

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

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## Chapter 1: The Greatest Challenge in the World

1. Why did you choose to get married (or why do you want to get married)? Is this a biblical reason?
2. How do you think most Christians would describe the purpose of marriage?
3. Were you encouraged or discouraged by the author's premise that marriage is a crucible in which we can learn more about ourselves and about God? What has been your personal experience in this regard?
4. What do you think of Gary's critique of romantic love as the basis—or measurement of success—for marriage? How have your attitudes toward romantic love changed over time?
5. Do you agree with Gary that, in one sense, moderns “ask too much of marriage?” If so, in what way?
6. What has your marriage revealed to you about your sinful attitudes, selfish behaviors, and other character flaws? Why do you think marriage brings so many character issues to the surface?
7. Gary says God is the One who ultimately fulfills us, not our mate. If this is so, what contribution does our mate make to our life?
8. How do you react to the idea that God may have designed marriage to make us holy even more than to make us happy?

## Chapter 2: Finding God in Marriage

1. What aspect, event, or element of your marriage has taught you the most about how God loves us?
2. How can a discouraged spouse directly apply Gary's admonition to seek God in the midst of disappointments rather than to

- obsess over where the spouse falls short? What mental exercises would you suggest?
3. Can you think of any analogies that Gary doesn't mention about how marriage reveals God and his love to the world?
  4. Gary contrasts a human-centered view of marriage (staying put as long as our desires and expectations are being met) and a God-centered view (preserving the marriage because it brings glory to God and points a sinful world to a reconciling Creator). What most motivates you to maintain and preserve your marital commitment?
  5. In your own marital experience, are you motivated more by what makes you happy or by what pleases God? How can churches support and encourage this latter and higher motivation?
  6. What aspect of God's character would you most like your marriage to reveal to the world? How can you accomplish this?

## Chapter 3: Learning to Love

1. Compare and contrast what our culture usually means by the word *love* with how the Bible defines it.
2. Discuss some of the ways that marriage seems uniquely designed to train us in how to love.
3. If somebody tried to describe your love for God solely by how well you love your spouse, what would he or she conclude? What are one or two things you can do that would serve your spouse, strengthen your marriage, and please God?
4. How much time do you spend thinking about how to make your spouse happy, compared to the amount of time you spend thinking about how well your spouse is pleasing you? Do you think your answer is about right, or do you need to do better in this area?
5. Discuss how marriage can reveal men's poor attitudes and prejudices about women, and how it can also illuminate women's critical thoughts about men. Is your marriage confronting these stereotypes, or is it suffering from them? What can you do to uncover and renounce such negative attitudes?

6. God loves us in spite of our flaws. How does marriage teach us to love our spouse in spite of their imperfections?
7. You and your spouse are different in many ways. Which differences have you grown to appreciate? Which ones still annoy you? Are these differences something you can learn from with better understanding? How so?

## Chapter 4: Holy Honor

1. How is any lack of respect or active contempt for your spouse negatively affecting your own life and the lives of your children?
2. Are you more apt to look for “evidences of God’s grace” in your spouse, or is it your pattern to be consumed with your mate’s flaws? What practical steps can you take to choose respect over contempt?
3. What evidences of grace can you see in your mate when you take the time to look for them? What are personal qualities of your mate and contributions your mate makes to your life for which you should regularly thank God?
4. How many of your marital disagreements are rooted in gender differences as compared to personal disagreements? How can recognizing such distinctions improve the quality of your relationship?
5. How does trying to understand our spouses—rather than judging them—help us to fulfill the biblical command to respect them?
6. Discuss some of the ways that you can *actively* honor your spouse.
7. How would your marriage benefit if you and your spouse became better at showing respect to each other?
8. Gary writes that “We’re not married in a carefree Garden of Eden. We’re married in the midst of many responsibilities that compete for our energy.” In light of this, do you believe you give your spouse sufficient leeway and understanding?

## Chapter 5: The Soul’s Embrace

1. Do you know any married couples who seem unusually successful in prayer? If so, what stands out about their prayer habits?

2. Has your prayer life ever been hindered due to negative attitudes toward your spouse? Are there any negative attitudes hindering your prayer life today?
3. Gary writes, “We’re told that if we want to have a stronger marriage, we should improve our prayer lives. But Peter tells us that we should improve our marriages so that we can improve our prayer lives.” How can you imagine your prayer life improving if your marriage can be closer to the way God intended it to be?
4. How would you say the quality and quantity of sexual activity in your marriage affects the way you pray? The way your spouse prays?
5. Gary writes, “Dissension is a major prayer-killer. Looked at from this perspective, the institution of marriage is designed to force us to become reconcilers. That’s the only way we’ll survive spiritually.” How well do you and your spouse resolve disagreements in a timely manner? What happens to your praying when you are upset with your spouse?
6. What idea about sexual activity and prayer intrigued you the most? What other aspects of being married might contain “hidden” lessons about prayer? How has your marriage helped you grow in prayer?

## Chapter 6: The Cleansing of Marriage

1. What most surprised you about your own sin during the first year or two of your marriage?
2. What is your overall reaction to the idea that God intends to use your marriage to expose your sin and help you grow out of it?
3. Is your marriage a safe place for your sin to be revealed? How can it become more nurturing in this regard?
4. How might Gary’s comment, “Couples don’t fall out of love so much as they fall out of repentance,” help restore a troubled marriage?
5. Do you agree with Gary that “much of our marital dissatisfaction stems from self-hatred”? How can we avoid the “flight” mentality—

running from what we've done or become—and instead use our marriage to fight the sin that's revealed?

6. Why do you think spouses are often afraid to confess their sins or admit their faults? What needs to happen in our marriages so that it's safe to be more transparent? (Or what is true of your marriage that has helped you become transparent?)
7. Identify the top two weaknesses in the way you relate to your mate. What are the positive virtues that are the moral/spiritual opposites of those two weaknesses (for example, harshness/gentleness; criticism/encouragement)? Which one will you work on this week?
8. Have you ever used your knowledge of a weakness in your mate to shame or punish him or her? How could you have used that situation to build up your spouse and encourage spiritual growth?

## Chapter 7: Sacred History

1. How can understanding Israel's history with God (times of celebration, anger, infidelity, and silence) help couples grow in all seasons of marriage? What lessons have you learned that will help you face the “angry” or “silent” seasons?
2. Do you agree with Gary that “we live in a nation of quitters”? How can the church more effectively teach about the benefits of perseverance when addressing such a culture?
3. What do you see as the relationship between perseverance and personal holiness? What “messages” of modern life are hostile to perseverance and holiness?
4. How can the concept of perseverance and persistence help you be patient with your spouse's growth in holiness?
5. What would you lose if the sacred history of your marriage was ended? What would your spouse lose? Your children? Your church?
6. Spend some time talking with your spouse about which stories should go into the sacred history of your marriage, to be told to your children, family, and friends.
7. Discuss how respecting and telling the sacred history of your marriage can foster community with other couples you know.

8. How can you make the idea of eternity and its rewards a practical motivation for perseverance in the daily grind of married life?
9. How do you want people to describe your marriage at your golden wedding anniversary?

## Chapter 8: Sacred Struggle

1. Whom do you admire for the way they handled difficulties in their marriage? What do you admire most about these individuals?
2. What is the difference between productive, spiritually profitable marital struggle and debilitating marital struggle? How can the difficulty in *your* marriage produce positive spiritual results?
3. How did you answer Gary's question, "Would I rather live a life of ease and comfort and remain immature in Christ, or am I willing to be seasoned with suffering if by doing so I am conformed to the image of Christ?"
4. Gary says that a good marriage "takes struggle. You must crucify your selfishness. You must at times confront, and at other times confess." Do you think this is overstated? Are there any exceptions? How might this belief provide perspective for couples going through difficult times?
5. How can sorrow "set us free," as Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote? How can we encourage each other—as Anne urges—to add "understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable" to our disappointments and sorrow?
6. Do you think Abraham Lincoln and Anne Morrow Lindbergh would have accomplished what they did if both had been in relatively "easy" marriages? Why or why not?
7. How can the Christian belief in heaven encourage couples to persevere?
8. How do you think God can use the specific difficulties in your marriage to refine your character and prepare you for future ministry?
9. Why are difficulties and suffering inevitable in every marriage? What happens if we run from them? What happens if we face them head-on?

10. Do you and your mate face the difficulties in your marriage differently? What can you learn from your spouse's approach? What can your spouse learn from your approach?

## Chapter 9: Falling Forward

1. Donald Harvey argues that intimate relationships “are the result of planning. They are built. The sense of union that comes with genuine spiritual closeness will not just happen.” Over the past year, how much thought, prayer, and effort have you put into building “genuine spiritual closeness?”
2. What makes you feel like your spouse is “falling forward” toward you? What makes your spouse feel like you are falling forward toward them?
3. In which arena is it most difficult for you to grow toward your spouse: physical intimacy, emotional intimacy, or spiritual intimacy? Ask your spouse what you can do to improve in your weakest area.
4. What accommodation can you make in your marriage in order to foster deeper fellowship and intimacy?
5. Is there a “file cabinet” in your marriage’s “confessional”? What do you have to do to forgive your spouse and get rid of the filing cabinet?
6. Christian marriage expects that you give the “gift of self” to your mate. What are some ways in which you think your spouse truly wants to receive you? How can you give more of yourself in these ways?
7. Fellowship is fostered by three spiritual practices: learning not to run from conflict, learning how to compromise, and accepting your mate’s weaknesses. Which of these disciplines is your strongest? Weakest? What can you do to build on your strength and overcome your weakness?
8. Where do you fall on the spectrum of running from conflict to being brutally harsh during conflict? How can you work toward a healthier response?

9. Would you say that in the past you have been a “falling forward” or a “pulling away” spouse after you were offended? Based on the teaching here, what steps can you take to learn how to fall forward? What can you do to make it easier for your spouse to fall forward?

## Chapter 10: Make Me a Servant

1. When is the last time you loved your spouse in such a way that it cost you something? What can you do for your spouse in the next few days that will fulfill this level of love?
2. Do you agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that “Christian marriage is marked by discipline and self-denial”? How does this view compare or contrast with the view you held *before* you got married?
3. Kathleen and Thomas Hart write of the “paschal mystery of marriage—the process of dying and rising as a pattern of life for married people.” What does your marriage call you to die to? What might it be calling you to rise to?
4. When you think back to why you decided to get married, were your motivations more selfish than selfless? In what way? How has this changed (or does it need to)?
5. Do you sometimes find it difficult to serve your spouse by letting him/her serve *you*? What can you do to grow in this area?
6. What are some of the world’s messages to men that keep them from serving their wives? What are some of the world’s messages to women that keep them from serving their husbands? How can we counteract these messages in our marriages?
7. When you think of your marriage, do you agree that “quarrels over money and time usually reflect a demand to ‘own’ our life rather than to serve the other with our wealth and existence?” How can you use your money and time to better serve your spouse?
8. Is your attitude toward the sexual relationship marked more by service or by the exercise of power? What can you do to grow in this area?
9. What do you think would be the greatest benefit for your marriage if you and your spouse became better servants of each other?



## Chapter 11: Sexual Saints

1. In what ways has your past had a negative impact on your marriage's sexuality? How may seeking spiritual counsel or care help you deal with this past?
2. Were you shocked by Gary's assertion that "God doesn't turn his eyes when a married couple goes to bed"? How does this make you feel? Consider praying with your spouse, specifically thanking God for the gift of sexual intimacy.
3. Has sex been more of a blessing or a burden in your marriage? Was it always this way? If not, what may have changed and why?
4. How well have you "cultivated" holy appetites? How may this be affecting your physical intimacy?
5. Has shame kept you from giving what you *do* have to your spouse? What is one small thing you can do to begin confronting this selfishness?
6. How much do you think selfishness affects the average married couple with regard to their sex life? In what ways can an attitude of service transform the experience of marital sexuality?
7. How can gratitude for the marital sexual experience help a couple overcome guilt about sexual experience prior to marriage?
8. According to Gary, "Abstinence is not a cul-de-sac or dead end; it is a long on-ramp. . . . I am not truly saying no, but rather, wait." What can you learn from the rhythm of abstaining and enjoyment inherent in married sexual expression? In other aspects of married life? In life in general?
9. How are you growing in the spiritual side of your sexuality (generosity and service)? What would you like to become more true of you? What would you like to stop being true of you?
10. What one thing can you do in the next month to demonstrate to your spouse your desire to grow in the area of physical intimacy?

## Chapter 12: Sacred Presence

1. How can a husband and wife more consciously invite the presence of God into their marriage?

2. Are your spoken words inviting God's presence into your home, or are they pushing him away?
3. Have you ever experienced "malicious silence" in your marriage? How is this an offense to God?
4. How does listening invite God's presence into our homes?
5. How can marital dissatisfaction remind us of our need for fellowship with God?
6. Did you agree with Gary when he wrote, "I have discovered . . . that my satisfaction or dissatisfaction with my marriage has far more to do with my relationship to God than it does with my relationship to [my wife]?" How so?
7. How does your spouse mirror a quality of God that you might be somewhat lacking in? What can you learn from this?
8. Gary suggests that if our pastor lived with us, we might treat our spouse differently in his presence—yet God is always present! How can we become more aware of God's presence, creating a more nurturing and encouraging environment at home?
9. Gary warns, "There hasn't been a single marriage in all of human history that could fill a soul that has been emptied of purpose through noncreative living." Has life's busyness kept you from being fully engaged in creating a family together? What can you do to become more creative in your family?
10. "The family that will enjoy Jesus' presence as a customary part of their union is a family that is joined precisely because husband and wife want to invite Jesus into the deeper parts of their marriage." What are some of the deeper parts of your marriage that you've never thought about asking Jesus into? How would you go about inviting him there? What would be the implications of such a step?

## Chapter 13: Sacred Mission

1. Before you got married, what did you sense that God wanted to do with your life? What was your mate's life mission before you

- got married? How has marriage affected these life missions? How do you feel about this?
2. Have you, in any way, committed what Gary calls “spiritual fraud”—agreeing to get married but then acting like a single man or woman after the wedding? What do you need to do to renounce this?
  3. How can we find the right balance between faithfulness to our calling and faithfulness to our marital vows?
  4. Do you believe that either your or your spouse’s ambition may be suffocating your relationship? If so, discuss the best way to confront this.
  5. Honestly consider how an early ambition—had it been fulfilled—might have harmed you and/or your marriage.
  6. What ministries at church or in your community are you engaged in? What ministries is your spouse engaged in? Which do you share? How is your marriage healthier (or weaker) because you serve in contexts outside of your home?
  7. Consider the effects that these stages of family life can have on ministry:
    - newly married, without children
    - married with toddlers
    - raising teenagers
    - empty nesters

What are the advantages and challenges of each phase of life as it relates to living out your ministry calling?

8. What do you think would happen in a marriage if a couple focused only on their emotional satisfaction with each other to the exclusion of any involvement or service to God’s work?
9. How has being married shaped and strengthened the way you engage in ministry?

## Epilogue: The Holy Couple

1. Will you commit to praying, at least several times a week, “Lord, how can I love my spouse today like she (or he) has never been loved?”

2. What appeals to you about Gary's challenge to become a "couple saint" with your spouse? What concerns you about such a challenge?
3. As you consider everything you've read, what one or two areas will most help you begin remaking your marriage into a God-honoring one?