

Marriage 101

Building a Life Together by Faith

Jewell R. Powell



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Preface

A long time ago, I met my Prince Charming at a Roy Rogers fast-food restaurant. After dating for three years, we decided to get married. We were both aware of the statistics concerning marriage, and we both had parents, siblings, and friends who were divorced. We were very concerned and cautious about marriage because all around us were divorced couples. We had a little over three months of premarital counseling and a couple of months to prepare for the big day. Because we did the counseling, attended church regularly, and felt a strong love for one another, we believed we were ready for marriage and would be fine.

So Lewis and I pledged our love until death before a host of family and friends on May 4, 1996. Immediately we started having problems, one of which was infertility. Then, a couple of years after our wedding, Lewis stopped going to church while I remained a faithful, active member. Within four years we found ourselves sleeping in separate bedrooms, not liking one another very much, and estranged as a couple. I quickly found out that marriage was nothing like the fairy tales I read as a child. Lewis and I thought we had done everything necessary prior to getting married. We thought we were well prepared before entering into marriage.

In February 2001, I was in a dark place in my life. Lewis and I had just separated, and all I knew was that I loved my husband but our marriage was not working. I started wondering why so many marriages, including mine, were heading toward divorce. Is it possible to live in holy matrimony until death? My Christian faith had me searching for answers. Because I believed in God's Word, I knew I would find the answers in the Bible. What I learned was that with man (you or your spouse), it is impossible to have a happy, satisfying, and fulfilling marriage, but with God nothing shall be impossible. The Bible says, "For with God nothing is ever impossible and no word from God shall be without power or impossible of fulfillment" (Luke 1:37 AMP). We can find hope in knowing that the same God who is the creator of marriage and the one who unites couples can help us keep our marriages strong and bless them.

If you are going through hard times in your marriage right now, there is hope. There is nothing wrong with the institution of marriage; actually, it's very good if you do it God's way. The problem is with us, because we don't understand why God created marriage or even how it works. God created the covenant of marriage. So we need to let go of preconceived ideas we've learned from the world—from television, movies, books—and the ideas and goals we had when we were growing up. Whenever we make a purchase (be it a computer, stove, car, toaster, or camera), we get instructions—a manual—and a customer service number to help us understand how to use it. Yet when it comes to marriage, God's institution, we go not to his Word but to magazines, books, and psychic hotlines. But the Bible is our manual.

Most of us have heard what the acronym BIBLE stands for: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. The Bible gives us everything we need to make it in life, especially in our marriages. God says his people perish because of the lack of knowledge (see Prov. 29:18). Marriages are destroyed because people lack knowledge of what God says in his Word concerning them. Why would God create

marriage if it couldn't possibly work? He wouldn't, and he didn't. It's not the marriage covenant that is the problem; it's those who don't seek God and get their wisdom, knowledge, and understanding from his Word.

My prayer for everyone who reads this book is that the Word of God will come alive to you and cause you to want to change. The purpose of this book is to lay a spiritual foundation. As you read it, God will give you (by the leading of the Holy Spirit) answers concerning your marriage, just as he did for me. If you will change your thinking and incorporate the truth that God will show you, your marriage *will* turn around, just as mine did. My marriage started improving after only two months because I did everything God told me to do. You have to purpose in your heart to submit to the Lord and to do all that he tells you to do concerning your marriage. Is my marriage perfect today? No, but it is so much better, and with each passing day it gets even better.

The Purpose of This Book

Marriage 101 was written for anyone who wants their marriage to be strong and healthy and is seeking a better relationship with their spouse. This book is a combination of book and workbook that is designed to help you examine areas in your life that need to be changed in order for you to have a successful and fulfilling marriage. By doing the exercises, you will begin to see God's plan for your marriage. They will help you to develop godly character and build your marriage upon a strong foundation. Ultimately, if you truly yield yourself to the change process, you will be transformed into Christ's image because you will be focusing on the vertical relationship between you and God rather than the horizontal relationship between you and your spouse.

At this time you may be going through a "wilderness experience," which I define as having problems in your marriage (such as

adultery, not getting along, one of you wanting to leave, or having feelings of loneliness or depression). Perhaps you're about to give up because it seems as though there is no hope.

I've heard many stories from failed marriages. Here are some of the reasons and excuses I've heard for getting married and then not staying in that marriage:

I'm not getting any younger.

I'll try it out and if it doesn't work, I'll leave.

I'm lonely.

He (or she) will change once we get married.

I'm pregnant.

I married the wrong person.

I could go on, but there is no point, because this book is for those who want a better relationship *regardless* of why they got married. In my own life, my marriage was almost destroyed because I sought to come up with my own solutions rather than seeking God concerning the problems and challenges we were facing. He is the one who designed, purposed, and ordained marriage from the beginning. Marriages are ending at an alarming rate, both inside and outside the church, because we don't understand that *change* is mandatory when bringing two completely different individuals together to become one in God.

Even if your marriage was built upon the wrong foundation (without Christ), this book will help you to fix that crumbling foundation and make it strong. If you are contemplating marriage, this book will prevent you from building your marriage upon any foundation other than Jesus Christ and the Word of God. And if you already have a good marriage (or even a great marriage), it will help you to develop a closer relationship with God and your spouse. (Note: If you are in an abusive situation, I suggest finding a Christian counselor to give you the support you need and help you seek God as to what you should do concerning your situation.)

God never intended for marriages to end in divorce. In Matthew 19:3–8, the Pharisees asked Jesus whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason.

Jesus replied, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female? For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”

Then the Pharisees asked, “Why, then, did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Jesus replied, “Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been this way.”

Divorce was never the intention of God. Our heavenly Father has given us every piece of marriage advice and counsel that we will ever need to have successful marriages. It is all in his Word. Therefore, no matter what is going on in your relationship right now, know that you alone cannot turn your relationship around, but “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

When my marriage was in ruins, I knew deep down inside that my husband and I had purpose as a couple. I knew that divorce was not the right thing to do or the answer to the problems we were facing. God had something great for us to do! I had no idea at that time, when I was ready to give up and in desperate need of help and answers, that God would use us to help other couples in similar situations.

But God had to change me before I could begin doing the things he was calling me to do. Before you begin the journey of your own transformation (change process), know that it will *not* be easy. It will take work, commitment, and Jesus on the inside of you in order for you to see the fruit of your labor. I challenge anyone who truly wants to be used by God and to fulfill his purpose in your life to do

all the things God is telling you to do concerning your marriage. If you do, the blessings from your obedience will be phenomenal.

If you truly want to be changed (conformed to Christ's image and likeness) and you want your marriage to be heavenly, you must be willing to do the following:

Be honest with yourself.

Stop looking at your spouse—what they are or are not doing.

Do all God is telling you to do (even when your mind is screaming “no!”).

Constantly pray and seek God for answers.

Take your time. Don't rush—change is a process!

Change, change, change—stop making excuses.

Are you willing?

How to Use This Book

This book provides an eight-part plan that you can study on your own or in a group. Take your time in working through it. Tailor your study time to fit your life and situation. Don't put a timeframe on how long it should take to complete each chapter. Please understand that this book is really about examining the areas in your life that you need to change. “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man [and woman] of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

I wanted this book to include practical tools to help you reflect upon the wonderful lessons you will learn while God is speaking to you through each chapter. Each chapter will set forth a goal in terms of developing new attitudes and behaviors based on biblical standards. These goals are summed up in the acronym ALTRUISM:

Act
Love
Talk
Repent
Unite
Identify
Submit
Minister

The word *altruism* means an unselfish regard for the welfare of others. It sums up who Christ is and why he died for us. Therefore, I used this word as an acronym to help you develop godly behavior according to God's Word. The acronym ALTRUISM, broken down and used throughout this book, describes how one should Act, Love, Talk (or communicate), Repent, Unite, Identify, Submit, and Minister in a biblical way to your spouse and loved ones according to the Word of God. The goal is to always think about what you do and how that affects your loved ones and then develop the godly behavior to help you improve those relationships.

Each chapter concludes with a "Why should I" question to challenge you to think about why you should act in the biblical manner being discussed. Throughout my own transformation, I kept asking God why: Why should I love my husband the way God was teaching me to love him, especially when I felt that my husband didn't deserve it? Why should I submit to a man who was not even serving God? I questioned everything. These sections will help you understand why we should develop each particular behavior. God wants all of us to have a victorious life and win souls for him.

Each chapter is followed by a workbook section that will help you to understand more clearly what is being discussed in that particular chapter. The workbook sections will help prepare you to be what God wants all of us as Christians to be: a light in a dark world. Each

workbook section includes several parts designed to help you learn more of what Scripture says about that chapter's subject and apply it to your own life and marriage. Below are the elements that are included in each chapter's workbook.

Biblical Example

These sections profile good and bad examples of married couples in the Bible. Although I provide a summary of each story, I've also referenced where you can find the entire story in the Bible. Read the full story and allow it to further help you improve your relationship with God and your spouse.

Scripture Meditation

“This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success” (Josh. 1:8 NASB). Since every part of *Marriage 101* is supported by Scripture, I urge you to meditate on all of the Scriptures provided to you. It is important that you don't overlook them so that you may hear what God wants to speak directly to you through them. I encourage you to read and reread the Scriptures listed in each Scripture Meditation section, underline them in your Bible, and meditate on them so you can get a greater understanding of what God is saying about your situation. Space is provided under each Scripture reference for you to write in your own words what God is saying to you.

Self-Examination

The questions posed in this section allow you to examine yourself. They are designed to help you reflect upon the mistakes made in your marriage and to highlight the areas that you need to change. Notice I said *you*, not your spouse. You must be willing to stop playing the

blame game and to take an “up close and personal” look at yourself and what you must do in order to see your marriage turn around.

Developing Character

This section is designed to help you develop godly character. Each one provides an assignment for you to work on in order to help improve your relationship with your spouse and others. Make the commitment to develop godly character in your life, which is the necessary ingredient for turning a failing marriage into a great one. Matthew 7:24 says that the one who *hears and does* what Jesus says is like a wise man who builds his house upon a rock. That is the goal: to build or rebuild our relationships upon a rock—a strong foundation in Christ.

Of course, you cannot work toward this goal in your own strength. That is why each chapter includes a prayer. This prayer is an opportunity for you to come into agreement with God concerning changes necessary in order for you to see improvements in your marriage. Make a decision that you will hear and respond to what the Holy Spirit tells you throughout this transforming process.

Affirmation

The affirmations are Scriptures rewritten to help you speak by faith. As you say them, you may not feel that these things are true about your marriage; however, saying them will help you to change your thinking and see your marriage in a different way.

Reflections

This section is designed to act as a journal. It is a place for you to write down and reflect upon all the things that God spoke to you while you read the chapter and worked through the workbook. Take advantage of this area to write down God-inspired notes that you will be able to reread for years to come.

My Prayer for You

As you prepare to begin *Marriage 101*, here is my prayer for you:

Father, I lift up every person who is seeking your will for their marriage, and I come into agreement with them right now that their lives and marriages will be forever changed. I agree with them that they will have godly marriages, the way you designed them to be—marriages made in heaven, here on earth, right now! Because I see the greatness of your plan by which they are built together in Christ, I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, and ask that you would grant, according to the riches of your glory, for them to be strengthened with power by your Spirit in their inner man, so that Christ may dwell in their hearts by faith and they may be rooted and grounded in love and experience a type of love that they cannot fully comprehend—the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love in them and working through them (as your Word says in Ephesians 3:14–19). In Jesus’s name, amen.

Introduction

A Sleeping Beauty Parable

As I was writing *Marriage 101*, I was led to revisit the story of Sleeping Beauty. After reading the story and then watching the movie, the Lord showed me that this fairy tale is a parable of Christ's love for the church. Jesus taught in many parables throughout his ministry, and even today we are able to receive revelation from them.

What is a parable? A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. The story of Sleeping Beauty has a valuable hidden meaning that can be revealed to you if you allow the Holy Spirit to show you. Then you will see the timeless story of God's eternal love for mankind and the sacrifice his Son, Jesus Christ, made over two thousand years ago by willingly dying on the cross to save mankind from their sins.

Before we begin our journey, allow me to set the stage for you and share the revelation the Lord gave to me about this classic fairy tale. Although the story is about a princess who falls in love with a prince, the underlying story is how the prince sacrificed his life for her and what that sacrifice accomplished. For those who might not be familiar with the Sleeping Beauty story, here it is in a nutshell.

The Story of Sleeping Beauty

Once upon a time, a king and queen celebrated the long-awaited birth of their daughter. It was a joyful day, and feasts were thrown throughout all the land to pay honor to her. All the people in the city brought gifts. Another king presented his son, and both monarchs prayed that their kingdoms would one day unite through the marriage of their children. In honor of the baby princess, three good fairies descended from the sky to give three special gifts. The first gave the gift of beauty. The second gave the gift of song. But before the third could give her gift, an evil fairy appeared in a blaze of fire.

The evil fairy was upset that no one had invited her to the special celebration, and in her anger she cursed the baby, saying that before she turned sixteen, she would die by pricking her finger on a spinning wheel.

Needless to say, the king and queen were quite upset. To comfort them, the good fairies reminded them that the third fairy had not yet given her gift.

The king and queen exclaimed, “Can you reverse the curse?”

“No,” the good fairy replied, “but I can modify it. Instead of dying, she will sleep until true love kisses. Then she will awake.”

No one—neither the king nor the good fairies—could reverse the curse. Only true love could revoke it. In an effort to save his daughter from pricking her finger, the king made a decree that all the spinning wheels in the city should be burned. The townspeople brought their spinning wheels and threw them into a bonfire.

In the meantime, the good fairies tried to find a way to harm the evil fairy. However, they realized they could only do good; they had no evil in them. So how could they stop the evil one from hurting her? One of the good fairies came up with an idea. The one thing they knew about the evil fairy was that she didn’t have what they had—love. The evil one didn’t know or understand love or any of the characteristics that make up love.

In a vain attempt to protect their daughter, the king and queen decided to keep the child hidden and safe until she passed her sixteenth birthday. As part of their plan, the good fairies would live like mortals to raise the princess in a hidden place. While in hiding, the princess had to live as a peasant girl, which was beneath her birthright.

For many sad and lonely years for the king and queen and their townspeople, their beautiful princess remained hidden. During those hidden years, the princess continued to grow and mature into a beautiful young woman. Although she appeared on the outside as if she had everything, she was lonely. She was not living in the fullness of who she was as a princess, and she had not yet met her true prince.

Then the princess met a man, whom she did not know was a prince, and they fell in love. The prince rushed to tell his father how he had fallen in love with this peasant girl. But his father, the king, was very upset with the news. A peasant girl?

The princess also ran home to tell the good news that she had fallen in love. To her surprise, she was told of her identity—that she was a princess, not a peasant—and was taken to meet her family. Before she could see her parents, the evil fairy put her into a trance, and she followed a spirit until she came to a spinning wheel.

A voice said, “Go, touch it,” and the princess pricked her finger—just as the evil fairy had said she would—and fell into a deep sleep.

The good fairies didn’t know how to tell the princess’s father the terrible news. Instead, they put the whole kingdom to sleep. One act—a finger pricked on a spinning wheel—put the whole kingdom to sleep. However, before the king fell asleep, the prince’s father tried to tell the other king that their kingdoms would not unite because the prince had fallen in love with a peasant girl. One of the good fairies overheard it, and immediately she knew that the prince was the princess’s true love.

To thicken the plot, when the fairies arrived at the cottage where the prince was, they found that the evil fairy had already taken him. Now they would have to go to the forbidden mountain to help the prince. At that time the evil fairy and her ugly creatures were celebrating with fire and laughter. They were teasing the prince, who was in the dungeon in chains, about true love *not* conquering all. When the good fairies reached the prince, they told him that they couldn't help him because the powers of the evil one were great, but they could give him a shield of virtue and a sword of truth, which they called the weapons of righteousness, to help him triumph over evil.

After receiving these weapons from the good fairies, the prince proceeded to do exactly what they had told him to do. When the ugly creatures came against him, he fought them off one by one. As each shot their fiery darts, the darts hit his shield and turned into flowers. The evil creatures pushed huge boulders off the top of the mountain to crush the prince, but before the rocks could hit him, they turned into bubbles. Then, as the prince galloped on his horse toward the gate, they dropped hot molten lava at the gateway. But a rainbow suddenly appeared over the exit, and the lava didn't touch him.

The prince finally made it out from the dungeon and away from the evil one, but the evil fairy put up a barrier—a forest of thorns around the castle—so he couldn't reach Sleeping Beauty, who was lying asleep inside. The prince began cutting and chopping his way through the thick forest of thorns.

All of a sudden the evil fairy turned into a dragon and told the prince that he would now have to deal with all the powers of hell. The fight was intense, and the dragon seemed to be winning the battle. Although the prince was obviously exhausted and appeared to be overcome by his enemy, he continued to persevere. He fell down and got back up and fell down and got back up. He even lost his shield. Then the fairies cast a blessing on the sword so that evil would die

and good would endure. He threw the sword at the dragon, and it struck the dragon in the heart.

Recognizing the Symbolism

Now let's look at the story again to see its biblical symbolism. Sleeping Beauty (the princess) represents the church—she is the bride. The prince represents the bridegroom—Jesus. The princess is “sleeping” as a result of the curse that is put upon her, which represents darkness and is symbolic of man's sin, rebellion, and ignorance. In John 12:35 Jesus says that he who walks about in the dark does not know where he is going. He is drifting. The evil fairy represents Satan, and her ugly creatures represent demons. As we know, light represents truth, goodness, and the kingdom of God.

Just like Sleeping Beauty, mankind was under a curse—sad and lonely for years—because of the sin committed by Adam and Eve. We were in darkness and no longer had a direct relationship with God. Why? Because Adam and Eve's sin was disobedience, and sin separates us from God. When a person has not yet met or developed a relationship with the Prince of Peace, although their lives may appear on the outside to have everything, they are not living in the fullness of who God has called them to be.

The fact that Sleeping Beauty is raised as a peasant girl is also symbolic. Every time I read that Sleeping Beauty was a peasant girl, God reminded me of the gift of salvation that was given to the Gentile nation through the redemptive blood of Jesus Christ. Although the Jews were God's chosen people under the old covenant, anyone who accepts his dear Son, Jesus Christ, has been adopted into his royal family under the new covenant. God instructs us in his Word, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which

had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:9–10). The two kingdoms in the story represent two nations, the Jews and the Gentiles, which are now united as one because of the noble actions of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. Under the new covenant, there is neither Jew nor Gentile but one body under the leadership of the Lord Jesus Christ (see Gal. 3:28). The three fairies represent the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

In this story, the beautiful princess is put under an evil spell. God showed me that just like the evil fairy put the curse on Sleeping Beauty, Satan put a curse on mankind. When the serpent deceived Eve and she and Adam ate from the forbidden tree (see Genesis 3), sin entered into the world. But the third good fairy brought comfort, saying that while the curse could not be reversed, it could be changed. I see this as the Holy Spirit giving comfort, just as Jesus said he would do: “And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever” (John 14:16). The Greek word for “comforter” is *parakletos*, which literally means “one called alongside to help or an advocate.” The Holy Spirit is called “another” comforter because, as 1 John 2:1 states, Jesus himself is our advocate.

The third fairy’s solution used the power of love, which the evil fairy did not have. My Bible defines the fruit of the Spirit as “love,” which is made up of the following characteristics, as stated in Galatians 5:22–23: *Love* is the willing, sacrificial giving of oneself for the benefit of another without thought of return. *Joy* is gladness of heart. *Peace* is tranquility of mind, freeing oneself from worry or fear. *Long-suffering* is patience with others, a disposition quietly bearing injury, the opposite of a short temper. *Gentleness* is kindness. *Goodness* is generosity. *Faith*, in this context, means dependability, faithfulness. *Meekness* is humility—being teachable and thinking of others before your own needs. *Temperance* is self-control or the ability to control your desires. In our own lives, these are the characteristics we need to beat Satan at his

deceitful tactics. As born-again believers, we must overcome evil with good!

The very nature of God is love. If we respond to the evil one with God's love, then Satan is paralyzed and unable to retaliate, because we have just stopped him in his tracks. This is how we can keep the devil out of our marriages, out of our homes, and out of our lives—by walking in God's character. Love is a powerful weapon.

Love is also seen in action through the fairies who hid the princess away to protect her. Jesus, too, gave up his birthright and lived as a human here on the earth to accomplish God's perfect plan to save mankind from their sins.

The love between the prince and the princess is symbolic of God's powerful love for us. I am reminded of what Scripture says in 1 John 4:19: "We love him, because he first loved us." When the prince met the princess, he was so excited that he didn't care about who she was or where she came from. Our Prince, Jesus, feels the same way about us when we receive his love and accept him as Lord and Savior of our lives. He doesn't care who we are, what we've done in the past, or what sins we are committing. He just loves us and receives us as we are. That is what is so awesome about the good news of Jesus Christ.

Sleeping Beauty isn't just a fairy tale. As I was watching the movie, the image of Sleeping Beauty being lured into a curse by an evil spirit was an awakening moment for me. I realized that the voice of the evil fairy was the same evil voice that told Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is also the same voice that tells you and me to do something that is contrary to what God is telling us to do.

The prince trapped in the dungeon—a symbol of hell—is a picture of Jesus descending into the lower parts of the earth (or hell; see Eph. 4:9) to strip the enemy of everything he had stolen from God so that it could be restored to us.

When I saw the fight between the prince and the dragon, the Holy Spirit gave me a vivid picture of what our Prince, Jesus Christ, had to endure before ascending to the right hand of the Father. We have to realize that it was only Jesus—not the angels, not the Holy Spirit—who had to go to hell, defeat the devil, and save his beloved (you and me) from her sin. I could see Jesus literally fighting Satan in the kingdom of darkness, destroying all the works of the devil, triumphing over sin and death, reclaiming everything that rightfully belonged to God, and reconciling mankind back to the Father. All that Jesus endured and the benefits of the price he paid on the cross are available to anyone who accepts him as Lord and Savior of their lives. That is why the gates of hell cannot prevail against us—because Jesus has already won the battle. Thank you, Jesus!

Just as the fairy-tale prince was given weapons of warfare against evil, so God gives *us* weapons of warfare. Ephesians 6:10–17 confirms that the spiritual weapons given to the believer will help us triumph over evil. The *helmet of salvation* protects the mind from Satan’s lies. We put on the *breastplate of righteousness* by reminding ourselves that God looks at us through Christ’s righteousness; therefore, we are not condemned when we do something wrong. We can repent and move on in our righteousness. Just as Jesus allows us to go free without guilt and shame from our sins, in the marriage covenant we must learn to implement the same practice with our spouses. We put on the *belt of truth* by learning what the Bible says so that when the enemy attacks, we’ll know the truth of God’s Word and it will hold us up. The *sword of the Spirit* is the word (or guidance) God directly gives you pertaining to a particular situation. For example, if the enemy is attacking you in your marriage, and God has already given you a word about that situation, you fight the enemy with that word. Then strap on the *shoes of the gospel of peace*, knowing that you can stand firm in the battle against Satan. Hold the *shield of faith* high by putting your trust in God for victory when Satan attacks and tries to defeat you. This means that you won’t doubt what God says, because

you take him at his word and believe his promises. Scripture says, “Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked” (Eph. 6:16).

Just as the prince used his weapons to slay the evil fairy, as believers, we must slay evil with the spiritual sword given to us. We must use the Word of God to cut down the cares of this world with which Satan tries to entrap us.

We Have the Victory

Just like the prince in this story, you may be in the midst of the worst battle of your life right now, and you may seem to be losing that fight. Just know that the Word is blessed. According to Mark 11:22–24, if you have faith in God and don’t doubt in your heart, you can have what you desire. You have already won! The victory is yours if you just hold on to God’s Word and what he has spoken to you. We can have confidence because our Prince of Peace has already defeated the enemy. Because of his actions, we are destined to overcome and win, no matter what situation we may find ourselves in. We *will* triumph over the enemy.

In the Bible, Jesus promises that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church (see Matt. 16:18), which gives me a picture of the church going on the offensive and the devil being on the defensive. Since the devil has no authority over us, we can aggressively attack and snatch what belongs to us, including our loved ones, out of darkness into God’s glorious kingdom of light.

In the tale of Sleeping Beauty, immediately upon the death of the dragon, the kingdom was no longer in darkness. The weeds and entanglements of the forest were gone, and the sun came out in all its brilliance and glory. The prince had beaten the evil one. The curse was now reversed. This scene demonstrates what happens when you first receive Christ as your Savior. Before you come to Jesus, your life is in total darkness and your heart is entangled in

a forest of sin. Then you hear the message of the gospel, and God's love immediately comes into your heart. The darkness that once clouded your life is now overpowered by the radiance and brilliance of God's glory—his presence. You are immediately removed from the kingdom of darkness, and the enemy of your soul is defeated. You are now a born-again child of God. Thank you, Jesus!

The prince ran to his beloved and sealed his love for her with a kiss, and she was awakened with love in her heart. Instantly all the people throughout the city were awakened too. The prince and princess were married, the two kingdoms were finally united as one, and they lived happily ever after. Unlike this fable, however, Jesus's fight against Satan was only the beginning. He hadn't finished God's work. In order to unite the kingdoms—in order to allow all people to enter the kingdom of heaven—he had to seal the new covenant with his blood. Ephesians 2:11–22 describes this uniting, and verse 16 says, “And [He designed] to reconcile to God both [Jew and Gentile, united] in a single body by means of His cross, thereby killing the mutual enmity and bringing the feud to an end” (AMP).

Why did Jesus die? One, that all people throughout the earth (Jews and Gentiles) could partake of God's love through the gift of salvation; and two, to end the feud for our souls once and for all.

Ephesians 4:10 (AMP) says that Jesus died that he might fill all things (from the lowest to the highest). What are just a few of those things? He died so that:

- sin would no longer dominate us, because we have forgiveness;
- Satan would be defeated, and we would rule and reign over him;
- we would no longer be subject to death, because we have eternal life;
- though we were once powerless, we would now have power;

- we would no longer be subject to the law, because we now have grace;
- we would have no fear, because we live by faith; and
- hatred would be substituted with love.

Of course, I could go on and on, but I'll stop here at his love. It was because of his love for you and me that Jesus gave his very life. God loved you and me so much that he manifested himself in human flesh (remember, as John 1 says, the Word was God and the Word was made flesh in Jesus); and then he showed off his miraculous powers and wisdom on the earth, died on the cross, was buried, and then was resurrected.

I just gave a few examples of what Jesus conquered and fulfilled. There are many more. Now I want to also show you a few things God had in mind when he allowed his Son to die for you and me. Through Jesus, we have:

- his divine deliverance—“He personally bore our sins in His [own] body on the tree [as on an altar and offered Himself on it], that we might die (cease to exist) to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24 AMP).
- his faith—by faith we understand that the world was framed by the Word of God; so then, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (see Heb. 11:3 and Rom. 10:17).
- his grace—Jesus says, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).
- his Spirit—“In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph. 1:13).
- his power—“According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the

knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue” (2 Peter 1:3).

- his promises—“And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).
- his love—“And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us” (Rom. 5:5).
- his Word—“In the beginning [before all time] was the Word (Christ), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God Himself” (John 1:1 AMP).
- his forgiveness—“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).
- his help—“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father” (John 14:12).
- his blessings—“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

The question I have for you is this: why did he die if we don’t experience God’s love and live in what he left for us? Paul simply puts it like this: “I don’t want to frustrate my God by not accepting his grace: for if who I am is by going to church only, then Christ died in vain” (Gal. 2:21, my paraphrase). People of God, accept the precious gift God gave us: his love through Jesus’s death on the cross.

God wants you to fully understand this “[that you may really come] to know [practically, through experience for yourselves] the love of Christ, which far surpasses mere knowledge [without experience]; that you may be filled [through all your being] unto all the fullness of God [may have the richest measure of the divine

Presence, and become a body wholly filled and flooded with God Himself]!” (Eph. 3:19 AMP).

This is what Jesus did for you and me. Hallelujah! Christ is in us—we were flooded with him on the inside of us when we gave our life to him. Therefore, we can go before God with boldness knowing God hears our prayers (Eph. 3:12). Because there is one God and one mediator between God and men—that is, Jesus Christ (see 1 Tim. 2:5)—we now have access to God directly, just as Adam and Eve did before they sinned.

The Image of Christ

Who is the image of the invisible God? Jesus. Why did God create man? The answer is in Genesis 1:26–28:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

I define the *image of God* as the moral and spiritual character of God. When you are in the image of God, people can see a difference in you. They see God in you. I also believe that to be the *likeness of God* is to conduct oneself as God conducts himself—to act like God—by the Spirit of God working through you.

Therefore, it is God’s desire that we all conform to the image of Christ. “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:29 NIV).

conform: a willingness to act in accordance with or to comply with God's standards, not your own (or anyone else's); to become similar in character and form

Being conformed to Christ's image will mean a change in how we relate to others, including—and especially—our spouses. It means that we must be the one who makes the necessary steps toward having a great marriage even when our spouses do not. It means that I am willing to love and to give to my spouse even when they don't deserve it. Our marriages should reflect Jesus's love for the church. Everything God does is motivated by love. Jesus's life exemplified his unconditional love for mankind. He gave his very life for us. I know for sure that you did not go to the depths of hell to fight Satan. Nor were you beaten so badly that people couldn't recognize you. Nor were you mocked with a crown of thorns on your head or nails driven through your hands on a cross. Nor were you buried and resurrected on the third day. Now that is love! God is love, and we are created in his image and likeness. Therefore, the love he freely gave you, you should give to others. The forgiveness he freely gave you, you should give to others. The blessings he freely gave you, you should give to others. Do you get the point?

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whosoever shall

confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is [love], so are we [love] in this world.

1 John 4:7–17

Jesus is our prime example, and we are to follow and be like him. For example, when we accept Christ in our lives, we become the bride of Christ. We are in him and he in us. Since there is a covenant between you and Christ, when you mess up, you repent (acknowledge wrongdoing and make a commitment to change) and God forgives you. The Bible states that Christ will never leave us nor forsake us. He is committed to his relationship with us. Likewise, in the marriage covenant, we become one with our spouses; therefore, when we have problems or seemingly irreconcilable differences, we should repent and be willing to forgive. We must learn to stay and work out those differences because we are committed to the relationship just like our Savior is committed to us.

Your happiness in your marriage is dependent upon your obedience to God in your thoughts, words, and actions and not dictated by the behavior of your spouse. By obeying the Lord in your daily walk, you show your love for Christ and demonstrate his lordship over your life. Say, for example, that you and your spouse just had a disagreement. You storm out of the house to go to Bible study at church. The Lord tells you to go back into the house and apologize before going to church. You don't want to because you feel that you are right and your spouse is wrong. What do you do?

- (a) Go to church without apologizing.
- (b) Go back into the house and apologize because God told you to.

God's Word tells us that if you have an argument with a brother, you should leave your offering at the altar, go apologize, and then come back to present your offering (see Matt. 5:23–24). Did you know that your offering could be your praise and worship to him? Guess what: if you have an argument with your spouse and then go to church *without* apologizing, God will not accept your praise and worship. You will have wasted your time. The answer is (b), so go back inside and apologize. Your ego may be bruised a little, but you will demonstrate your love for God by your obedience, and when you get home from church, there will be peace in your home.

God has given us, as born-again believers, all the provisions we need to have a great marriage. I call them the three S's: his Son, his sword, and his Spirit.

1. God has given us his Son, so that we can live a righteous life through him (see 1 John 4:9–10).
2. God has given us his sword (the Bible, the Word of God), which alone will provide specific direction for every area of life (see Eph. 6:17).
3. God has sent his Spirit to dwell in us, to lead us into all truth, to empower us, to help us in times of prayer, and to help us understand the things of God (see John 16:13–14; Rom. 8:26; 1 Cor. 3:16).

In his Word God clearly tells us not to conform to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (see Rom. 12:2).

transform: to change inwardly. Spiritual transformation means allowing God to be the surgeon; with the help of the Holy Spirit, you undergo a complete makeover in which God's character is developed inwardly while the results are seen outwardly

How do we renew our minds? Ephesians 4:23 says, “And be constantly renewed in the spirit of your mind [having a fresh mental and spiritual attitude]” (AMP).

It is the Word of God that will renew your mind and transform you and your marriage into all that God has called it to be. Below shows you how the Word of God will help you:

- The Word cleanses my mind (see John 15:3).
- The Word sanctifies me or sets me apart (see John 17:17).
- Obeying the Word purifies my soul (see 1 Peter 1:22).

In order to be transformed and conformed into the image and likeness of Christ, you must renew your mind. To be like Christ, we have to:

Act biblically (in thoughts, words, and deeds)

Love biblically (love others unconditionally)

Talk biblically (use the Word as a weapon)

Repent biblically (change our behavior and thoughts)

Unite biblically (become one as husband and wife)

Identify biblically (understand who we are in Christ)

Submit biblically (submit ourselves to others as we would to God)

Minister biblically (live by faith and allow others to experience God through us)

These biblical characteristics form the acronym ALTRUISM, which is the foundation of how we should live as Christians. The more we begin to develop these characteristics, the more we become like Christ.

altruism: a selfless regard or concern for the well-being of others. Caring for others is more important than caring for yourself.

Becoming like Christ is a process. The first step is to believe that you can change from your old ways (the way you think, act, and talk). The second step is to renew your mind by allowing your thoughts to line up with God's Word. Case in point: you may say you believe in divorce. Why? Because the world's system allows divorce. But Moses told the people of Israel that divorce was instituted only because of the hardness of their hearts (selfishness). It was never what God intended. God's Word says he hates divorce (see Mal. 2:16 AMP); therefore you, as a Christian, should hate divorce and never let it become part of your vocabulary. (Note: It is important for each person to develop their own relationship with God so they can understand the Word of God for themselves and do not leave it to anyone else's interpretation. If you are in an abusive situation, search the Bible—God will tell you what to do.)

The final step in becoming like Christ is to be committed to doing what the Word says. You must be willing to submit to God's Word and willing to make the necessary changes in your character. In your obedience, you will be blessed. It has been several years since I began my transformation process, and I am just starting to see the fruit of my labor (the blessing of the Lord) concerning my husband and his transformation. As for me, I am not the same person, and I am very driven to make sure that people will experience God through me, especially my spouse and children.

We now understand how we can be transformed—but *why* should we be transformed? As Christians, our desire should be to seek and please God by learning his ways, his plans, and his purposes for our lives. If you have the desire to fulfill that purpose, you must develop the character of God, which is, simply put, love (see 1 Corinthians 13).

If you are married, you and your spouse should reflect Jesus's unconditional love toward one another. If you do not, you will easily find yourselves part of the skyrocketing divorce statistics. You must

make a conscious decision to change. It is no longer acceptable to hide behind the excuse “that is just how I am.” We all need to make adjustments in every relationship we enter, whether at work, in our churches, or in our homes. In order to reflect the love of Christ, each spouse has a responsibility to be changed (transformed) into the image of Christ, which is love.

We have been trained by the world that “love is 50–50” or to ask, “What have you done for me lately?” That kind of thinking is selfish and conditional. It is not godly. I thank God that Jesus wasn’t selfish and that his love wasn’t conditional when he died on the cross for you and me. We have to learn how to love our spouses (and all people, for that matter) unconditionally. This simply means that you love a person because they exist, not because of what they do or do not do for you. The only way you can love unconditionally is to be changed by God through his Word. Furthermore, people in the world need to see and experience the love of God, and that can only be done through believers, the body of Christ. Will you accept today the challenge to be an instrument of love that God can use?

Remember, Jesus gave us all we need to have successful marriages. Let’s use all his wisdom and love to develop and nurture the very special gift God gave us: our spouses. Let’s honor Jesus’s love by demonstrating his love to others, especially our spouses.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for showing me areas that I need to work on so that I can display who you are here on the earth. May I decrease right now so that you may increase in me. Continue to perfect me and mold me into your image. Father, continue to show me the areas in my life where I need to be more selfless toward my spouse and my family. I thank you, Lord, that with your help,

I can change. I declare that I am transformed. I make a deliberate decision to do your will and heed what the Spirit of the Lord is telling me. Amen.

For an additional resource, visit the *Marriage 101* website, www.marriage101.us, for a free copy of “The Fruit of Love from A to Z.”

ALTRUISM:

Christ's Unconditional Love

Spread love everywhere you go: first of all in your own house. Give love to your wife or husband, to your children, to a next door neighbor. . . . Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness; kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greeting.

Mother Teresa

The goal of this section is to help you conform to the image of Christ, which fulfills our created purpose, as seen in Genesis 1:26–28. We were created in God's image and likeness; therefore, our goal should be to be like him. This section will show you the true characteristic of Christ, which is his unconditional love for all mankind. Jesus is the ultimate picture of the definition of *altruism*, which is an unselfish regard for the welfare of others. This section will help you to understand why you were created and how you can be transformed into his image and likeness.

Biblical Example: Jesus and the Church

Jesus had a purpose. He came that all might be saved (see John 16:7). His life was the ultimate example of love and obedience to his Father. His love and obedience allows all those who believe in

what he did to be saved from the penalty of sin and eternal death (see Rom. 5:21). His love for us was selfless. He was able to endure the pain and shame of the cross because he saw before him the joy of you and me in right relationship with God (see Heb. 12:2). He is our biblical example of displaying selfless love to others, especially to our spouses.

Ephesians 5:25 states that husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the church and gave himself for it. Verse 33 tells the wife to see to it that she reverences (or respects) her husband. There is no greater love than for a man (or woman) to lay down his (or her) life for another. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked God to let the cup of suffering pass from him, but his ultimate statement was, “Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39). In other words, Jesus was not eager to endure what he was about to endure on the cross, but he realized he had to fulfill his purpose. It was not about him but about God’s will.

In marriage, sometimes we may have to say, “Okay, Lord, not my will but yours be done.” For example, your spouse may want a family member to move into your house, and you may be totally against it. You pray about it and tell God, “Not my will but yours.” Your position of humility and submission allows God to move through you. As you yield to the leading of the Holy Spirit in your relationship with your spouse, you begin to see how this change has a positive impact upon those you come in contact with as they witness God’s love moving through you.

Scripture Meditation

Meditate on the following Scriptures, which will show you ways to be transformed into the image of Christ. Ask God to speak to you through them and to reveal to you where you need to change to better reflect these characteristics in your own life. In the space after each verse write down anything God reveals to you.

Hebrews 12:1–2 (Message)

“Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!”

Galatians 2:20

“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”

Romans 8:4–5 (AMP)

“So that the righteous and just requirement of the Law might be fully met in us who live and move not in the ways of the flesh but

in the ways of the Spirit [our lives governed not by the standards and according to the dictates of the flesh, but controlled by the Holy Spirit]. For those who are according to the flesh and are controlled by its unholy desires set their minds on and pursue those things which gratify the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit and are controlled by the desires of the Spirit set their minds on and seek those things which gratify the [Holy] Spirit.”

Ephesians 5:1–2 (Message)

“Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.”

Romans 12:1–2 (AMP)

“I appeal to you therefore, brethren, and beg of you in view of [all] the mercies of God, to make a decisive dedication of your bodies

[presenting all your members and faculties] as a living sacrifice, holy (devoted, consecrated) and well pleasing to God, which is your reasonable (rational, intelligent) service and spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world (this age), [fashioned after and adapted to its external, superficial customs], but be transformed (changed) by the [entire] renewal of your mind [by its new ideals and its new attitude], so that you may prove [for yourselves] what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God, even the thing which is good and acceptable and perfect [in His sight for you].”

Self-Examination

1. Why did I marry my spouse? (List your reasons.)
2. Do people (including my spouse and children) see Jesus in me—compassion, patience, forgiveness, faithfulness, and obedience to God’s Word? If not, what areas do I need to improve?
3. What is missing in my life? In what areas do I feel unfulfilled? Do I look to my spouse for fulfillment? If so, where am I in my relationship with God? How can God help me feel fulfilled in those areas?

4. Am I trying to fix things in my relationship, or do I allow God to fix them? For example, when things are not going the way I think they should, do I tend to make irrational decisions? If my spouse is not changing a behavior I think they should change, do I nag and judge or tell them what they should do?

5. Do I really understand God's perspective on the covenant of marriage? Am I willing to do it his way? Write a prayer to God asking him, "Where do I start?"

Developing Character

Rank the following areas that need improvement in your life, beginning with #1 as the area that needs the greatest improvement, #2 as the next greatest, and so on (see definitions on page 24 to help you).

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Long-suffering
- Gentleness
- Goodness
- Faith
- Meekness
- Temperance

Now that you know which areas you need the most work in, focus on the area that needs the greatest improvement until you gain some victory, then start on another. Never take your focus off

