be influenced by the vitality and centrality of your spiritual life. Because of that, your relationship with God must be more than a compartment of your marriage, like one room in your house. Your relationship with God should be the core of your lives and the core of your marriage. It's like the nucleus of an atom. The nucleus keeps the particles that surround it in their proper orbits. Without it, there is no atom. Likewise, our connection with God holds the facets of our lives together in proper balance. Then every part of our marriage will show the transforming power and influence of our relationship with God, through Christ Jesus.

But we must choose, for having our relationship with God at the center of our life and our marriage doesn't happen automatically. Here are three diagrams, each showing a different source of influence at the core of the relationship:



In the first model, the central question of life is *“What will please me?”* When we live only to answer that question, when it is the prime motivator of our life, we become self-centered. You can see what damage that orientation could have in a marriage. Self-centered people know little about love. They will sacrifice true unity to get what they want. They are takers, not givers. With this orientation marriage becomes a battle of wits, with each partner trying to out maneuver the other.

In the second model, the central question of life becomes *“What will please them?”* Pleasing others can be a noble impulse for our actions, but as the prime motivator of our life it is really no better than the first question. Motivated by this question we become people who would sacrifice our convictions and our relationships just to ensure acceptance by “them,” whoever “them” might be. It is dangerous for you, and for your marriage.

Now let's look at the third model. In this model the central question of life is, *“What will please God?”* When that becomes our central question, and we live to answer it, our lives develop focus and peace. God created each of us and put us on earth to answer that question through our attitudes, actions, and relationships. That is our destiny. And we only experience true fulfillment when we know our true destiny.

Leo Tolstoy, the renowned Russian author, had come to such a place of desperation in his life that the thought of suicide plagued him. Tolstoy was prosperous, learned, a member of a privileged class, yet he could find no real reason for his existence. To the question, *“What is the meaning of life?”* he had no satisfying answer. He lived in that unsettled condition until he was in his fifties. Then, after years of searching, he found meaning and a reason for his life in Christ.

You might think, *“How can we know what would please God? He's way up there, and we are just tiny humans.”* Good news! God has provided all that we need to live a life that pleases him.

He sent Jesus to die for us, raised him from death, and made him King of everything, forever. When we believe in Jesus we become new persons. If we allow it, the power of that newness works its way into every segment of our lives, transforming our attitudes, actions, and relationships.

We have other resources, too. God puts His Spirit in us to enable us to live a life that pleases Him, blesses others, and brings us a level of fulfillment that we can have in no other way. He has given us the Bible, a handbook for living a life that pleases God. And He connects us with other believers so that we build each other up and help each other along.

With the right question at the core of our lives, and with the wonderful resources that God has given us, we can live lives that please God no matter what circumstances we are in. Our marriages will be healthier and we will be happier. Even more, others will experience the benefits, for when we pursue God's Kingdom the effect reaches our children, our friends and neighbors, our colleagues, and our churches.

Will you, right now, make pleasing God the central motivation of your life? And will you, as a couple, make the same decision? You may both be believers in Jesus, but perhaps you have locked him in a room of your relationship. You don't allow him to influence all of your marriage. Give him the place of influence only he deserves. Make Jesus your nucleus. You will see the dramatic difference in your lives and your marriage.

The apostle Paul had much to say about pleasing God. I have arranged some of his statements together, for the purpose of impact, in the following paragraph:

"And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will accept. When you think of what he has done for you, is this too much to ask? Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is. Our aim is to please him always, whether we are here in this body or away from this body. He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live to please themselves. Instead, they will live to please Christ, who died and was raised for them. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful desires will harvest the consequences of decay and death. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and you will continually do good, kind things for others. All the while, you will learn to know God better and better. For God is working in you, giving you the desire to obey him and the power to do what pleases him." (Romans 12:1,2; 2 Corinthians. 5:9, 15; Galatians 6:8; Ephesians 5:10; Colossians 1:10; Philippians 2:12, NLT)

Caring for the Core

The spiritual core of our lives and marriages needs care and development. How do we do that? How do we strengthen our desire to please God? The answer is through practicing spiritual disciplines. Now, please! Don't let that word scare you. I am not suggesting legalism.

Disciplines are the things we do to make it possible to achieve a goal. Every valuable accomplishment results from disciplines. If you ever won an important race, you won because you trained. If you got good exam results, you got them because you studied. If you play an instrument well enough that others want to hear you, you play well because you practiced. Farmers practice disciplines to get a good yield from their seed. And every battle is won because the soldiers trained for victory.

Our goal is to have a strong relationship with God, through Christ, at the core of our lives and our marriage. Spiritual disciplines help keep the desire to please God strong in us. People who practice them find that thinking, acting, and speaking in a way that pleases God becomes their custom.

Personal Prayer and Supportive Prayer:

Have some personal time with God every day. Pray together if you can, but if you cannot, at least pray for one another. Use Scriptures to pray for each other, asking God's blessing on your husband or wife in every area of his or her life. Pray for health as well as healing, constant freedom from past hurts, ongoing development of spiritual gifts and God-given abilities, and growth in wisdom. Pray with thanksgiving and pray believing God to make a difference. When you make decisions, especially big ones, agree to pray about it for a set time. God will help you know what is best.

Practice God's Presence

Remember that Jesus said, "I am with you always." You are, everyday of your life, surrounded by God's presence. Sometimes you are more aware of His presence, but he is always near. Turn your thoughts to him frequently throughout the day.

Study and Meditate on the Word of God

God's Word will renew our minds and help us understand God's will. It will nourish us like good food nourishes our bodies. It will cleanse our minds, help us to live for what is really important, and equip us for involvement in God's work. As Paul said, "Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you wise. Use his words to teach and counsel each other. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts." (Colossians 3:16, New Living Translation)

Be a Part of a Strong Local Church

As a couple you will need time with other couples who are living for God's glory. A strong local church provides just the right environment for you to grow as a couple. It also gives you a place to discover the special ways God wants to use you.

Can we have different ministries in the church or must we work together in the same ministry? Every man and woman bring their own gifts and talents to the marriage relationship. In marriage God blends our gifts and talents, but we maintain our individuality.

Agree about all your involvements in church and ministry. Support one another in them, and encourage one another to develop the gifts and abilities God has given each of you.

With the right core question and with a mutual determination to care for that core, both of you will become all God wants you to be. You will bless many others, and your life will shine with Christ's light.

Think and Pray

1. Of the three diagrams which one best describes you? Do both of you have the same center? How does it help a marriage when both husband and wife have the same center?

2. For each of the following topics write one sentence that begins, "*It would please God if we would*" Be as practical and specific as you can.

Work

Money

Household Chores

Involvement in Church Activities

Sexual Intimacy

Communication

Now that you have written a sentence for each one, go back and ask yourself, "*What can I do, with God's help, to make this happen?*" Again, be as specific as possible.

Who's In Charge Here? Authority In The Home

Please read Ephesians 5:21-33

Please also read Local Man Becomes Spiritual Leader, on page 14.

1. Who was the head of the home you grew up in?
 - A. Mother
 - B. Father
 - C. Both together
 - D. An extended family member
 - E. There was no discernable leader

2. When faced with a difficult situation, who made the final decision?

3. Would you be happy if your marriage followed the same authority model as your father and mother? If not, what would you change?

4. How do you see the role of husband and wife?
 - A. He is the head. She is under him.
 - B. They are both equal in every way.
 - C. They have equal standing in the eyes of God, but the wife still submits to the husband.

5. Once a man has made a decision, can his wife ever question him? Does she always have to agree with him? Can you think of an example?

6. Will the Lord ever want a husband to submit to his wife? (See Ephesians 5:21) Can you think of a good example of this kind of submission?

7. Is there anything from the story of Arthur and Mary that especially speaks to you or challenges you?

Local Man Becomes Spiritual Leader

Penang

A wave of excitement has gripped the home of Arthur and Mary Chua in this seaside paradise following the realization by the happy couple that Mr. Chua had assumed the spiritual leadership of his home. Observers have been unanimous in their reports that a new peace and joy permeate the Chua home.

In an exclusive interview with this reporter, Arthur and Mary share a first-hand report of this transformation that has amazed their friends and baffled their enemies.

Reporter : Arthur, how did it all begin?

Arthur: My wife and I became Christians several years ago, but after attending a seminar at my church on how to have a successful marriage, I realized that I was not doing a good job of being the spiritual leader of my home. Because of that, our home atmosphere was often very tense.

Reporter: Was this the first time you ever felt like a failure as a spiritual leader?

Arthur: Actually, I felt that I was failing in this matter all my Christian life. My pastor preached sermons about it; my wife borrowed books on the role of the husband and left them near my chair. But I always felt inferior . . . as though my wife was the more spiritual one and I would never catch up with her.

Reporter: Why did you think that?

Arthur: "For one thing, my wife became a Christian before I did. I really gave her a hard time. She was different, and I wasn't sure I liked it. She didn't want to go to the club or the disco with me; she seemed like a another person. I tell you, I made life miserable for her! I tried to force her to go with me to those parties and clubs, and when she pleaded with me to not make her go, I accused her of being a useless wife. That always made her cry, for though I didn't know it at the time, she was praying for the Lord to help her be the best wife she could be. I never hit her, but I was very cruel with my words."

When I became a Christian, I remembered all those times I had acted so badly to her, and thought that I was not worthy to be the spiritual leader of our home.

Reporter: Were there other reasons?

Arthur: Yes. It seemed that she was so far ahead of me in her walk with the Lord. How could I be the spiritual leader when she was the older Christian? Another thing: after I became a Christian I did not have the time to attend as many meetings and Bible Studies as my wife did, and I am not as outspoken as she is. It seemed that she would always be the more spiritual one.

Reporter: When did you start to see the change?

Mary: Let me answer that question!

Arthur: I *told* you she was more outspoken. (*Laughter.*)

Mary: Sorry, Arthur. I didn't mean to interrupt, but I think that I can say something important about that. You see, the *first* change had to come in me. I realized that all my efforts to make Arthur take the lead in the home were just making it harder for him to do so. I determined that I would ask the Lord to help me to be a more submissive wife.

I confessed to the Lord that I had been trying to *force* Arthur be the leader, and that I was trying to manipulate him. (I've always had a problem with that, haven't I Arthur?)

Arthur: No comment. (*More laughter.*)

Mary: Anyway, I asked the Lord to help me to be a more quiet wife. And He did! But it was hard. Instead of telling Arthur what I thought, I tried to ask him what he thought about things.

Reporter: You gave him the privilege of stating his opinion about things first?

Mary: Yes, that's right. It was hard! I prayed that the Lord would help me guard my lips, and I also asked him to change my heart so that I could trust Arthur as my spiritual leader. I stopped making him feel guilty for not attending prayer meetings because of his work, and I encouraged him to pray and fellowship with the Lord in ways that would fit his schedule.

Reporter: Mr. Chua, what was happening on your side?

Arthur: It was a miracle! Not a sudden miracle, but a gradual miracle. I think that's what I would call it. I remember the first time my wife asked my opinion instead of telling me what we should do. It was about a video we rented. There was a very sexy part in it that was making us both feel uncomfortable. Normally, my wife would say, "That's not pleasing to the Lord! We must turn it off! But this time she just turned to me and said very quietly, "Arthur, do you think we should be watching this?"

Reporter: And you took the lead and turned the offensive video off?

Arthur: Not right away. But when my wife went to make tea I thought about it. And then I turned it off. It was good to know that I had made my first real decision as a spiritual leader. It was a small thing, but it started me on the way. When I knew that it was my responsibility and I accepted it, I became much more careful about all the things we watch and listen to in our home.

Reporter: Are there ever disagreements about your decisions as the spiritual leader?

Arthur: Yes, of course. And at first I would get angry when my leadership was questioned. But I soon realized that *being the leader doesn't mean always being right, it means listening to the other family members and considering their opinions as well as my own.* Then I may change my decision based on their views. Even a leader must have a submissive spirit.

Mary: But in spite of the difficulties, our home has really changed as I have allowed Arthur to be our spiritual leader and as he has accepted that leadership.

Reporter: In the few minutes we have left, can you tell our readers about some other ways that you exercise your spiritual leadership?

Arthur: Well...I am learning how to pray for my wife and children. Often my prayers for them are quiet, but I now know that the Holy Spirit is the one who has put those prayers in my heart. And another thing, I am learning to admit my mistakes and weaknesses and ask my family to pray for me. As they see my honesty, they become more honest about their needs.

Mary: Don't forget to tell them about the healing, Arthur.

Arthur: Oh yes! Thank you, Mary, for reminding me. When our second child was born earlier this year, he had a deformity in his foot. The doctor said that he would have to

wear a metal brace for about two years to correct it. But Mary and I prayed and believed the Lord to heal the foot. We noticed that it was straightening, little by little, and today it is perfectly normal!

Reporter: And this has something to do with your spiritual leadership?

Arthur: Yes. You see, before I took my responsibility and Mary acknowledged me as the spiritual leader of our home, there was no real unity between us. We were both Christians, of course, but the tension kept us from walking in real agreement. But now, we enjoy our unity and stand together in the Lord. We do not see one another as more or less spiritual. Rather, we encourage each other. In this way, we can stand against the Evil One when he attacks.

Reporter: Mary, any final words to our readers?

Mary: I want to say once again that in many ways the whole change began in me. When I stopped being so demanding and stopped acting more spiritual than my husband, it gave him the freedom to change. That's what Christ gives all of us...the freedom to change!

The freedom to change. What a marvelous thing Christ does in our lives when He becomes our Lord. He saves us, not just from hell, but also from ourselves. And he gives us the freedom to change.

(a fictional story by Mike Constantine. Although the characters are not real people they represent a real possibility.)

Expression and Understanding

The Keys to Communication

Please read this article and answer the questions at the end.

Walter, a psychologist, makes his living by helping hurting people. Although Walter cares about the people who come to him, he has learned to care without becoming emotionally involved. It's the only way he can survive the constant stream of critical problems that he faces every day. If he didn't practice a little detachment, he would burn out faster than a cheap candle.

Walter has a wonderful wife, Sharon. Sharon wants Walter (this man who makes his living by listening, understanding, and communicating) to pay some attention to her. However, she needs his attention as a husband, not as a professional. When Sharon has an emotional need, Walter responds calmly and logically, just like he does with his clients. That drives Sharon crazy. She thinks that Walter, the professional counselor, can understand just about anyone but her. She doesn't resent the people he helps. She just wishes Walter would give her more of himself than what he gives his clients.

Earth to Walter, Come In Walter!

Walter and Sharon are struggling with a common problem. Let's call it disconnection. Drained by hours of listening to troubled people, Walter finds ways to avoid Sharon or at least maintain some emotional distance. Frustrated by her husband's logical response when he does talk to her, Sharon feels like giving up.

A couple's conversations can degenerate into shoptalk: necessary words, but no more personal connection than you would feel with a someone you met at the supermarket, and maybe even less. Like the old cliché says, "Familiarity breeds contempt."

Even good marriages can have some connection problems. Take, for example, this lady's comments: "My husband is a delightful guy, a kind man, and a wonderful lover, but something is missing. I am so lonesome I could cry." For some reason she didn't understand, she and her husband were not connecting.

Connection has two parts: *expression* and *understanding*. Both are vital. Just as the human body requires both veins and arteries for healthy circulation, relationships need both expression and understanding. Block either one and you threaten the heart of the marriage.

If you feel disconnected from each other, here are some tools and techniques to help you express yourselves and understand each other.

Good questions invite sincere responses. Assumptions make you look proud and insensitive.

A man we know bombards his wife with questions. He asks them like a police officer questioning a subject, or an attorney cross-examining a hostile witness. For this man, questions are weapons. He doesn't want to understand. He wants to keep her off balance, like a swordsman in a duel. Then, when she stumbles in her responses, he lunges for the kill. Remember: the value of a question depends on the underlying attitude of the person who asks it. If the attitude is sincere enquiry, questions can help. If we only want to wound, or protect our own hurting soul, questions become weapons.

Like me, you may have trouble listening. We're like Martha, a woman in the Bible. One day Jesus visited the house she shared with her brother and sister. Martha got busy preparing a meal for her honored guest, but Mary, her sister, sat with Jesus, giving him her full attention.

I know we usually use this story to illustrate a more deeply spiritual point, but allow me to draw something more down-to-earth from it. Serving a meal is important in Middle Eastern hospitality, so Martha was being a good hostess to her honored guest. She felt that Mary was a slacker, so she complained about her lazy sister to Jesus. But Jesus told her that Mary was actually doing what pleased him most.

It seems that Martha thought she was fixing the main course, but she was really missing it. That day Mary's attention was more important to the Lord Jesus than food.

Sharon would say the same about Walter. You might have a partner who says the same about you. My wife once told me that I was the only person she knew who could leave a room without using the door. Sure, my body is there. I nod, and even look straight at her, but my mind could be anywhere. Sometimes I even start doing some chore or read an article while she is talking with me. That kind of behavior doesn't exactly assure her of my attention.

Thankfully, I am becoming a better listener, not great, but greatly improved. You can too. As a good friend once told me, "Learn to be present to the moment." Don't be so anxious to get to the bottom line. The trip is at least as important as the destination. The process is at least as important as the conclusion. Give each other the wonderful gift of time and attention.

What's the hurry, Speedy?

People think and respond at different speeds, like computers with different processors. Some, like me, think quickly and sometimes speak impulsively. Others, like my wife, need more time to process information and form a response. Neither is more intelligent. I can show Diane my love by giving her time to respond.

If you are the faster thinker and quicker responder, slow down. It will be good for you and good for your marriage. You'll become less impulsive and more patient with everyone. Like our daughter-in-law, Natala says, that's a good thing!

If you are more deliberate, ask your partner to be patient with you. Most important, don't leave your husband or wife hanging in silence. It's like someone who puts you on hold when you call them, and then forgets to come back. Your silence may be necessary for you, but fast thinkers can generate many false assumptions during long, awkward pauses. Assure your partner that you're listening, that you want to understand, and that you need some time to ponder. It will help reduce wrong conclusions.

Hello? Hello? Anybody there?

You know the sound. You're talking on your cell phone when suddenly, instead of your friend's voice, all you hear is silence. You have been disconnected. Some couples have been disconnected all their married lives, seldom speaking or listening. Please do not assume that silence means rejection or anger. Silence can have many meanings:

I have no words for how I feel. For some of us, this is often true. It's hard to put feelings into words.

I don't trust myself to speak without doing some major damage. Because we fear that we can't find the right words, we remain silent.

I am afraid you'll misunderstand me. Fear of being misunderstood disturbs many relationships, and sometimes with good reason. Some of us do a great job of making our partners think they don't speak clearly and accurately. It's just another tactic for avoiding personal responsibility.

You might ridicule me or belittle me. Does anyone want to appear foolish? Yet how often do we, in subtle ways and obvious ones, make our partners feel like fools?

I am angry. It's better to let an angry partner have a little time out rather than forcing words to be spoken in haste and anger. Agree that you will talk about the issue a little later.

I have given up hope. Every time we try to talk it only gets worse, never better. The only way to help a hopeless partner is to assure him or her that you really do want to understand. Then put your assurance into action.

Picky! Picky!

Some of us love to pick at words. Like the religious teachers in Jesus' time, we divert attention from the real issues by making a big deal out of insignificant details. Jesus said those religious teachers filtered out little insects and swallowed big, ugly camels. In our pride and defensiveness, and our desire to control others, we do the same thing.

Feelings are often deeper than words and sometimes, no matter how carefully we try to express them, we hurt each other. Remind yourself that the overall improvement of the relationship is your goal. If you pick at words, making an issue out of every small inaccuracy, you will never reach that goal.

We can really frustrate our efforts to communicate by trying to force communication at the wrong time. Of course, for some couples no time ever seems right. Too many obligations, too many appointments, and too little energy make it easy to remain disconnected. And when a couple have been disconnected for a long time they often find it easier to just stay that way.

Plan a time. Pick a place. Don't let anything interfere. Talk like friends. Do not force the conversation to become serious right away. Laugh. Discuss. Let the talk develop. Though it may not feel spontaneous at first, given time you will relax and reconnect.

Think About It

1. As a couple do you have anything in common with Walter and Sharon?
2. Which is harder for you personally: expressing or understanding?
3. With your future husband or wife in mind, finish this statement: "It would help me understand you if you would . . ."

Talking Like the Animals

Here are some animals that might help you understand your communication style:

Clam

Hardly ever speaks, and doesn't seem to listen, either

Puppy

Happy, energetic, but sometimes can't stop yapping. Particularly irritating late at night.

Tiger

Lots of growling. Listens quietly, but always waiting for the opportunity to strike. Makes other people feel it's only a matter of time until they *will* be eaten.

Goat

"But! But!" Always finds an exception for every statement. People tire of trying to communicate because they get tired of being "butted." Most common in overly analytical thinkers. Tendency to frequently interrupt.

Mouse

Squeaky little statements. Too quiet too much of the time. Self-protection is of greatest importance. Found mostly in women, but when seen in a man is particularly sad. Especially intimidated by tigers . . . but then, who isn't?

Beaver

Ever heard the expression "Busy as a Beaver?" That's the picture. Always too busy to talk. Always another tree to chomp through; always another stream to dam up.

Think About It

1. Which animal best describes your most common communication style? What about the person you plan to marry? (You can combine animals to describe yourself if necessary, for instance, "Beaver-Tiger," or "Clam-Goat.")

Man:

Woman:

2. Do you sometimes take on another style? In what situations do you take on that other style?

3. Looking at your styles of communication, what special problems do you think you might encounter in your marriage?

Training the Animals

All of us have natural communication styles, but sometimes those styles are not the best for our marriages. God's Spirit in us can open the clam, calm the puppy, tame the tiger, civilize the goat, make the mouse more confident, and slow that beaver down. You really need to let him do it. Then you'll find your blend, a blend that will keep your communication open all your marriage.

Don't be afraid to change when it is God who is bringing the change. His changes are always for our best. "It is God who is working in you, both to will and to do what pleases him." — Phil. 2:13

In-Laws or Outlaws?

Please take time to read the article, Extended Family, on page twenty-three.

1. Will you be living with your parents? If so, whose parents will you be living with?
2. Do you anticipate any strain in your marriage because of the parents you are staying with?
3. For the man: Who is the most important woman in your life? Will your answer change after marriage?
4. How much of your income, if any, will you be giving to your extended family members?
5. What does the underlined part of this statement mean to you: “ For this cause a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two will be one flesh.” Genesis 2:24

Honor, Respect , and Love

The Keys to Understanding Your Future in-laws

Here are some specific pointers to help you have a great relationship with your in-laws.

Pray

Ask God to bless them and your relationship with them.

Appeal

Not demanding. Does not assault their authority

See

Developing understanding of their concerns and viewpoints

Help

Find ways to show them you care

Limit

When is enough, enough? As a newly-married couple you may need to establish limits to the amount of time, energy and resources you will be sharing with your extended family. These limits are for your safety, as well as for theirs. Good limits, though hard to set at first, make the relationship with your extended families much healthier in the long run.

Can you disagree or go against their desires without being dishonoring them? Yes, if we are doing so to obey God and his commands.

Extended Family

— from the **Assemblies of God, USA, website**

How important is the extended family? How should Christian couples relate to their own and to their spouse's family.

The family today is under great pressure. Societal changes, along with humanistic values and teachings, are undermining the God-ordained structure and health of the family. As the nuclear family crumbles so does the extended family with its many relational roots. The impact of broken homes means that many children are growing up without the vital spiritual direction, important historical records, key life lessons, and loving support systems of grandparents and other relatives within the family. Recognizing this destructive trend, the Assemblies of God teaches and advocates the need for strong Christ-centered marriages and the important biblical component of the family and its extended roots.

Within the traditional Christian family there are stresses and struggles that must be addressed. Relationships with extended families and in-laws can be among the main sources of conflict in homes. When such relationships are not positive, family relationships are put under considerable stress.

When two people marry, two families intersect and are brought into alignment (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:7-8, Ephesians 5:31). At marriage a couple begins a process of merging together two separate home cultures, value systems, and sets of traditions. Each spouse will often be accustomed to different and occasionally opposite methods of conducting family life. As family differences arise in the marriage clear communicating and negotiating compromise becomes essential. To successfully form the new household each spouse will need to be flexible and giving, allowing for shared methods and resources of the other mate's family tradition. Without loving compromise and sharing within the marriage the newlyweds will collide rather than merge together as a new family unit.

Extended family members often unknowingly add undue pressure and stress on a young marriage by placing possessive time demands on a son or daughter. At a time when a younger couple is struggling with limited finances, establishing solid relationships, securing a dependable income, and learning to raise children of their own, overbearing parents on either side can add unnecessary stress to a fragile marriage. Parents must do their part to support and strengthen the marriages of their children. But even when parents-in-law wisely avoid adding stress to their children's household, tensions concerning relationships with the families of each spouse can still arise. Quite often the newly married husband and wife maintain overly strong ties with their former immediate families; furthermore they may not be fully aware of the strong ties the spouse still has with his or her parents and siblings. A strong desire to spend time with one's own parents in preference to being with in-laws they do not know as well is a test for any marriage.

These tensions can have hurtful impact when they are added to other disagreements not yet resolved by a young couple. Again, Christian parents should be more concerned with the success and healthy condition of their child's marriage than with their own assumed rights to time with the family.

Young couples torn in such conflict would do well to implement a record-keeping system that regulates a fair balance in time spent with each extended family. The attitude of each Christian partner toward his or her in-laws should be genuine love and reflect one's love for his/her mate.

Though relationships with extended family members can be complicated because of geographical locations and close bonds within certain families, adult Christians should be able to work out these problems. In situations where couples are unable to resolve family differences it may be necessary to jointly seek the advice of a mature Christian friend.

Christian adult children and their spouses must also realize they have obligations and responsibilities to their elderly parents. The Bible frequently repeats the command, "Honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12, Ephesians 6:2). This is accomplished through love and respect, and living pure lives. Most important, adult children should be committed to Christ. As Christians they should routinely share the wonder of this truth with their parents.

As adults, grown children should generally be self-sufficient in meeting their own needs. They should remove as many of the worries and emotional stresses from their elderly parents as possible. Much of this can be done simply by living Christ-centered lives that honor God and family.

Adult children should also continue to learn from their parents even after beginning their own homes. Many parents have much to offer adult children in the areas of spiritual growth, marriage, child rearing, and prioritizing family over career. All adult children would do well to inquire about the early lives of their parents as children and young adults so as to record and learn from their life histories. At the appropriate time they should pass these lessons and life stories on to their own children.

When aging parents experience failing health, adult children have a responsibility to administer or see that proper care and support is in place (1 Timothy 5:8). Such care may take a variety of forms ranging from supplying financial assistance, overseeing medical treatments, securing necessary assistance, arranging for nursing care or personally administering care within their home, or supplying needed emotional and spiritual encouragement. Though nursing homes and elder care facilities may provide helpful and needed resources in caring for invalid parents, institutions should never be looked to as complete solutions to elderly parental care. Adult children are wrong in thinking that such facilities and programs absolve them from other support responsibilities. Love and emotional support expressed through touch and heartfelt conversation is the responsibility of children and family, not employed care providers. In all things Jesus calls us to "do unto others as we have them do to us."

Concerns:

Some Christians who have been severely hurt by past actions, attitudes, and mistakes of their father and/or mother struggle with the biblical directive of honoring their parents. Others have difficulty respecting parents who intentionally do not serve God or follow His moral teachings. Yet God's command to children, "Honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12), universally applies in all circumstances regardless of the individual parent's past record or spiritual standing.

Another great concern is for the one-parent families in the church. Though not the ideal, they are a reality of life. Because of divorce or death, the remaining parent has an overwhelming challenge. This should call forth the compassionate support and encouragement of the entire church. Spiritual and physical needs must be met, especially for those who have been hurt by sin and the loss of marital relationships. Two-parent families, retired couples, and others within the church must reach out to these families, warmly include them, and help to ensure that essential elements of the missing parent are fulfilled.

Sex and Family Planning

Please read *The Private Garden*, on page thirty-two.

1. Do you both have a good, healthy understanding of the basics of the sexual relationship in marriage?

2. Where do you get your information about sex in marriage? (Mark all that apply)

- A. Hearsay and chit-chat
- B. Novels and movies
- C. Secular books on sex in marriage
- D. Christian books on sex in marriage
- E. A trusted relative, teacher, or friend

3. Do you feel confident that you will be able to develop a mutually satisfying sexual relationship?

4. Do you plan to practice family planning? Who will be responsible for implementing it?

5. How many children would you like to have? How long do you want to wait before having children?

6. Are you sexually active right now? *Sexually active* means any fondling, touching or kissing of breasts, buttocks, or private parts, as well as intercourse.

If you are sexually active, stop until you are married. First, because all sexual activity outside of marriage is sin. Second, by setting good limits you prove that you can trust each other and develop self-control. Couples who exercise self-control before marriage find that they can trust each other more after marriage.

7. Have you had any previous sexual relationships or experiences that you need to talk to your future partner about? This is a very delicate matter, and one that not all counselors agree about. How do you know if you should tell or not? Here are some guidelines:

- Is this something that your partner will find out about eventually? Would it be better for him or her to hear it from you?
- Is this something that could impact your partner's health?
- Will this prevent you from having children together? In this category would be any sexually transmitted disease that can prevent pregnancy.

The Private Garden

Take a moment to read some actual comments we have received from husbands and wives who have attended our seminars:

"We've been married only a year and my husband hasn't touched me in months! I want his affection; I want to make love to the man I married."

"Asian Women! They are so cold and uninterested in sex." (From a Chinese Malaysian)

"We're just too busy, too tired, and have too many responsibilities. By the end of the day there's just no energy . . . and not much desire!"

"My wife was very responsive before we had children, but now it seems they are more important than I am. We seldom have sex, and when we do we just can't seem to enjoy it."

Those comments, and many more like them, come from nice, normal people. Yet they are frustrated because of the sexual condition of their marriages. It takes a lot of pressure for anyone to talk about something as personal as sex, so I assume the problem is quite serious when they finally do speak to us.

What happened to the passion? Like dew that evaporates in the heat of the sun, sexual passion disappears under the harsh glare of day-to-day realities and necessities. But unlike the dew, it doesn't always reappear when the pace slows and the day cools down.

The Bible has some very special passages for husbands and wives that have the power to ignite their sexual yearning for each other. Yes, the Bible speaks to us about sex. In fact, the Bible has much to say and says it with beauty and passion. Consider the following verses from Song of Songs and Proverbs:

From Song of Songs, chapter four, verse twelve:

"My sweetheart, my bride, is a secret garden, a walled garden, a private spring . . ."

Verse sixteen of the same chapter:

"Wake up, North Wind and South Wind, blow on my garden; fill the air with fragrance. Let my lover come to his garden and eat the best of its fruits."

Chapter five, verse one:

"I have entered my garden, my sweetheart, my bride. I am gathering my spices and myrrh; I am eating my honey and honeycomb; I am drinking my wine and milk."

From Proverbs, chapter five, verses fifteen to eighteen:

"Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth."

Secret, walled gardens with private springs; fragrances carried from the garden on the winds; spices and myrrh; honey and honeycomb; wine and milk. What does it all mean? It means that God inspired the biblical writers to say some very fervent, very beautiful things about the sexual relationship between husband and wife.

Please understand that sex is holy, a gift from God to every married couple. That may seem strange to you, but only because most of us have such a limited understanding of what makes an activity holy. In our minds holy means religious.

Now, sex is not religious! Thank God! As we said in the section on the three loves, it

is God who created man and woman with the capacity to give and receive sexual pleasure. And if we use what He has created and made possible in the way he intends, it is holy.

Pleasure is the Idea

Some African cultures practice female genital mutilation, a process so horrible, so barbaric, that I could not describe it to you. I mention it for this reason: the purpose of this mutilation is to make it impossible for a woman to enjoy intercourse. They believe that sexual enjoyment (at least for the woman!) is dangerous and could lead to unfaithfulness.

Using the same reasoning, why not burn out our taste buds so we don't overindulge in food? Or perhaps we should blind our eyes so we cannot worship what we see. Or puncture our eardrums so we cannot hear music and fall in love with it.

Do you see? Those physical capacities are God-given. They need regulation, but God designed them to give us pleasure. Food tastes good. The sounds of life inspire us. There is beauty, all around, for the seeing. And, for a married couple, there is sexual enjoyment as a gift from a wonderful, loving God.

A Private Pleasure

What makes the sexual relationship in marriage so exciting? Notice what Solomon said about his bride. She is his secret garden, his private spring. That is the secret. Sex is private, something so intimate that a marriage covenant must protect it. It is the ultimate intimate experience shared by two lovers in a unique marital relationship. Sex is an expression of commitment, not just an opportunity for excitement.

In marriage man and woman give each other exclusive entry to their secret gardens of sexual desire and fulfillment. They share springs of passion with each other which they will never share with any other person. Our marriage covenant walls the garden about and there is only one gate.

The husband and wife give each other the key to that gate. They unlock their secret gardens, releasing the springs of passion in each other. They are refreshed by each other's springs. The pleasure is theirs alone, for only they have the keys and the permission to unlock each other's desires.

A Celebration

Some married people use sex as a reward or withhold it as a punishment. To do that is to abuse something which God designed as a celebration of marital unity. How can we give each other the keys to our private gardens, then, as punishment, refuse each other? How much better to forgive each other and celebrate deep love through sexual intimacy.

One Key for Your One and Only Lover

It would be a good idea for newlyweds to perform a ceremony of the keys. At some point in the wedding service, or perhaps better, on their first night together as a married couple, they would exchange two small, beautifully fashioned keys, perhaps made from gold or silver.

The keys symbolize that they are giving and receiving entry to a private garden. They would vow to never deny one another entry to that garden. They would agree to treat their sexual relationship with honor, tenderness, and understanding. They would assure one another that the keys they have exchanged are one-of-a-kind, never to be copied.

It is the privacy, the uniqueness of sexual intimacy, that makes it such a powerful expression of love. In sexual love, a husband and wife give each other a gift, a lavish

gift, that no one else can give to either of them. Couples who give and receive that gift in a mutually satisfying way will always have a secret glow in their marriage.

Since marital sex is such a wonderful expression of love, why do some couples neglect it? Why do we hear the comments you read at the beginning of this section? The answers are many, and often complex, but here are two that many couples face:

We forget the great value of our sexual intimacy. Unless we know the value of a thing, we will not make time for it.

We are always too tired or too busy. True, you may be too tired to make love some nights, but I have a solution for you. Make an appointment! “Sorry, darling, but I am just too tired. How about an appointment? Same time, same place, tomorrow night.” By doing that you create anticipation. All the next day you’ll be thinking about the treat that awaits both of you that evening. Anticipation is an aphrodisiac that is stronger than anything you can buy in a Chinese medicine shop.

Another solution to tiredness is to simply forget you are tired, at least for a few minutes, and make love anyway. You don’t always have to feel sexually alive to start the process. Wise couples learn that sex can be very fulfilling even in the tired times. You’ll probably sleep better, too.

As every marriage counselor will tell you, a couple’s sex life is a concentrated reflection of their entire marriage. Because of that, we couldn’t, in these lessons, address all possible problems. If you and your spouse have deeper problems than what we have addressed here, get some detailed help by reading a good Christian book on the subject of sexual intimacy or perhaps speaking with a trustworthy counselor.

No article or book can help a couple have better sex unless they are willing to change their attitudes about sex and about each other. God gives us the power to see those changes. Just as you can pray for any other need, you can pray for the restoration of sexual passion in your marriage. We know people who have done just that and have seen their prayers answered in remarkable ways.

If the devil is a thief, and he is, then he will do what all thieves do. He will go after the valuables. Your intimate, sexual relationship is one of those valuables. Don’t neglect it, and don’t let Satan steal it.

Money and Financial Planning

Please read Money Matters, by Mike Constantine, on page twenty-eight.

Financial Expectations

1. How did your mother and father manage the family finances? Was their method effective? Do you think you will use the same method?

2. Do you see any differences in how your parents managed money and how your fiancé's parents managed money?

3. Who will make the final financial decisions in your marriage? How will you decide which things are important to spend money on?
 - A. The husband will have the final say.
 - B. The wife will have the final say.
 - C. We will discuss our financial goals and make big decisions together. We will each have our areas of responsibility and a personal allowance we can use for whatever we choose.

4. Do you plan to have separate accounts or joint accounts? Do you both agree with this decision?

5. How much of your combined incomes do you plan to give to God's Kingdom?

6. How much of your income will you be giving to your extended family– parents, brothers, sisters?

7. Do you have a plan to save a certain percentage of your income? Do you agree about how much?

8. How do each of you feel about the use of credit cards?

9. Do you believe that the person you are marrying is financially responsible?

Financial Evaluation

1. Do either of you have any credit card debt right now? If so, is it important to you to pay it off?*

2. What other major debts do you have at present?

3. Do you have a budget or do you plan to set one up?

*(For an excellent system to pay off credit card debt, see Defeating the Debt Monster and The Snowball Principle.

Money Matters

Marriage counselors all agree that money problems are a chief source of marital stress. The following letter to John and Anne, a couple experiencing financial difficulties, gives some good, practical advice to couples about managing their finances. Without a doubt, money matters.

Dear John and Anne,

I hope you'll take this letter in the spirit of love and compassion in which I send it. Ever since I came to know about your financial difficulties, I've been deeply concerned for you. When a friend complained you had borrowed money from him and had not repaid it, I knew the problem was really serious. I soon discovered that you were in debt to many people, sometimes borrowing from one to pay something to the others. That's quite desperate, wouldn't you agree?

I want to share some principles with you that will help you recover from your financial snare. Of course, you are not alone. Many, many people find themselves caught in the same net. Like a trapped animal they fight against their bonds, spending all their strength and more than all their money. There is a way out, but it comes by humbly applying God's wisdom, not by frantically scheming.

Financial distress has many causes. Each of them, like a strand of strong rope, binds you. The more strands, the more bondage. Let's call them the shortages that lead to financial bondage.

Shortage of Work

If a person faithfully works at his job, he can expect a fair wage and promotion. Faithful work habits show our desire to please God and earn respect. John, do not be offended, but I believe you are trying to find a get-rich-quick scheme. Believe me. They're not hard to find, but they rarely produce the results they promise. In the worst cases they are even deceptive and unethical. Beware of any job in which you have to lie or misrepresent your product or yourself. Find a good job, do a good job, and you'll reap a good reward.

Shortage of Wisdom

Wisdom makes the difference between success and failure. The Bible tells us that a rich man can also be a fool if he allows what he owns to own him. Wise people manage their money, no matter how much or how little. They don't allow their money to manage them. As Solomon said, a person who has money, but lacks wisdom, is the same as a person without money: "Of what use is money in the hand of a fool, since he has no desire to get wisdom?" (Proverbs 17:16)

Shortage of Faith

What, exactly, is faith? Faith means seeing God as your source, your provider. Many people talk faith, but do not live faith. We prove our faith in God by the decisions we make about money and possessions. Do we live for money? Do we have an Aladdin complex, hoping to make God our genie? He will gladly be our provider but he will never be our servant.

We also show our faith in God by submission to His will and authority. If we do not submit to Him, how can we hope to claim His promises? Show your faith in God, not just in your words, but in actions that please him, and he will bless you.

A wise man once said "Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture." (Psalms 37:3)

Shortage of Giving

Those who never give, never have enough, or never think they do. Those who do give to God and his work experience joyous freedom. When you consistently practice that kind of giving, you are free from a grasping, penny-pinching attitude.

I once talked with a man who works as a car sales agent. You know how changeable that job can be. He told me some of his financial difficulties and what happened when he and his wife started giving to God's work. With a light in his eyes and excitement in his voice, he told me how God has blessed his family and their finances. He sold some of the most expensive vehicles in the dealership, almost without trying.

No one can promise you instant results. God chooses when and how to bless us. Still, you will see your financial situation improve if you honor God by giving to his work. Please remember: it isn't the giving alone that pleases him. What pleases God is giving that comes from a sincere and thankful heart.

Work faithfully, live wisely, believe God, and give. You will see God bless you in all you do. I do not say that you will live lavishly, but you will have all you need and enough to share with others. And you will be free! No financial bondage. No sleepless nights. No scheming. God's way is a restful way.

Think, Act, Pray

1. Which of the four shortages do you think is the most common reason for financial problems among Christians?
2. Why do you think most get-rich-schemes do not work as promised?
3. What are some ways a couple can gain financial wisdom?
4. Name some ways people show their faith in God about financial matters.
5. Do you know someone whose financial situation improved when they began giving? Why do you think that happened?

Defeating the Debt Monster

If you are already in financial bondage, you will need to take some decisive steps toward freedom. Picture yourself in a deep hole. Here's a ladder that will let you climb out.

Step One: Recognize why you are in financial bondage.

Don't blame the economy. You must recognize that the real reason for your financial problems is your own unsound decisions. Times may be difficult, but many people survive difficult financial times because they follow the right principles and make wise resolutions.

Step Two: Do not borrow any more money .

This is a real step of faith shown by action. "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" (James 2:14) Right actions must accompany faith, not just any actions. If you steadfastly decide not to borrow or buy anything on credit, God will honor your faith and provide honorable ways to meet your needs.

Step Three: Destroy or lock-up credit cards.

If you have credit cards, either destroy them or pass them to someone for safekeeping. When financial pressure increases, it's easy to use a credit card for impulsive purchases. We heard about one couple who placed their credit cards in a dish of water, then put the dish in the freezer! In essence they "froze" their own credit. It's a cold, hard solution, but it might just work. They couldn't use the cards until they thawed them out. That gave them time to think before they made a purchase.

Couples who have developed good financial discipline can safely use credit cards, if they pay the outstanding balance in full each month. A credit card is like a chainsaw: a useful tool in a skilled hand, but a dangerous weapon in the hand of an undisciplined person.

Step Four: Arrange to pay something to every creditor.

Contact any companies or banks whom you owe and ask them to be patient with you and to accept lesser payments. "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison." (Matthew 5:25) You can also start using what someone called the snowball principle. You'll find an explanation of the snowball principle at the end of this section.

Step Five: Contact any friends or family members you have borrowed from.

If you have taken advantage of their generosity, you should ask their forgiveness and make restitution. If you cannot repay them right now ask for understanding, and make plans to repay them as soon as possible. If necessary, ask your pastor or theirs to mediate a settlement. By doing that you also establish some financial accountability.

Step Six: Find someone to oversee your journey to financial freedom.

It will help you. We sometimes need an outside party to keep us on track, especially if we have a history of undisciplined spending.

One other thought about accountability: you can fool anyone but God. Sure, you could ask someone to help you stay on track, but without a personal sense of accountability to God, you might still practice the same personal dishonesty that led to your present crisis.

Step Seven: Avoid the temptation of looking for a quick fix.

Usually, God delivers us from financial bondage gradually. Of course God could provide all the money you need to get out of debt in a moment, but he usually doesn't. Why? Because monetary miracles do not develop character, but faithful, patient progress does. The real gold comes from the development of our inner character, for when we are rich there, we are rich indeed!

I recently heard that many people who hit the jackpot or win the lottery eventually lose it all. They strike it rich, but they don't have the character and self-control to use it wisely. God wants to do more than release you from debt. He wants to form your character and teach you financial self-control so you do not repeat the mistake. "Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow. (Proverbs 13:11)"

Remember this: God wants you free from financial bondage, but he cannot deliver you unless you follow His path. If you do, you will see His blessing in all you do. If you don't, the pit gets deeper. Seize the chance! Break the destructive pattern you have fallen into. Resist every voice that tells you it's too late. Believe God, and prove it by the financial decisions you make. You will love the results.

Using the Snowball Principle to Become Debt-free

1. List all your creditors. Do not include your mortgage or house rental payment.

2. For each creditor, divide the amount owed by the minimum monthly payment.

Here's an example:

\$1000 (amount of debt) divided by \$50 (minimum payment) = 20

\$2000 divided by \$40 = 50

\$500 divided by \$50 = 10

Do that for each debt. Now choose the debt with the lowest number. In the example above it would be the \$500 debt since it will be paid in ten months.

Next, determine what amount from your regular income you can add to the \$50 each month. Let's say you can double it each month. Now you are paying \$100 on a \$500 note so you will pay it off in five months instead of ten.

That's good, but now the real fun begins. Since you are already accustomed to paying \$100 each month on that debt, and since it is now paid off, add that \$100 to the next highest monthly number. (In our example you would increase the payment on the \$1000 debt from \$50 to \$150.) By doing that you will pay it off in about seven months instead of twenty months.

Repeat the process with each debt, being careful to not incur any additional debt and you will be debt free in a much shorter time.

The last step, once you retire all debt, is to place the full amount of the payments into savings each month. Follow this plan and you will learn self-control, financial discipline, and faithfulness.

Does the snowball work in other cultures outside the West? We wondered about that. Then we met a young Malaysian man whom we had given those principles to about three years earlier. At the time he had just finished university, but still had many debts. He followed those principles and is, today, debt free and smiling!

The Rest of the Journey

Congratulations! You and your spouse-to-be have come to the end of *Preparing to Succeed*. If you have applied yourselves with honesty and openness, you are well-prepared to start this journey.

Now we have a few suggestions for you. These will help you keep your marriage in shape during your first year together.

Join a Nearly-Newly Group

Your church may have a small group that is focused on couples who are engaged to be married or are newly married. Find out, and join it. If there is not such a group, ask about starting one.

Connect with a Mentor Couple

Again, your church might have some designated mentor couples who would meet with you once or twice a month, just to chat about how you are doing. These couples will also commit to being confidential prayer partners for you during the balance of your courtship and your early months of marriage.

Keep a Healthy Relationship with God

It means so much when we walk with God and take time to be with him every day. Remember, you are just beginning. You don't know what the future holds for you, what good and bad surprises you will discover in each other, and in yourselves. Your greatest hope for success is to always connect with the resources God has provided for us: His Word, His Spirit, His People.

As you grow together, always remember to stay committed. Don't let anything break your friendship. With a relationship like that, you'll both be blessed, and you'll be a blessing to your world.

If you find that you are facing special problems that were not addressed in this material, make sure you find someone to talk with about them. Start with your pastor, or a trusted counselor.

About Mike and Diane Constantine

Mike and Diane Constantine have been married and in ministry for more than 40 years. They live in Malaysia. They have developed their teachings and writings through their personal experience as well as their years of involvement with couples in Malaysia.

Mike and Diane have many resources available to give you extra help with your marriage and family. You can see many of these resources by visiting:
<http://intermin.mikediane.com>