

THE Total
MARRIAGE
Makeover



SHANE THACKER

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my mom and dad. Throughout all my childhood, I grew up on a healthy foundation because of you. I'm so glad that I was such an easy child to raise, to offset the difficulties you faced with my brothers.

To our amazing children, we are so grateful that God has given you to us. I pray for you, that your potential future marriage and family would bring glory to God. I pray for your future spouse (wherever they may be), that they are learning even in this very moment what it means to love the Lord and to walk in His ways.

To my beautiful bride, Christina. Thank you for being the wonderful helpmate that God has given to me. Your sacrificial love for me has made me a better husband, father, and minister. I wouldn't have known what to write if it weren't for you.

I would like to thank God above all others. I couldn't possibly know how to truly love my wife if it weren't for the authentic, sacrificial, unconditional love You have shown us all. You have given me a wonderful helpmate to walk this life with. Through her, You have given me something far greater than a fairytale marriage.

FOREWORD

When my husband came to me and expressed his desire to write another book, I was ecstatic. He worked so hard on “The Total Ministry Makeover” to offer help and encouragement that he had learned from his 12 years of ministry. But as some of you know, when you are doing God’s work, Satan is on the attack, especially when you are publicly speaking up. We spent a lot of time in prayer while he wrote “The Total Ministry Makeover.” Praying over him, our students, our church, our head pastor, staff, and elders. We knew God was going to use this book to help others stand firm in their calling and that Satan was going to try his best to wear them down. So, when Shane said his new book would be on marriage, I got a little worried. No pressure, right?

At the time of publishing, we will be coming up to our 13th wedding anniversary. While I do not claim to know the answers to achieve the “perfect” marriage, I personally could not imagine a better one than ours. We have our disagreements, quarrels, and misunderstandings but I know that no matter what, we are working to overcome them together. I have my faults and Shane has his, C-Rap for instance (if you don’t know, look up “C-Rap Inola Christian New Years Lock In”... I’m so, so sorry.) But we have built our foundation on Christ and made a vow to “Love, Honor, and Serve” each other no matter what. Even though Shane is the one who wrote this book, I feel so connected to it with our stories and experiences that he includes. I was reminded how in love with my husband I am while I read through when we first met and started dating, to our first years of marriage. Some of these stories brought up wounds that we have worked together to heal, others show me how much we have grown.

Our desire for this book is to help new/engaged couples to start on the right foundation, strong marriages to become stronger, and those with struggles to see hope in what God has brought together. Because we both feel so passionate about this, Shane has even talked me into doing a podcast with him to speak about our

experiences in the hope of encouraging others. We want to see you win together.

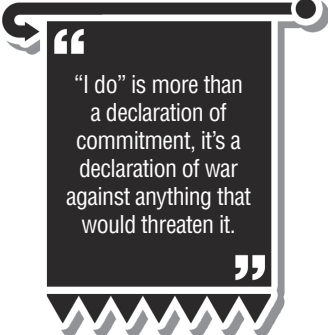
Shane Mack Thacker I am truly proud of you, of your obedience to God and your patience with me to follow these crazy ideas. You are an amazing dad to our children, and the 60+ adopted kids in our youth group, a wonderful husband, and I could not have found a better guy to do life with. You make “of” smile everyday and have given me the comfort and safety to know even in our rough days we will still kiss and make up.

Forever your Waya Unalii,
Christina

INTRODUCTION

The Right Foundation?

“I do.” These should be the most powerful words on the face of this planet. Marriage is a covenant relationship between you and your spouse, a sacred pledge designed by God, never to be divided or broken. God set marriage apart as a wonderful, holy union. This is a gift God has given us while here on earth, a suitable helper for one another. It’s intended to last from the moment we say “I do” until our very last breath. “I do” is more than a declaration of commitment, it’s also a declaration of war against anything that would threaten it.



“I do” is more than a declaration of commitment, it’s a declaration of war against anything that would threaten it.

Knowing the gravity of what marriage is, no one in their right mind would set themselves up for a *short-term marriage*, but without living on *the right foundation*, that’s exactly what will happen. Check out Matthew 7:24-27, where Jesus taught about the wise and the foolish builders:

²⁴ Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

A proper foundation holds up the structure and helps keep everything intact. It stands firm, weathers the storm; it is a safe, healthy, sustainable place to dwell. In the context of this story, Jesus was talking about living on the right foundation to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but you'll find this principle can be applied to *any aspect* of your life.

If you want to hold a lasting career, then you wouldn't switch jobs just because you had a tough day. If you want to be financially responsible, it requires discipline and commitment to a plan; you would need to set up a budget and practice healthy spending habits, not just buying what feels good in the moment. If you want to raise your children well, you will do the hard work of giving them unconditional love, steady discipline, and regular encouragement (I know . . . there's much more to it than that).

The fool in the story built his house on "the sand." What does that look like? Consider this: he didn't think long-term but took the lazy way out (the easy road) and built right where he was rather than doing the hard work of thinking long-term and doing what was best. The fool decided there was no need for discipline, no concern for the wind and the waves; only the assumption that "it will all work out," no matter what he did. Don't be like the fool. Instead, let's think long-term and do the hard work of getting on the right foundation if we're expecting something to last. This certainly applies to your marriage!

The very picture of what a *Biblical marriage* is has eroded terribly in our society today. It's no secret that there are widespread levels of divorce; it is not only expected, but in some circles, *even celebrated and encouraged*. Perhaps in your own marriage today, *just seeing* other marriages fail has you paralyzed with fear for your own. I can say with confidence that you are not alone in feeling this way. I can also say this with confidence: There's hope to get on the right foundation, even if you're far from it today, and there's hope for your marriage to last until your dying breath. It's time to declare war.

With *The Total Marriage Makeover*, this is our mission: ***to empower every married couple to live on the right foundation for a thriving marriage***. This foundation can only be found in Jesus Christ, our Rock and our Salvation. As Christians, we know that Jesus can save our souls; if we put our lives on the foundation He has given us, He can save our marriages, too!

Dream with me for a moment. Imagine you and your spouse have a *thriving marriage*. Imagine the steps you took today helped to build your marriage in a way God would want, to the point that it is so positively radiant that your marriage

would *deeply* impact the community around you . . . **not just in your life, but also for generations to come.**

How can this be possible for any married couple? I firmly believe that if you take these steps to heart for the sake of your marriage, you'll pursue the Lord and what He wants for your lives. **Your marriage will no longer be torn apart . . . but set apart to honor God.** Holy marriages will produce healthy homes (whether you have children or not). If you do have children, they will be raised up in a wonderful Christian home, but they'll also be equipped one day with the tools they need to have their own thriving marriage. That is God's desire for you: to pass on a generational blessing. This is what it says in Deuteronomy 6:

*¹ These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, ² **so that you, your children and their children after them** may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and **so that you may enjoy long life**. — Deuteronomy 6:1-2*

Maybe you're on track for that already; that's fantastic! If not, I want you to see beyond the relationship issues that are going on now. You're changing far more than what happens *today* with your spouse; your marriage can build a legacy because of the steps you take *right now* to make that happen. *It gets even better.* Imagine that your marriage is so unified, that you become a bright light of hope one day for *other* marriages, to the point that you'd be able to help others with the tools they need to thrive as well. As great as all that is . . . **it gets even better!** Because of your work beginning now to get on the right foundation, you will get to experience this blessing that can be passed on to the next generation and the next! Don't have children? *That's ok.* There are people in your life that you have an impact on as well. You can accomplish all of that through God's work in you today. It all starts with understanding the gravity of this "I do" declaration of love and war, and the willingness to get on the right foundation.

Before going on, I want to encourage you to stop and read that last paragraph again.

THE STEPPING STONES

I've listed what I call the 7 Stepping Stones of *The Total Marriage Makeover*. These are the steps that Christina and I have been blessed to experience since our wedding day. Some of it was already based on what we knew, some of it we stumbled upon together; *but all of it was blessed by God*. These steps have given us an incredible marriage, but it's also empowered us to raise our family and manage our home well. I'm not saying all that to brag on us, but to brag on God, because it is only through Him that we could accomplish what we have built together. With that in mind, we're offering what God has blessed us with in our marriage accompanied by hopes of helping you in your marriage, too.

What is the value of declaring "I do" on the right foundation? I'll share it from our own marriage. We know where we stand and what our values are as a couple. The decisions we make are easier because we're already on the same page in most things *before* the conversations begin. Our fights do happen but are *rarely* escalated and *always* short-lived. Having our marriage on the right foundation has shaped everything we do for our home, our finances, our future, and our children's future. God has blessed us with each other, and we know that these principles will work in every marriage, whether you're standing firm on the rock or if you're crumbling on shifting sands.

With that in mind, here are the 7 Stepping Stones that we're taking you through in this book. This plan will lead you to the right foundation for a thriving marriage, regardless of how *long* you've been married or how *distant* your marriage might feel today. We're building our "house" God's way with these three main segments: **The Foundation, The Walls, and The Roof**. Here's a quick look at all three segments.



THE FOUNDATION

I can't even imagine trying to build a house on a foundation of sand. If you do, Jesus made clear what will happen: the storms will come, and the home will come down with a crash. Our world is riddled with this problem and wondering why

things are going so poorly. One thing that's not often focused on in Jesus' story is this: *whether you're on the right foundation or not, you will face the "storms."*

Both homes in the story were hit, but only one made it through. It wasn't because of the great skill of those that built it or what materials they used in building the homes. *In fact, the only thing different about them was where their homes stood.* This is good news for us! **We don't have to have all the marriage skills to have a great marriage; we just need to take our stand together on God's foundation for us.** We need an "I do" moment, declaring war on anything and everything that would threaten our marriage. The only homes that last are the ones that are standing on the right foundation. That's what these first four steps are all about: to make sure the two of you are on the *right foundation* for your life and marriage together. This is how it's done:

STEPPING STONE 1: Fall in Love with the Lord.

STEPPING STONE 2: Fall in Love with Your Spouse.

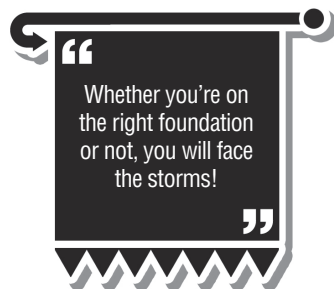
Stepping Stones 1 and 2 get you to the heart of it all. God is love, so if you love God, and love like God, that's when you'll know what true love is. From there you can love like God loves and find yourself dearly in love with your spouse. Next comes looking deeply into your *values*.

STEPPING STONE 3: Assess Your Individual Values.

STEPPING STONE 4: Become One in Your Values.

For *Stepping Stone 3*, there's an assessment for you and your spouse. This is an assessment of your values for your *faith, family, and finances*. You'll take this assessment *separately* at first. In *Stepping Stone 4*, you will come together to reveal your findings, and determine what it would take to *become one* in your values and your direction. If you're going to have a healthy and thriving marriage, you're going to need to be unified on every front!

Doing this will naturally pave the way to *become one* in every area of your life. This is the healthy and holy foundation you're building this marriage on. Once you reach here, you'll see clearly what it takes to stand on the right foundation. You'll be empowered to stand steady and firm. Let's get on *the foundation*. Next is **The Walls**.





THE WALLS

STEPPING STONE 5: Raise the Walls.

STEPPING STONE 6: Defend the Walls.

What do *the walls* represent? *Walls protect everything inside and defend against threats on the outside.* These are the well-defined boundary lines to *protect* and *defend* your marriage. Your marriage is (and will continue to be) under attack. How can you defend against the threats? Stepping Stones 5 and 6 will help you see clearly so that you can accomplish this! One part of the walls is having the right support system.

Developing a healthy support system is crucial. You're getting the right people in your lives, ones that are also seeking to live on the right foundation in their own marriage. *They're not a "gossip echo-chamber" but a "holy sounding board."* They're going to point you to the right foundation, and that means sometimes they're going to say what you need to hear, *not* just what you want to hear.

We're going to destroy anything that would get in the way of our relationship with the Lord and with our spouse. This could range from **the way you were raised** (how your parents' marriage was) **to your past relationships** (whether a former marriage or getting out of a toxic relationship) **to the current practices you have today** (your habits or addictions, an affair, you name it).

“
When it comes to
protecting your
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just "fight night"
— it's WAR!
”

In the process, we're going to “throw off everything that hinders” (see Hebrews 12:1-3) so that we can run hard and fast after the Lord, together! This part of the study is going to equip you with the tools you need to protect and defend your marriage. **When it comes to protecting your marriage, it's not just “fight night”—it's WAR!** It's you versus the world, versus Satan, versus any of his schemes

(if you haven't picked up on it yet, he's doing everything he can to stop you from staying together and thriving). The storm is either here, or it will be soon. It's time to get ready. Thankfully, if you've gone through these steps and if you're standing on the right foundation, you two aren't alone! So get the right walls in place to protect your marriage.

Once you've made it here, it's like you climbed on top of a mountain. Shouldn't this be every marriage? Shouldn't this be *your marriage*? Your marriage is going to stand tall, to shine brightly with the love of Christ, and *ideally* will become a beacon of hope to *other marriages*. The next few steps are what will make you a bright light for Christ as a married couple. Here comes the last segment, **The Roof**.



THE ROOF

STEPPING STONE 7: Lead Together.

Wouldn't it be great to figure out your *greatest strengths* as a couple and then be able to use those strengths for those around you with your family and local community? Wouldn't it be amazing to pass a blessing to your children, rather than a curse? Wouldn't it be incredible to thrive in your marriage to the point that other couples *could look to you* for help and for hope? When that day comes, you'll be equipped to help them through similar *storms* that you've gone through.

I know you can do this, because Christina and I are here today *standing firm in the storm*. It's not because she and I are anything special, and we're certainly not perfect (Christina can tell you all about my imperfections, but I'll let her do that in her own book). We simply built our marriage on the right foundation, we put up the walls and the roof to not only protect and defend our marriage, but also have been enabled by God to be a light of hope for marriages around us (all through the power of Christ).

If you get on the same page together and follow these steps, you're naturally going to gravitate to *the right foundation* and set yourselves up for the lifelong, thriving marriage that God has given to you.

FINAL NOTES BEFORE DISCUSSION

Each chapter offers questions at the end of the chapter to go through with your spouse. These questions will get the conversation going and will help lead you through this process! It's even better if you can get with a group of couples that are also doing this study (the *healthy support system* I mentioned earlier). As a group, everyone will be able to encourage one another and keep each other accountable through the process. Get together regularly (weekly or every two weeks is ideal), and really process each of these chapters together. Hebrews 10:24-25 says this: *“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

As a quick word of encouragement: undoubtedly some reading this have come from past or current experiences that have left you discouraged or defeated. Don't give up! Psalm 103:12 says this: *“as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us.”* You might be carrying some heavy relationship baggage with you. You might feel very distant from your husband or wife right now. Maybe you feel like **you are** as far as the East is from the West (and yes . . . you're going to see the “east and west” reference a lot). Regardless, will you take your stand now to make a change? The first step is quite possibly the hardest. But with God's help, you can do this! But you must want it, and you must be willing to do whatever it takes to restore your marriage. “I do.” ***Are you willing to do whatever***

it takes? IT'S WAR!

“
God can use any
situation for good.
”

Remember that God can use any situation for good. He's using YOU now. God can rescue your marriage, and God has a great purpose for your marriage. Christina and I know from experience that if you follow these steps together, regardless of just how far the *East is from the West*, you will

find great stability in your marriage, loving and bringing God all the glory through it all. You've got this!

Set up a time for your first marriage (or group) session! You can check out the first set of questions on page 13.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- *“I do” is more than a declaration of commitment, it’s a declaration of war against anything that would threaten it.*
- *Whether you’re on the right foundation or not, you will face the storms!*
- *When it comes to protecting your marriage, it’s not just “fight night”—it’s WAR!*
- *God can use any situation for good.*

INTRODUCTION: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Thank you for taking the opportunity to strengthen your marriage by getting this book and going through these questions together!

Before beginning on the questions, let’s set the official *Ground Rules* to agree on when having these discussions.

GROUND RULES:**1) Anything you discuss here, stays here:**

- a. The only exception of course is if everyone agrees with what is allowed to be shared.
 - i. There is no place for gossip. You should be able to *freely* share what is on your heart with full confidence that it will only stay with those involved. If in a group session, you need to discuss beforehand as a couple what you’re comfortable sharing with the group, as well.

2) There is no place for SHAME or for BLAME:

- a. While there should be accountability on your spouse’s past or words or actions, this particular time is not that time or place to address it.
 - i. **Why?** Because as you go through these steps, you need to focus on areas YOU need to change, not how to change the other.
 - ii. Ideally this study will reveal to both of you where you are off the foundation and personally need to change, but you can’t put a timeline of change on your spouse. That’s their job!

3) **“Extra grace required”:**

- a. *Conflict can be a blessing.* It’s all about how you handle it. Think of it as a hurdle that you and your spouse are going to jump over or a mountain you’re going to climb together. It’s a worthy challenge. Through conflict comes growth, and that means giving a “next level” amount of grace. After all, this is the very kind of grace that God has given us.
- b. If forgiveness is needed in some way, it DOES NOT have to be immediate, but it DOES have to be the end goal. *This is not a 100-yard dash, it’s a marathon.*

4) **If needed, you get to say “pass” on a question:**

- a. This is an unexpected rule, I know, but sometimes you or your spouse are not ready to deal with a certain issue, *and that’s ok.* Be patient with one another in love!
- b. However, IF you pass on a question, you are agreeing to *go back to that question the next time you meet* and reassess if you’re ready to discuss it. Take your time, but don’t keep avoiding it, address it! It’s the only way you can move forward together.
- c. You also need to be in agreement to *pray* for each other to be able to answer the question.

5) **NEVER leave a discussion session angry.**

- a. Sometimes that means taking more time in the discussion. It’s also doable to leave a discussion *in disagreement* without being angry. Trust me . . . it’s time well worth investing in.
- b. Communicate honestly what is on your mind but do so in love and with the goal of walking together *on the right foundation for the sake of unity in your marriage.*

6) **Be honest, be positive, and have fun!**

- a. There’s some honest reflection that needs to happen; but if that’s *all* you do, you’ll get burned out quickly from this study.
- b. With that in mind, we have different challenges that will fall under either “be honest,” “be positive,” or “have fun.” Each discussion question will fall under one of these categories, as well.

- c. Being honest sometimes means that there's something negative to see or say, but at the same time be willing to *focus on the good* in your marriage and on how much better your marriage will one day be as you go through these steps.

“HAVE FUN” challenge: If you both agree on the above terms, hold a pen or pencil together as you sign your names!

We, _____ & _____,
are committing to get on the right foundation for our marriage, and to
DECLARE WAR on anything that threatens it. We'll do everything we
can to remove any distance from each other. It's "I do" from here on out!

Signatures: _____

Date: _____

Bonus points: Take a picture together and share it online and type in the post "I declare war!" Use the hashtag #thetotalmarriagemakeover if you'd like to share it with our online community as well.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Have fun: When you signed your name together, who was in control? Was there a struggle? Who was hesitant to move first? Did one just hold the pen while the other dominated the task? Did you agree on which name to sign first? Answer all these questions, and then explain why! _____

- 2) Have fun: Look your spouse in the eyes and share (in 3 words or less) the story of how you met. Write down just those words, then tell the story to each other. _____

3) Be positive: How would you define a *healthy and holy marriage*? _____

4) Be honest: What causes couples to be *led off* the right foundation for a healthy and holy marriage? _____

(If in a group setting, take a moment to discuss with your spouse what is okay to share on the next 2 questions.)

5) Be honest: If you could go back in time and change one thing that **you** did (past or present) that had led you off the right foundation in your marriage, what would it be? _____

6) Be honest: What kind of *foundation* would you say you have right now (your marriage is built on the Rock, on the sand, somewhere in-between)? Explain your answer. _____

7) Be honest: What is one thing you wished you knew when you first got married?

8) Have fun: What do you love the most about your spouse? _____

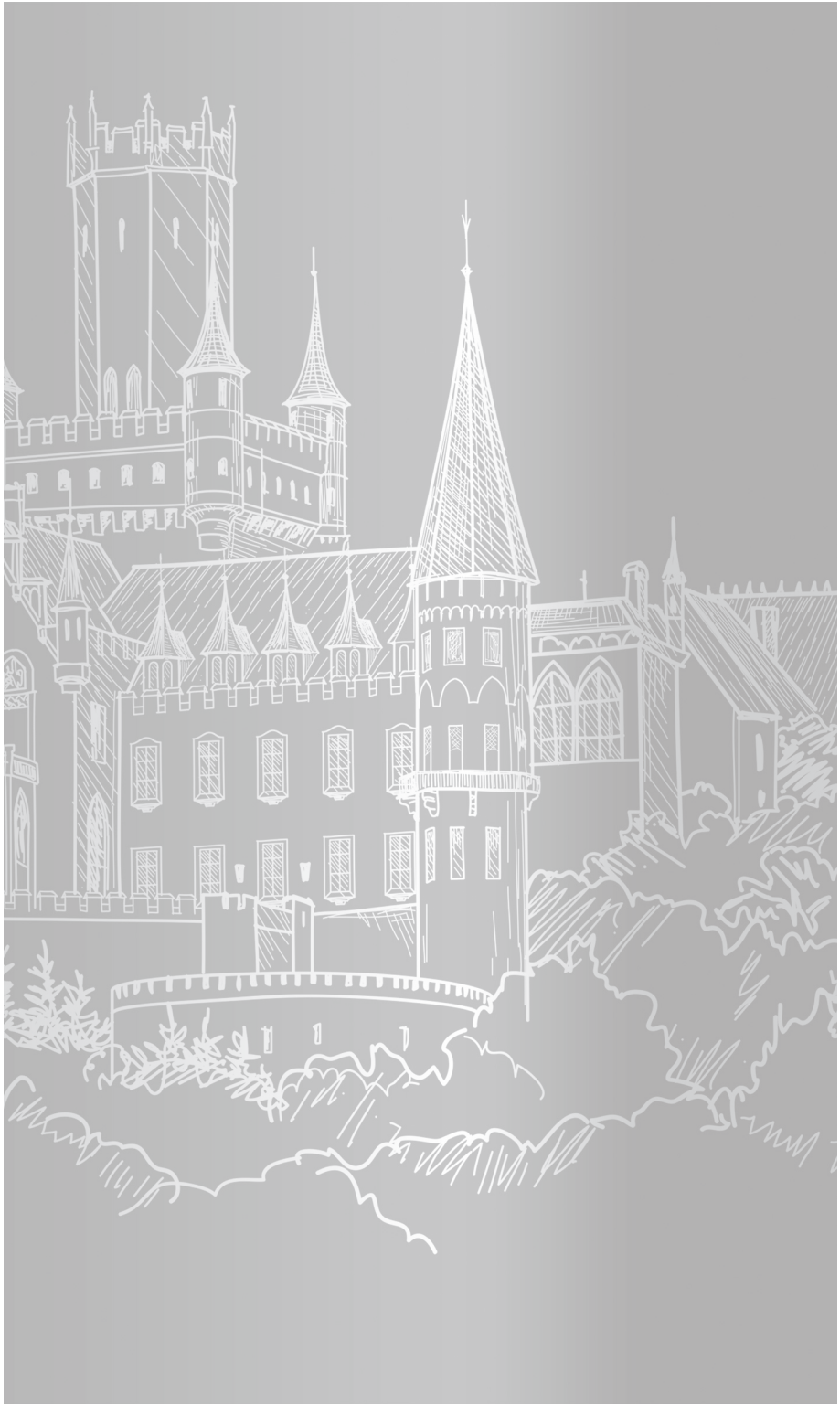
As you continue in this study together, pray that God will lead you and your spouse as you go through *The Total Marriage Makeover!*



THE FOUNDATION

As you read in the Introduction, **The Foundation** is the first segment of the book. What kind of foundation is your marriage standing on right now: on the rock or shifting sands? Regardless of the past, or the present, there is hope for the future. This study can help good marriages to become great and struggling marriages to become restored. You can move forward on solid ground together and build your lives renewed before the Lord.

Let's take our stand as we progress in this study. **Whatever it takes!**



STEPPING STONE 1

Fall in Love with the Lord



OUR STORY

Christina and I met at Ozark Christian College (Joplin, Missouri) in the Fall of 2008. How did we meet? *I walked into her room.* Her dorm was having their “open house” night, which is when the guys can come in and see the girls’ dorm for a few hours one evening (which I know sounds odd, but this was special because it happened only one night a year for each dorm).

It’s a great hangout opportunity, but kudos to Ozark for playing matchmaker while they were at it, as well! Side note: when the guys’ dorms would have open houses, there was always AT LEAST one dude sporting a guitar for absolutely no reason at all . . . certainly not for the purpose of impressing the girls dropping by . . . *and I may or may not have been one of those dudes at one point for our own open house.*

When I first walked into her room . . . my goodness, she was just so beautiful. I remember seeing her for the first time and saying “WOW!” (in my head, of course). I went in the dorm planning on visiting everyone, but when I got to *her* room, I stayed and talked until it was time to leave. I was asking all kinds of questions, and she was asking a lot about me too. We just hit it off! I left her room as happy as could be and didn’t even realize why until a good while later.

A few weeks passed by, and I hadn’t seen her. We didn’t have classes together and she was a super shy person (and if I’m being honest, I am not). Christina had

her roommate snoop out the situation and see if I was dating anyone or available . . . you know the drill in friendships like these, right? So, Christina liked me, but she didn't *want me to know* that she liked me. Frankly, I liked her, but I didn't *want her to know* that I liked her. Do you know why we do stuff like that during the pre-dating phase? **It's because we don't want to take the next step unless we feel like it's safe to step forward together.**

Thankfully Christina's roommate was a good friend. She found out a little about my schedule and hinted at where I *might* be at certain times of the day, and she found herself just short of dragging Christina out of her room to bring her to wherever I was (and to her roommate, Nikki, I cannot thank you enough for doing that!).

Soon enough we were playing pool at the Student Center. At Ozark, a huge indicator that you *liked* someone is if you were playing pool together at the Student Center. For us, this was our favorite thing to do on campus, aside from long walks on *The Loop* (about a half-mile walk around the campus). If you didn't like either of those, there was also ping pong and betting how long other couples *wouldn't* last.

But I digress. We spent time together every chance we got. We weren't officially dating yet, but it was clear that this woman was incredible, and I really liked her. Come to find out, against all odds, she really liked me too. We played pool a lot. We walked *The Loop* a lot. We may have even taken *a few* bets on how long other couples wouldn't last. We weren't officially dating, we just got to really know each other over the next few months, as friends who wanted to be *more* than just friends.

In December of 2008, there was a winter storm coming, and the high risk of ice prompted classes to shut down the next day. I texted Christina something that I texted her often: "I like you!" In this moment, she got tired of receiving that text without *taking anything beyond friendship*. She had knots in her stomach in this moment, but she texted back, "What do you mean by that? What do you mean that you like me?" A gentleman like myself has the perfect response in times like these. However, this was not one of those times. I responded, "Yes, I'd love to tell you what I mean. *Can I talk to you in the morning?*" Yes, I really did have her wait all night, and no, she really *didn't* like that! This led to an entire night of *her* not sleeping. For me, I slept like a baby (typical guy, I know).

The next morning, we got together and walked *The Loop* surrounded by pure white, beautiful snow. We chatted about what I meant by "I like you." "I like you" meant that I saw something amazing in her and wanted to be more than friends. "I like you" meant I don't know that I am in love with you quite yet, nor was I by any

means ready for the covenant of marriage, but I like you enough that I want to see where this is going, and that this *could be* something bigger. We talked about how dating for the both of us meant that we were going *in the direction of marriage*, rather than carry on for years just dating or engaged.

This day was a major moment for us as we defined the very groundwork of *why* we were even dating in the first place. We shared with each other, regardless of if we marry or not, that we want to honor God along the way. We walked around The Loop that day at least 10 times in the freezing cold, just talking about what “I like you” really meant to us.

We began dating in February of 2009, and that summer she had to go home to St. Louis while I had to go home to Tulsa. We wanted to be together, but we had no choice but to be physically separated. On the day we had to part ways. It seemed like *forever* when it came to being separated. This was easily the longest summer of our lives.

Over that summer, we talked every day by phone. As soon as I could, I bought us both a webcam so we could talk every night and see each other (this was before FaceTime or Zoom was a thing). She mailed me a figurine of a wolf, and she bought one of her own (I’ll have to share the backstory to that another time). I saved up all I could for the sole purpose of *being with her*. Let’s be clear: **Nothing else mattered.** I surprised her a few times by showing up at the door (about a 7-hour drive). She and I sent constant love letters to each other. I had the song “I Thought I Loved You Then” by Brad Paisley¹ stuck in my head on repeat.

I proposed that Fall, and we were married in May of 2010. We have three amazing children, Christina is a photographer, and I’ve been on staff for many years at our local church. We’ve had our hiccups and been down bumpy roads like you would expect of anyone else, but because we have lived on the right foundation, we have had a healthy and thriving marriage as a result.

We don’t have a fairytale marriage; this is better because this is real, and this is our story. I can say with confidence that God was with us through it all and that *you can have better than a fairytale marriage too* (if you don’t already). because it’s not about our story or your story, as great as those stories may be; **it’s all about what God can do through anyone, regardless of their past or current situation.** With God’s help you’ll get there, whatever it takes! To get there, I think it’s important to take a good look at our purpose.

WHAT IS OUR PURPOSE?

Our purpose on earth: To carry out what God wants for us in our lives and to honor Him any way we can.

Let's put marriage aside (just for a moment). What is our greatest purpose as individuals on earth? Let me put it as simply as I know how: ***Our purpose is to carry out what God wants for us in our lives and to honor Him any way we can.***

Carrying out what God wants for us is going to look a little bit different for each one of us, based on the needs of those around us as well as the unique gifts God has given us. On top of that, he may have a *specific mission* for you in this season of life, and then it might shift to something else in time (for example: our mission while dating was to get on the right foundation, our mission right now is to show you how to do the same).

As we get on the right foundation for our marriages, we need to be constantly mindful of our purpose. You can find a whole host of passages on your purpose, but let's look at just a few. This is what Jesus had to say:

“For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” — John 6:38-40

Jesus had a clear mission on earth: to die on the cross and rise from the grave, offering eternal life to all who would accept Him and obey His call to salvation.

How can you know what God wants for your marriage? How can your marriage bring *Him glory*? If your mission now is getting your marriage on the right foundation, then the “I do” declaration has to be at the forefront of everything you do. What does God want for your marriage? What is it going to take to get there? More division or more unity? More selfishness or selflessness? More grudges or more forgiveness? More of the world's fake love or God's authentic love? We need to be willing to lay aside our own personal desires to carry out God's plan for us in our marriage.

How can we bring God glory in our everyday lives? Here's what Jesus had to say on that:

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” — Matthew 5:14-16

The whole purpose of shining the light of anything we have (including our marriage) is about bringing more praise and glory to our Father in heaven. We’re called to shine light to “*everyone in the house.*” If we’re always considering God’s will (as seen in the passage above from John 6), we should think about how we can shine bright for Christ everywhere we go, and with everyone we encounter. Just to be clear: it’s not “look at me,” but “look at what God has done.” **How can you bring glory to God in your marriage?** This takes time and reflection, but this study is going to help you work through any issues you’ve faced and prepare you for the issues you will face.

STANDING FIRM IN YOUR MARRIAGE

Regardless of what is pulling you off the foundation (and onto sand); it’s going to take hold of your heart, your habits, and negatively affect your marriage in some way. What can you do to change the course? **It starts by the recognition that there’s a problem, coupled with having the courage to do what is necessary to fulfill your purpose of doing what God would want, no matter the level of sacrifice required. Whatever it takes!** God has given you the free will to choose Him or to choose the foolish things of this world.

Are you being wise and standing on the Rock, or are you being a fool and still choosing sand?

If you have the heart to change, then it is time to turn your heart back to Him. It’s the fastest road to God’s heart. It never ceases to amaze me that God is ready and waiting *right now to receive you with open arms*, and He offers forgiveness freely for all that we’ve done. What a mighty God we serve! To top it off, God has given us each other as the Church to encourage, to mentor, and to offer Biblical discipline. Hebrews 10:24-25 says this:

and let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the

habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

“Spurring” one another is no fun at the time, but it’s necessary at times to help get us back on track with God and in our marriage. It’s imperative to get with a wise and godly brother or sister and get some accountability in your life. Division in your marriage will draw you away from your purpose, but worse yet: *it’ll keep you from bringing God glory.*

In your marriage, Satan wants nothing more than to put your focus on anything or anyone other than God, and to lead your life on a foundation of sand any way he can. That’s why you need to walk with the wise as you take the journey through this book. A wise and godly friend will help you examine your life and lead you to the Scriptures in all things, and ultimately lead you back on *the fastest route* to God.

THE FASTEST ROUTE?

Let’s go back to the summer of 2009 when she had to go back to St. Louis, and I went back to Tulsa. I wanted to get there as FAST as possible! When I drove to see her, which road should I have taken? A quick web search will tell you that I-44 is the best option. Why? Because interstates overall have a higher speed limit than other roads, they are generally maintained better than any side road or state highway, and they usually can host much higher amounts of traffic. All that factors in and makes it the fastest route from Tulsa to St. Louis.

Now consider this: What is the ‘fastest route’ to fulfill our purpose (which we defined earlier, “*to carry out what God wants for us in our lives and to honor Him any way we can*”)? You might not think there is one, but Jesus made it clear in what is known as “The Greatest Commandment.” Jesus was teaching and He was approached by a lawyer. Jesus was regularly being tested by them. This is the dialogue that was exchanged in Matthew 22:36-38. The lawyer asked:

³⁶ “*Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*”

³⁷ *Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*³⁸ *This is the first and greatest commandment. — Matthew 22:36-38*

In other words, love the Lord your God with **all of who you are**, with every ounce of your being! Follow this command if you want to take the fastest route to

the very heart of God. Why?

If you love God with all of who you are, you will do all that God would want you to do.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

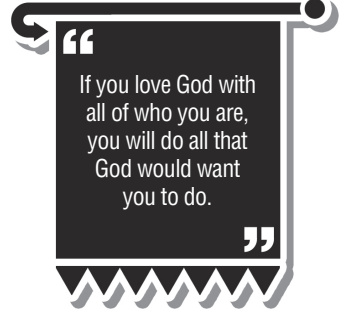
This is how we get back to our purpose, so our love for the Lord should be at the very foundation of *everything* we do (including marriage). You can go through the motions in your marriage by going on a date, attending church together, having sex at the regular appointed times of when you both *clearly defined* that you should have sex. (Speaking of which, if you want to have a good laugh, *stop what you're doing right now* and listen to the song “Business Time” by Flight of the Conchords.² It’s what I like to call a “disasterpiece”!)

You can check off the boxes and have all the right *things* in your marriage. Maybe it’s those perfect date nights, or those perfect pictures, or that perfect “business time,” or those perfect traditions that you get to create together. As great as all those can be, it’s all for nothing if God’s *authentic* kind of love isn’t present. To know God’s love is to know true love. Sure, I did everything I could to get to St. Louis to see my bride to be, but it’s nothing compared to what Jesus did.

Think about it: Jesus left the perfection of heaven to come here on earth. The sole purpose of it all was to die the most painful death imaginable, to give us the opportunity to be forgiven and set free, to show us just how much He loves us. He wasn’t forced to do it but chose it! There would be no East or West too distant, because Jesus’ love was far greater than any distance we could put between us and Him. That’s the kind of love we need to have if we’re going to get on the right foundation and restore our marriage. That’s the kind of “I do” declaration that Jesus wants us to have for each other.

Jesus’ love is authentic, sacrificial, and unconditional.

If you could just get to the heart of who God is, it changes everything in your life and your marriage. *And when you follow the Greatest Commandment, you’re on the fastest track to the very heart of God!* If we could all do this, we would naturally grow the desire to do whatever it takes, following what God wants for our lives and bringing Him glory any way you can. That’s why Stepping Stone 1 is “Fall in Love with the Lord,” because then (and only then) you will be able to fulfill your purpose in your marriage!



THE GREATEST GOAL

“The Greatest Commandment should always be our greatest goal if we want the right foundation for our marriage.”

The Greatest Commandment is our greatest goal. It doesn't matter the East from West distance, go here first! If you've been distant, you'll find each other again along the way. If this command is not first in your life, your spiritual foundation is going to be on shifting sands. Now consider that for your marriage: *how can we possibly expect to have a healthy marriage if we are not loving our spouse like the Lord loves us?*

That is why it is so important to consider how you are living: have you fallen in love with the Lord, or are you a lover of the world? This is the command given to us in Hebrews:

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. — Hebrews 12:1-3

FINAL NOTE ON STEPPING STONE 1

This is just the first Stepping Stone, but it's the biggest step. It gets to the heart of why you're doing all the rest (not just for marriage but all areas of your life). What is it going to take for you to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? What is hindering your daily walk with Jesus? What is it that has you deeply *entangled with sin*? It's time to fix our eyes on Jesus. After all Jesus has done for us, there should be no question in giving our all for Him. We'll fulfill our purpose of following His will and bringing Him glory. If you can just do this consistently in your life, you'll be standing on the healthiest foundation you could possibly have for your marriage, *as it will lay the groundwork for all the rest.* Stand on the Rock and watch God move as you weather the storm.

But what does loving God look like? With all our various values, mannerisms, and situations, it will undoubtedly be very different for us all. With that in mind,

look at your questions for discussion for Stepping Stone 1. My prayer is that as you look through this first step, as well as the discussions questions, that this will open up your heart to the very heart of God, laying the foundation for everything that will follow in this book and for the sake of your marriage.

STEPPING STONE 1 CITED SOURCES

1. Brad Paisley, “Then” *Apple Music*, <https://music.apple.com/us/album/then/320601108?i=320601256>.
2. Flight of the Conchords, “Business Time” *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGOohBytKTU>.



STEPPING STONE 1 QUESTIONS

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- *Our purpose on earth: To carry out what God wants for us in our lives and to honor Him any way we can.*
- *If you love God with all of who you are, you will do all that God would want you to do.*
- *The Greatest Commandment should always be our greatest goal if we want the right foundation for our marriage.*

Reminder of the GROUND RULES

(look on page 11 for the expanded version):

- 1) **The things you discuss here stay here.**
- 2) **There is no place for SHAME or for BLAME.**
- 3) **If needed . . . “extra grace required.”**
- 4) **If needed, you can say “pass” on a question.**
- 5) **NEVER leave a session angry.**
- 6) **Be honest, be positive, and have fun!**

STEPPING STONE 1 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1) Have fun: Shane shared the story about how “nothing else mattered,” he was going to do anything he could to be with Christina. Can you think of a “nothing else mattered” moment in your marriage that you’d be willing to share? _____



- 2) Be positive: What are some qualities about *God's love* that help us know how to love each other better (authentic, sacrificial, unconditional)? Name one quality of God's love that you see the *other* exhibiting more than anything else. _____

- 3) Be honest: What are some things that could pull us away from our relationship with God? If we're not careful, how can it also pull us away from each other? _____

- 4) Be honest: How does God love us? What can we learn from that concerning our marriage? _____

- 5) Be positive: What is one thing that will change in your life if you *love God with all of who you are*? What has kept you from implementing that change? _____

FUN CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Go on a *purpose-filled date*! Whatever you love to do together, plan out a date night together (if you have kids, make it a KID-FREE date)! Here are the “rules” for this particular date night:

You each are going to plan a part of the date night without letting the other know the specifics.

■ **For the guy:**

You get to pick the meal!

- Love her like Jesus loves you! Be authentic, sacrificial, and unconditional.
- What meal means a great deal to her (and maybe even catch her off guard)?
- This can be eating somewhere else, cooking it at home, whatever you decide.
- You need to prepare *everything* needed for this part of the date!

■ **For the gal:**

You get to pick an activity to do! What would he love to do the most? (“business time” doesn’t count unless you just want bonus points)

- Love him like Jesus loves you! Be authentic, sacrificial, and unconditional.
- It’s up to you if that activity is elsewhere or at home and to prepare everything needed for it!

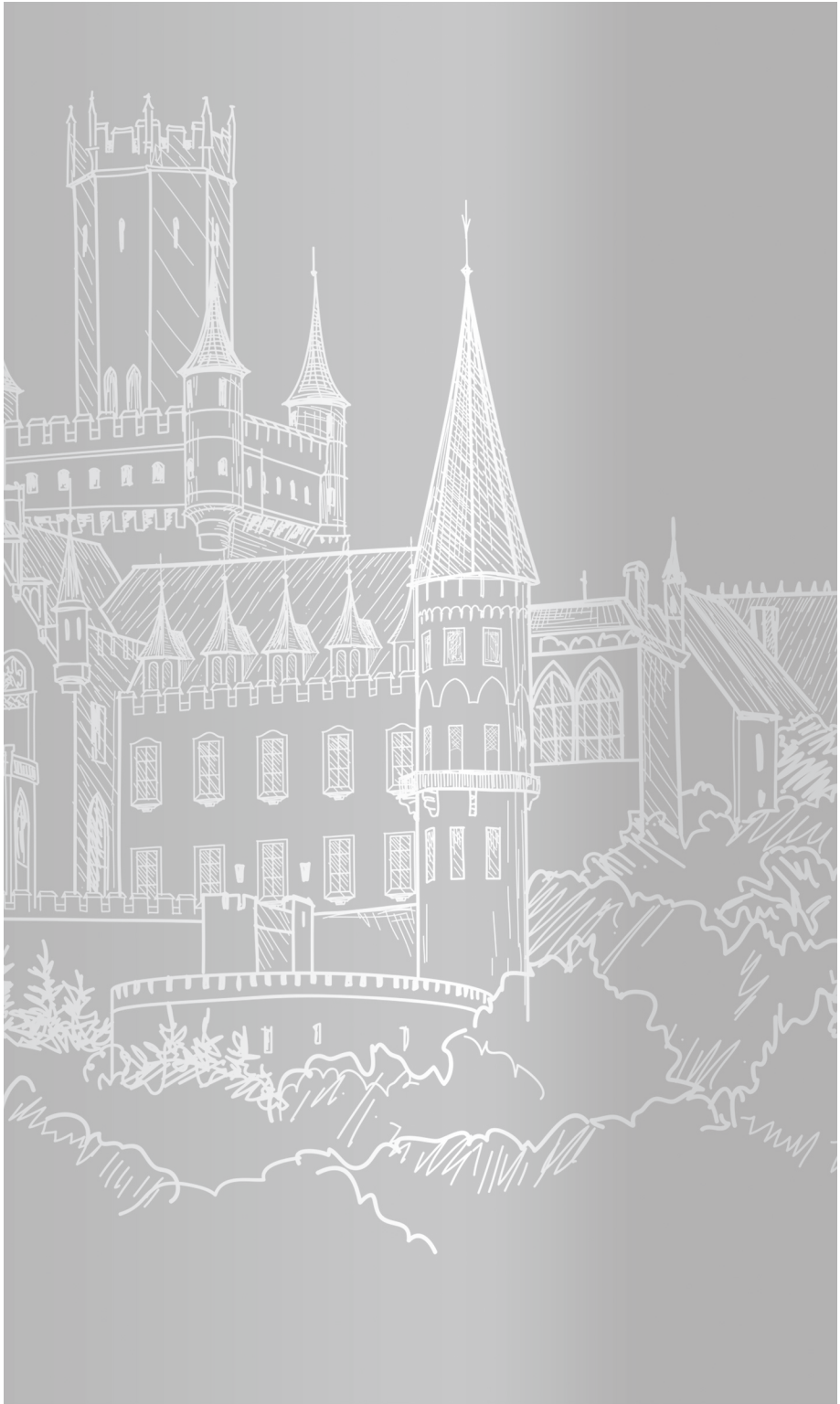
■ **During the date:**

Specifically take time to talk about what your purpose is in your marriage, and what it would take to get on the right foundation of God’s love together.

Remember: be honest, be positive, and have fun! Write down any special notes below.

CHALLENGE:

Set a reminder one year from today, to go back to this page and look through the questions as well as your previous answers, asking, “How is it going now?”



STEPPING STONE 2

Fall in Love with Your Spouse

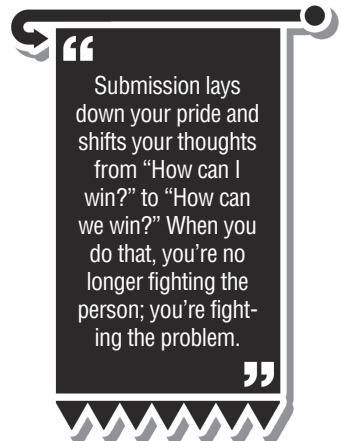


OUR GREATEST MARRIAGE MODEL: CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

Have fun: For this chapter, read this chapter out loud together! Swap reading each section as shown below:

Husband: God’s amazing love for us is *authentic, sacrificial, and unconditional*. The whole world over is craving this crazy kind of love! The New Testament refers to the Church as the “bride of Christ” (we’ll look at one of them in a moment). We can see what a great marriage model looks like very easily by looking at what Christ has done in His time on earth.

Wife: What did He do? He healed and fed people and taught them how to live, but ultimately, Jesus laid down His very life on the cross so that we could have eternal life. This love is incredible, to be willing to go to that level of sacrifice *because of that level of love*. Would you be willing to do this for your spouse? It’s the (authentic, sacrificial, and unconditional) kind of love we all need to have if we want to thrive in our marriages.



Husband: Here are a few verses on instructions for a Biblical marriage. Before reading the passage itself, I have to note that I've seen people get offended by this passage. In my opinion, there are two major reasons for this:

- 1) They've seen this passage get abused based on a *misunderstanding* of the meaning of the passage.
- 2) They're unwilling to love like God loves (authentic, sacrificial, unconditional).



With that in mind, consider how it makes you *feel* as you're reading it, and we will come back to this later.

Wife: ²¹ *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.* ²² *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.* ²³ *For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.* ²⁴ *Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.* ²⁵ *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her* ²⁶ *to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,* ²⁷ *and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.* ²⁸ *In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.* — Ephesians 5:21-28

Did any part of this put you on edge or offend in any way? If so, consider why. Is it a misunderstanding of what it really means? Is it because you're struggling with loving like God loves us?

CONTEXT MATTERS

Husband: Let's be honest, a lot of guys **love** this passage on the wife submitting to the husband. The reality is, it's quite possibly *the most misunderstood passage on marriage*. Yes, the wife is to submit to the husband, but look again at verse 21: "*submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" You're **both** submitting to each other out of reverence for Christ.

Wife: Just as Christ is head of the Church; the husband should be leading in your marriage . . . but you might *still* have a misunderstanding of what that means. Jesus showed husbands how to be the head of the home . . . **by being the head**

servant! Jesus said this in Matthew 20:28, “*the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” We lead best by being the lead servant. Jesus also said this in John 15:13, “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” This message is specifically for the husbands to hear: **We love best by being willing to do whatever it takes to love her, even if that requires that we die for her.**

Husband: All I did was drive from Tulsa to St. Louis to be with my bride. You think the East and West are too far? Jesus left *Heaven* to come to this *imperfect world* to ultimately die for us. There is no price too high. *Whatever it takes.* That doesn’t sound very chauvinistic at all, does it? I can assure you that there’s nothing chauvinistic about being a Biblical husband. It’s built in us as men to take on a challenge, so to the man of God reading this, here’s the challenge: *be willing to take the lead in your marriage by being the head servant, any way you can. **Be willing to do whatever it takes!*** It’s “I do,” baby! You’ve got this! Stop and consider, what is the first thing you need to do?

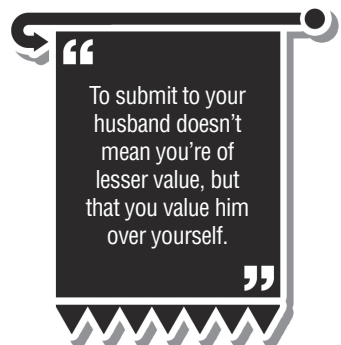
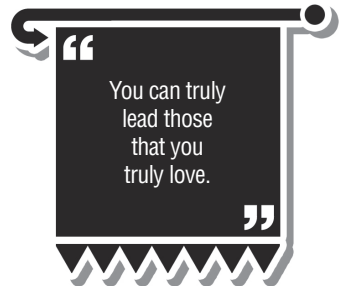
Remember this: *You can truly lead her by truly loving her.*

Wife: What about for the wives? Letting a man take the lead is considered taboo in many circles, but with a proper understanding of what this passage *really* means, and being willing to love like God loves us, you’ll be amazed at what letting your husband lead will do (this is not only for your benefit, but for him as well). Christina put it this way:

To submit to your husband doesn’t mean you’re of lesser value, but that you value him over yourself.

He’s excited to take on the challenge that lies ahead, and willing to provide for whatever you would need in life, to the point of being willing to die for you. Our society has shamed the very idea of *submitting* to one another. Just imagine what submitting to one another would do for you both physically, emotionally, and spiritually!

To the woman of God reading this, showing respect is one of the biggest forms of showing him love (to most men, respect **is** love). It is singlehandedly one of the



greatest blessings you can give to your husband. He feels empowered in a healthy and holy way to keep serving you, whatever it takes. **Showing disrespect will only produce the opposite.** With that in mind, to the wives reading this: I'm challenging you to follow his lead, serve him as he's serving you, and show respect any way you can. In this way you will *both* fulfill this passage: "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*"

DEALING WITH CONFLICT

Husband: How does this level of love, respect, and submission play a role in our conflicts? For us, we have found ourselves in many "opportunities for a resolution" (let's call it that, because "opportunities to bring up the last six months' worth of mistakes" doesn't have such of a nice of a ring to it). Conflicts in marriage . . . I mean . . . "opportunities for a resolution," are inevitable and healthy to have. If you're *never* having any conflict, you either truly have mastered the idea of getting on the right foundation by loving like God loves us and submitting to one another *or* one or both of you are potentially hiding your true feelings from one another. Which one describes you?

There's a shift in thinking when you both regularly choose to *submit to one another*. You shift your thoughts from "How can **I** win?" to "How can **we** win?" When you do that, you're no longer fighting the person; you're fighting the problem.

LIFE EXAMPLE — AN "OPPORTUNITY FOR A RESOLUTION"

Wife: One day early in our marriage, I came home from work. Christina had been working on a new lasagna recipe she wanted to try out. She had the heart of a servant but also decided to be a bit sneaky that day (at least that was my perspective). This was no ordinary lasagna. I'm so ashamed to admit that she made this, but, it was a **vegetarian lasagna** (to the ladies reading this out loud, please pause until he is done gasping at the audacity of this indecent and shameful act before reading on).

She said, "It's a new recipe, I'm not sure if you'll like it or not," but conveniently left out the detail that it contained no meat whatsoever. I took a bite of it, and though it didn't taste the best to me, I said, "This is great! Thank you for making it!" I will never forget what happened next. She smirked and said, "You know it's vegetarian, right?" I'm not exaggerating when I say that I dropped the fork on the plate and

pushed it away. I wasn't just upset; I was **mad** that she did that to me. I know this sounds crazy, but I legitimately felt like I'd been betrayed.

Because of where my heart was, I let it go way beyond where it should have, and it became one of our first big fights as a married couple. For her, she meant no ill will; she was trying a new recipe and thought it'd be funny. We were given an "opportunity for a resolution" that day. After we discussed it and I was able to lay down my pride (and my childish attitude), we were able to work things out.

Husband: If we're not careful, we'll fight over the pettiest things. We all do it, and when we do, we look like little children that didn't get our way. A simple little prank turned out to be a big blowup for us. What went wrong? A terrible tendency in relationships is *to assume the worst about the other person's intentions*. I assumed that Christina tried to poison me, rather than serve me a tasty meal. When we go down that road in our minds, *nothing* they do will be right, and nothing they do will be good enough (no matter how hard they try). When we go down that road, the conflict will be directed at the other person, not the problem, and the terrible truth is that the solution you come up with will be to create a bigger problem. Here's a marriage warning for us all: This cycle will not end *until a change of heart takes place*.



UNSTOPPABLE LOVE

Husband: As it was said from Stepping Stone 1: *If you love God with all of who you are, you'll do all He has called you to do*. Knowing that the Church is the precious bride of Christ, and the model for marriage that Christ gave for us; if we're truly followers of Christ, we should be willing to do *whatever it takes* to submit, to serve, and to love. Consider this passage for your marriage, this is a perfect description of Christ's love for us:

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. — Romans 8:38-39

Imagine having this same kind of love in our marriages. There are no barriers too big, no *East* too far from *West*, no betrayal too far, and no attitudes too grievous. Imagine that there is *absolutely nothing* that would separate or stop you in your love for one another. Husbands and wives, how much more powerful would your marriage be if you had that same level of love for your spouse that Jesus has for us? How much better would your spouse respond to you if they catch a good glimpse of Jesus every time they see you? How much more would our marriages thrive if we would follow *just these first two Stepping Stones*?

FALLING IN LOVE, ALL OVER AGAIN

Wife: Maybe you haven't been able to experience true love in a good while, because you got offended over something small. For far too many marriages, this unwillingness to lay down our pride and submit to one another can create a downward spiral that can lead to deep-rooted hurt and division and has led many to divorce.

My prayer is that we all, regardless of the past pain and obstacles that stand in the way, would be willing to throw off everything that hinders our relationships. My prayer is that we all would continue falling in love with the Lord and with our spouse, to the point that God will *restore what was lost* from any past arguments or past hurt, and that we could live deeply unified in all our marriages.

Husband: When you can get to the point that you both are fully loving God and in love with each other, it changes everything. You'll be restored from any past hurt, and you *both assume the best about each other's intentions* in everything. Have an "I declare war" moment, specifically against any division between the two of you. Once you've gotten to this point, you'll be standing firm on the right foundation for your marriage, and if you're really putting it into practice, most of the "opportunities for resolutions" will have already been won before the *battle* even began, *because you two have already won the war*. **"I do"!**

This is your best friend, your *suitable helper* given by God! Let's make it our top priority to love like Jesus loves, to serve like Jesus served, and to lay down our pride. Let's do *whatever it takes* to make sure we're both on track, together.

Let's continue the conversation with your best friend, as you look in your questions for discussion for Stepping Stone 2. Let's do this: Fall in love with your spouse!



STEPPING STONE 2 QUESTIONS

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- *God’s amazing love for us is selfless, sacrificial, and unconditional.*
- *You can truly lead those that you truly love.*
- *To submit to your husband doesn’t mean you’re of lesser value, but that you value him over yourself.*
- *A terrible (and common) tendency in marriages is to assume the worst about our spouse’s intentions.*
- *Submission lays down your pride and shifts your thoughts from “How can I win?” to “How can we win?” When you do that, you’re no longer fighting the person; you’re fighting the problem.*

Reminder of the GROUND RULES

- 1) **The things you discuss here stay here.**
- 2) **There is no place for SHAME or for BLAME.**
- 3) **If needed . . . “extra grace required.”**
- 4) **If needed, you can say “pass” on a question.**
- 5) **NEVER leave a session angry.**
- 6) **Be honest, be positive, and have fun!**

STEPPING STONE 2 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1) Have fun: Imagine if you were the last two people on earth, how would you treat each other differently? _____

- 2) Be honest: What's keeping you from doing those things today? How would you handle the "opportunities for a resolution" differently? _____

- 3) Have fun: Tell of a time early in the relationship that you had a *petty fight* over nothing. What was the root cause of it (tiredness, immaturity, stressors in other areas of life, etc.)? How did you resolve it then, and how would you handle it if the issue came up today? _____

- 4) Be honest: Would you say during arguments that you are motivated most by: "How can **I** win?" or "How can **we** win?" Explain your answer (maybe even share a recent experience). _____

- 5) Be positive: How would you say that your spouse is EXEMPLIFYING the love of Christ today? _____



- 6) Be honest (for him): How much healthier would your marriage be if you loved your wife as Christ loved the church? How would that change in the way you love and serve her? _____

- 7) Be honest (for her): How much healthier would your marriage be if you submitted to your husband as to the Lord? In what ways would it change what you're doing today? _____

- 8) Have fun: Read Song of Solomon 4. Which of these verses do you find the most romantic? _____

HERE IS YOUR “HAVE FUN CHALLENGE!”

Surprise your spouse, do one of the following for them this week:

- a. Prepare a meal **together**. During the meal, you cannot feed yourself, only your spouse!
- b. Write a love letter, one that is out-of-control sappy, but 100% true.
- c. Go and do that thing they love (specifically: something that you *really don't* enjoy).

Bonus: Take it to the *next level* and do more than one!

Double Bonus: Post a pic of the two of you doing whatever you chose! (Be sure to add **#thetotalmarriagemakeover** to share with our online community!)

STEPPING STONE 3

Assess Your Individual Values



Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. — Romans 12:1-2

Now you have made it through the first two Stepping Stones in *The Total Marriage Makeover*. Congratulations! Ideally, you're getting aligned and standing firm on the right foundation for a holy, thriving marriage. This means that you're on the fastest route to the very heart of God, you're loving like God is calling you to do, and with that, loving your spouse daily even more. You hopefully have an "I do" kind of attitude, a heart to serve, and are ready to submit to one another in a godly kind of love.

SEPARATED AT . . . REBIRTH?

We spent the first two chapters becoming God-centered and outward-focused. Hopefully it's been a real blessing to your marriage and a time of renewal; a fresh start, a rebirth. Now we're going to focus *just for a short time* on yourself and your values. ***For this chapter: do the assessment separately.*** Maybe even read it

separately, too!

As we have talked about in Stepping Stone 1, God has given everyone a purpose, and that purpose we have is to **follow God's will and to bring Him glory**. How can you figure out what that is for yourself? How can you determine what to do in your marriage? It starts with knowing your *values*. Your values determine a large part of who you are, and they light up the path of what you choose to do.

OUT OF ALIGNMENT

Your values determine a large part of who you are, and they light up the path of what you choose to do.

Let's go back to the *traumatic event* that I faced while eating Christina's vegetarian meal (so sorry to bring this up again . . . I know it's horrible to relive, but just imagine how I'm feeling). What would make her try a new meal like that? What she valued most in that moment, especially early on in marriage, was to get to know me and make me happy any way she could. As a result of her values and desire to *please her husband*, she tried

making new meals to see what I really would love. Her values helped her determine what she should do. With her act of love, what would cause me to get mad in a time like that?

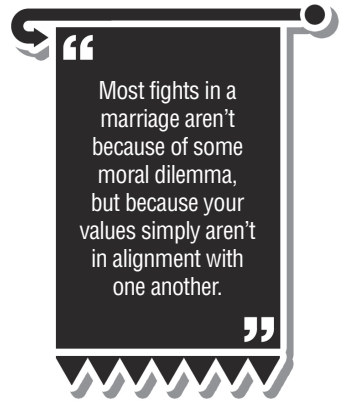
The problem wasn't that she did this act of love and serving me; the problem was, she didn't know something that I *deeply valued* in that time of my life (don't get me wrong . . . it was a heavily misguided value, but it was still what I valued). What was it? In that stage of my life, I believed that being a *meat-eater* was a marking of who I was as a man (go ahead . . . laugh it up! I'm laughing at myself writing this). As a result of being fed a vegetarian meal, I felt emasculated in that moment, and that she wasn't serving me, but threatening my manhood. Because my values were in my view *being threatened*, I didn't see this as an act of love at all. She might as well have held out a *calf bander* towards me (ask a rancher if you don't know what that is). I was obviously in the wrong, and it ended up being a huge misunderstanding of her intentions.

Now consider this: The vast majority of fights in a marriage aren't because of some moral dilemma, *but because your values simply aren't in alignment* with one another. There's not anything wrong with eating meat or not eating meat, but had she known this was a value of mine (coupled with her value of wanting to do whatever it

takes to please me), she would’ve told me about it before I took the first bite.

While you were reading this (and once you can stop laughing *at me*), hopefully you were thinking about something that was *out of alignment* in your values that caused a fight of your own. Since it’s probably still fresh on your mind, we’re going to go back to that *petty fight* from the discussion questions of the last chapter. We’re going to use that story of yours in a moment to assess how you were *out of alignment in your values*.

To help you assess better, don’t think of yourself in the fight, but as if you were the referee standing on the side watching you both fight. Hopefully this will allow you to see both sides of the argument a little better, and ideally able to see the details of the issues more clearly. Like a referee, you need to do everything you can to remain unbiased, you’re *simply seeking the truth*.



VALUES ASSESSMENT

The following questions are about the *petty fight* that you discussed at the end of the previous chapter (I mean . . . “opportunity for a resolution”). With each question, be sure to leave room for two sets of answers. You’re going to start off by answering these questions from YOUR SPOUSE’S perspective, put yourself in their shoes and in their world.

Start off by answering these questions in a way that you think THEY would answer (and leave enough room for your answer later):

- If you were to pinpoint this entire argument down to one thing, what would it be? There might be multiple, and that’s ok. If so, list them **all** out (and circle which one you think is the biggest). _____

- Consider the *values* that were present. What was the difference in what you *valued* in that time? How did that difference lead to whatever it became? _____

- What did it take to come to a resolution? *Was there a resolution?* _

Now that you've completed these questions, go back through and answer them (and the ones below) from YOUR perspective.

- Now consider what you know today from Stepping Stones 1 & 2. If you could go back in time with these values in mind, how would you handle that situation differently? _____

- After looking from both perspectives, was there anything new that you learned about yourself? Write it down here. _____

WHAT ABOUT OTHER “OPPORTUNITIES FOR A RESOLUTION”?

Now we’re going to explore three different *Opportunities for a Resolution* that you had in the past, concerning your *faith, family, and finances*. They could range anywhere from a small disagreement that was quickly resolved to the biggest blowup you’ve ever had in your marriage. Ideally, you want to pick the *bigger* ones, if possible. Prepare yourself for conflict as you go through these questions, and pray that the conflict is handled in a God-honoring way.

What we’re doing here in these assessments is exercising the *creative juices* in your brain, with the purpose of using your past arguments like a *practice run* in prep for the *big game* (you know . . . the next fight, and ideally, ALL future fights). Remember: It’s not about “How can I win?” but “How can WE win?”

Do the same thing that you did in the *petty fight* assessment! Start by answering from your SPOUSE’S perspective first, then work through them again from YOUR perspective. NOTE: If you cannot think of one, skip on to the next one, but come back to it later if something comes to mind!

Let’s start with your faith:

- Was there a time when you had a disagreement *concerning your faith*? A few examples could be a differing belief about who God is, how to serve, or where you should attend church (or maybe whether to attend/not attend at all)? _____

- Think of the *faith values* that were present. What was the difference in what you *valued* in that time? How did that difference in faith lead to disagreement? _____

- What did it take to come to a resolution (if there was one)? _____

Now go back and answer the previous question, as well as the next two questions, this time from YOUR perspective:

- Consider again what you know today from Stepping Stones 1 & 2. If you could go back in time with these *faith values* in mind, how would you handle that situation differently? _____

- After looking from both perspectives, was there anything new that you learned about your *faith values*? _____

Here's the second scenario. This time, it's concerning *family and home* (remember, answer from your spouse's perspective first, then go back and answer from your perspective):

- Was there a time when you had a disagreement *concerning your family*? Write the biggest one down below (As a few examples: parents or siblings *negative involvement* in the marriage, how you should clean the house or train your pets, how you raise your children) _____

- Think of the *family values* that you had in that moment. What was the difference in what you *valued* in that time? How did that difference in family lead to whatever it became? _____

- What did it take to come to a resolution (if there was one)? _____

Now go back and answer the previous question, as well as the next two questions, from YOUR perspective:

- Consider again what you know today from Stepping Stones 1 & 2. If you could go back in time with these *family values* in mind, how would you handle that situation differently? _____

This scenario is about your *finances* (remember, it's about your spouse's perspective first, then yours):

- Was there a time when you had a disagreement *concerning your finances*? Write the biggest one down below (As a few examples: how much you

should spend/save/give, making too large of a purchase without asking, one telling the other they *can't* purchase something). _____

- Think of the *financial values* that you had in that moment. What was the difference in what you *valued* in that time? How did that difference in values lead to whatever it became? _____

- What did it take to come to a resolution (if there was one)? _____

Now go back and answer the previous questions (as well as the next question) from YOUR perspective:

- Consider again what you know today from Stepping Stones 1 & 2. If you could go back in time with these *financial values* in mind, how would you handle that situation differently? _____

VALUES DETERMINE DECISIONS

Your values are a core part of the foundation you're standing on. Are you on the right foundation in your values? Do your values express love to the Lord? Do they express love to your spouse? This may sound odd, but don't undervalue your values. Your values are so incredible that they determine even the *smallest decisions* you make. If you're lazy in determining your values as a married couple, you'll find difficulty in making decisions together (just look back at your assessments if you're in conflict). If you truly *become one* in your values, the East will not be so far from the West, decisions become easier, and *your arguments will become discussions*. Best of all, love will overflow through it all.

My prayer is that you can clearly know what you value most and that you determine if your values need to change in any way. This marriage is a covenant that you made with one another before God. When you look at everything in your life, there're a lot of things that are important; but at the end of the day, *nothing else matters*. So fight for your values to **become one** as if your marriage depends on it, because it does!

Since this chapter was intentionally to be covered alone, there are no questions for discussion at the end of it. *However, there is a challenge*. Let's continue the conversation ALONE, as you look in your questions for discussion for Stepping Stone 3.

Recap: You're getting on the right foundation when you . . .

STEPPING STONE 1: Fall in love with the Lord.

STEPPING STONE 2: Fall in love with your spouse.

STEPPING STONE 3: Assess your values.

“If you're lazy in determining your values as a married couple, you'll find difficulty in making decisions.”

“If you truly become one in your values, you'll find that your arguments will become discussions.”



STEPPING STONE 3 QUESTIONS

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- *Your values determine a large part of who you are, and they light up the path of what you choose to do.*
- *Most fights in a marriage aren't because of some moral dilemma, but because your values simply aren't in alignment with one another.*
- *If you're lazy in determining your values as a married couple, you'll find difficulty in making decisions.*
- *If you truly **become one** in your values, you'll find that **your arguments will become discussions.***

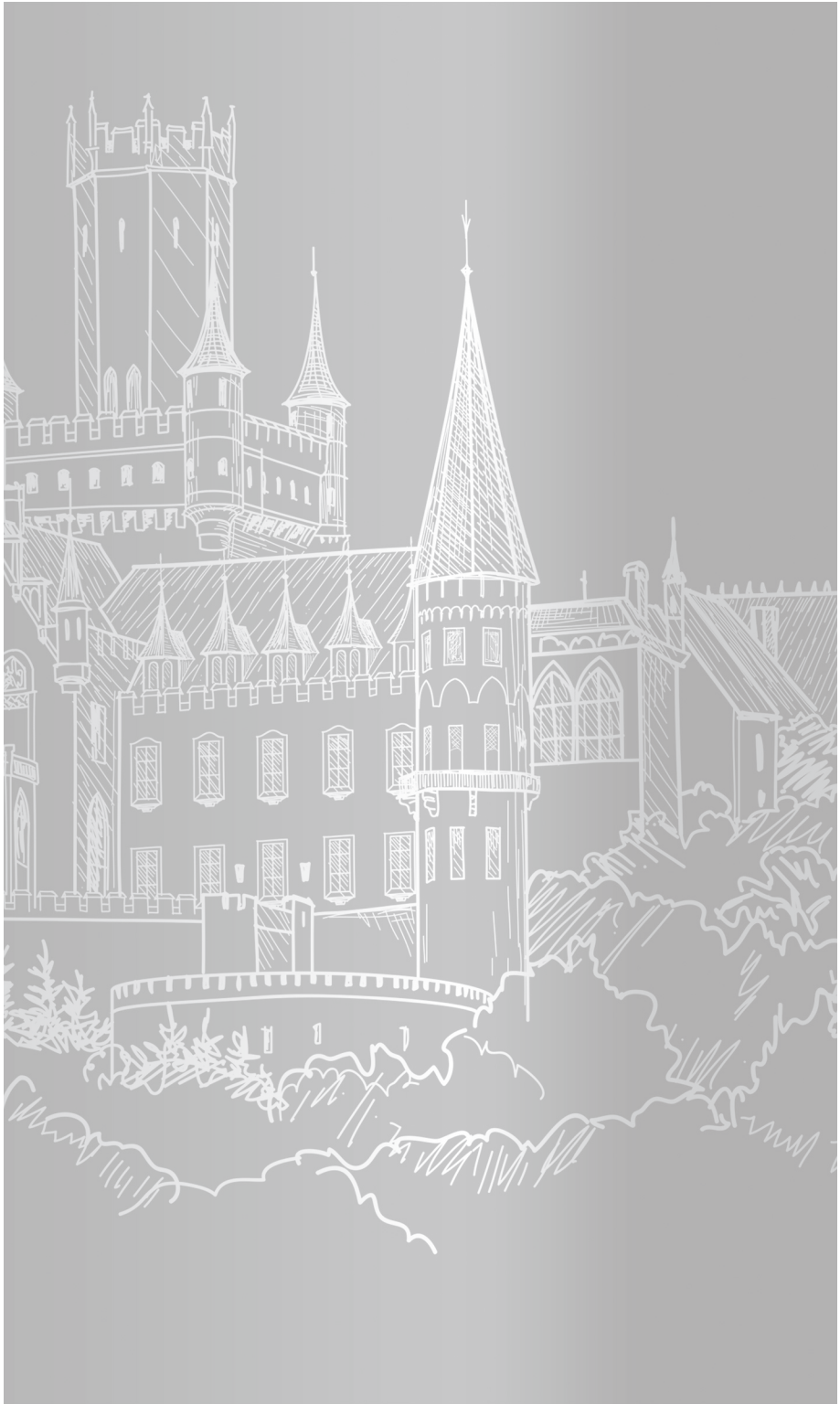
HAVE FUN— STEPPING STONE 3 CHALLENGE:

Normally there's a weekly challenge. For this challenge, make something for your spouse as a surprise. This is a gift that you will give your spouse at the very last step of the book. This is going to be a *keepsake* kind of item: so please treat it accordingly! It has to be:

- Something of high quality (but not necessarily expensive).
- Something that can be placed in your home or land and built to **last for a lifetime.**
- Something that will remind your spouse of *the values* of your marriage.
- Something *made by you.*

What should you do? This is open-ended but consider *the skillsets and passions you currently have* and use those gifts that God has given you in this challenge.

If you're stuck, think about your career or hobbies: how can you express your



STEPPING STONE 4

Become One in Your Values



Jesus replied: ⁶ “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife ⁸ and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

— Mark 10:6-9

BACK TOGETHER

Was it awful or refreshing having to do that last chapter alone? Don’t answer that out loud. Hopefully as you went through the questions *alone*, you felt a void, and are ready to do the challenges of this chapter *together*. Hopefully by now you have something in mind from the challenge to create as a keepsake item for your spouse (and started working on it! It’s due at the last chapter of the book). You’ve fallen in love with the Lord and with your spouse. You’ve assessed your values SEPARATELY, now you’re going to assess your individual values TOGETHER. My prayer is that through this chapter, you’re going to *see clearly* what is going well, and what needs to change.

With that in mind, I’ve set up a different kind of assessment. I think it’s wise for you to expect that it will *produce conflict*, but remember, conflict doesn’t have to be a bad thing (after all, God’s people in the Old Testament were named *Israel*,

“The two will become one” should extend well past sexual intimacy. It extends into our faith, family, finances, and everything we do.

which literally means “wrestles with God”!). We’re going to look at the findings of our previous chapter and think of ways we can be molded to be more in the likeness of Christ as a couple. “*The two will become one*” should extend well past sexual intimacy. It extends into our faith, family, finances, **and everything we do**.

You’ve determined your values as an individual, but this is the end goal: **to become one in your values**. The distance between the East and West tends to diminish when we’re one in our values. Sometimes that means we must lay down our pride and give way for the other, and for the other to do the same for you. Regardless of your individual values, you both need to be willing to *give way for God* in your life. At the end of the day, what God wants is of greater importance than what we want.

The “East” and “West” tend to diminish when we’re one in our values..

With that in mind, we’re going to see if we’re on the right foundation together. As you take this next assessment, remember: **Be honest, be positive, and have fun!** We’ll start with the *Vision Test*.

Regardless of your current values, you both need to be willing to give way for God. At the end of the day, what God wants matters more than what you want.

VISION TEST

For the Vision Test, you’re going to answer each question on a scale of 1-10 (1 being ‘fully disagree,’ 10 being ‘fully agree’), answer the following questions. **Have fun: for this next part, answer each question in your head, then**

when ready, tell your number out loud at the exact same time. If any answer is 3 numbers apart (or more), discuss why before moving to the next one.

In your marriage, the two of you...

- 1) Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. _____ | _____
- 2) Have a “spiritually healthy relationship”. _____ | _____
- 3) Have “East” and “West” happening right now. _____ | _____

- 4) Have *sin issues* you're working through. _____ | _____
- 5) Are spiritually mature overall. _____ | _____

Strengths:

- 1) Which questions had the *highest* numbers? Explain why you think that is.

- 2) See Galatians 5:22-23 (known as the “Fruit of the Spirit”). How do you currently “bear fruit” in your marriage? Go through the Fruit of the Spirit, and be specific on something you already exhibit, such as *patience, kindness*, and so on. _____

- 3) What would you say is the greatest strength (or strengths) of your marriage? _____

Be Honest, Be Positive, and Have Fun!

As a reminder, *especially when it comes to the negative side* of an assessment like what is coming: *You need to be honest*, but make sure your perspective stays within the boundaries of “*be positive* and to *have fun*.” It changes everything, even when looking at the negative side of something. This next part of the assessment will show the “opportunities for growth” (let’s be honest . . . this is just a nice way of saying *weaknesses*). It’s crucial to have the right frame of mind when

looking on this side of the coin. If you've followed the steps so far, you're going to naturally be focused on what God wants (not what you want), and on what is best for your marriage.

Israel wrestled with God. It was in their name, and it was in their actions. It's okay to wrestle with God, and it's okay to wrestle with your spouse. (Guys, I'm not talking about "business time" at this time!)

If you look at this next segment with the right heart, the right mindset, standing on the right foundation; you're going to find yourself choosing to see the struggles you're currently in as an opportunity for growth. With that in mind, especially in this next part of the assessment, ***be honest, be positive, and have fun!***

Weaknesses (opportunities for growth):

- 1) Read Matthew 7:3-5. What are some examples of "specks" (or maybe "planks") that you see within your marriage? _____

- 2) You've covered the Fruit of the Spirit. Now read about the "thorns of the Spirit" (see Galatians 5:18-21). Does your marriage "bear thorns"? Go through each one as needed. How are any of those thorns you discussed *choking out* the Fruit of the Spirit? _____

- 3) From the first set of questions on page 58-59 in the Values Assessment, which questions had the *lowest numbers*? Explain your answer. _____

- 4) What steps can you take today to make the *greatest weakness* one of your *greatest strengths*? _____

- 5) Are there any other matters *not listed here* that you need to discuss and bring to light? _____

- 6) Additional notes for consideration: _____

SEEING THE PATH CLEARLY

This isn't an easy task, but to walk according to God's plan for your marriage, we have to remove any obstacles that could get in the way and strengthen the

wonderful strengths that God has used to bless your marriage (this might be including ones you haven't discovered yet). For the assessment you just completed, give it plenty of time *praying* over these matters. Pray that God would allow you to continue seeing the *strengths* of your marriage clearly, but also pray for the *weaknesses* (er . . . I mean . . . “opportunities for growth”).

When it comes to those *specks* and *planks*, pray for anything that is hindering what God is calling you to do in your marriage. Use this as a time to discipline yourself and learn *patience* in the process. Pray that God would continue to reveal the truth, that you can see clearly what God is telling you to do. Furthermore, consider this: **What are some things you haven't discussed yet?** What would be the most *God-honoring way* to present the issue to your spouse? Honesty is *required* for you to wrestle and grow. If you're not honest, you're effectively saying to God and your spouse that you're *unwilling to grow*.

DEALING WITH DIVISION

What about if your spouse has deep-rooted personal issues with you (or vice versa)? We need to be very intentional about loving them like Jesus loves. Unfortunately, it is far too often that the greatest adversaries of your marriage *can be the one you're married to*. Just consider: How much would it change the dynamics and overall health of your marriage if you were both *for each other* (meaning you *both* want to win together)?

Jesus said, “*If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand*” (Mark 3:24). Over the years as a church leader, I've run into division many times. An elder of mine was helping me deal with division several years ago, and he gave some incredibly wise instruction. His advice was for divisions in the church, but applies to our marriage relationships, too.

He asked: “*When you're dealing with division, how can you do everything in your power to love them like Jesus loves, bend over backwards and bring them along? You need to do everything possible with prayer, patience, and love. If you do this, then you know at the end of the day, regardless of the outcome, you did everything to the best of your ability and with a clear conscience.*”

This is POWERFUL wisdom dropped here, and you need to apply it for your marriage. I've had years of experience handling issues this way in the church, and I'm not bragging by any means (after all, God gave me this wise elder in my church with wise and godly instruction, so it definitely wasn't done by my doing, or even his), but the whole church knows that if there's any issues of division, that *this* is

how it will be handled. There's a level of trust and stability built in doing things this way. It applies to your marriage, too. It tells your spouse that you're not there to beat them down when they're in the wrong, but that you're willing to do **whatever it takes** to work together, to come to a resolution, and to *become one* in your values.

That being said, it's not so easy, is it? But it's necessary. Sometimes it's one-sided, but it's necessary. Sometimes you want to give up, but it's necessary. When you follow these Stepping Stones, it will exponentially impact how you *shorten the distance* of the "East" from the "West" and align yourselves to God's plan for dealing with your struggles.

You've seen your spouse as clearly as you can at this moment; you've seen all the strengths and weaknesses, too. I want to challenge you to stay *humble* all throughout this process. When you have that extra bit of knowledge you've been given, it can be used by Satan for you to become arrogant or proud. One of the greatest indicators of good, godly marriages is not arrogance or pride, but *humility*. Jesus showed humility all throughout His time here on earth. I want to encourage you to do the same, and to always remember that you are called to live in *humility* as you continue following these Stepping Stones.

ONE FINAL THOUGHT

Every weakness is an opportunity in disguise. One of the greatest things you can do in your marriage is to pray for clarity on how to turn that weakness into a strength. So look for the opportunities *in disguise*. Get a clear view of the big picture of what God is leading you to do as you continue building on the *right foundation for a healthy marriage*.

Now it's time to continue the conversation! Before starting (I know this is repetitive), make sure for the content that you've discussed that you're both in agreement that the discussion goes no further than the two of you (or the group you're in). Conflict is inevitable, but through Christ, unity is attainable.

If you truly love the Lord and His Church, then you know the importance of the information you give (and are given). Enter this conversation with the goal of *becoming one* in your values.

“
Conflict is inevitable,
but through Christ,
unity is attainable.
”

“
The Goal: Enter
this conversation
with the goal of
becoming one in
your values.
”



STEPPING STONE 4 QUESTIONS

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- *“The two will become one” should extend well past sexual intimacy. It extends into our faith, family, finances, and everything we do.*
- *The “East” and “West” tend to recede when we’re one in our values.*
- *Regardless of your current values, you both need to be willing to give way for God. At the end of the day, what God wants matters more than what you want.*
- *The Goal: Enter this conversation with the goal of becoming one in your values.*
- *Conflict is inevitable, but through Christ, unity is attainable.*

Reminder of the GROUND RULES

- 1) **The things you discuss here stay here.**
- 2) **There is no place for SHAME or for BLAME.**
- 3) **If needed . . . “extra grace required.”**
- 4) **If needed, you can say “pass” on a question.**
- 5) **NEVER leave a session angry.**
- 6) **Be honest, be positive, and have fun!**

STEPPING STONE 4 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1) Be honest: Out of all the assessments in this chapter, which part stood out to you the most? Were there any ‘surprise’ answers that caught you off-guard? Please share. _____
-

2) Be honest: What is the greatest strength of your marriage? What about the greatest opportunity for growth? _____

3) Be positive: How did you deal with a plank (or speck) before taking the assessment? _____

4) Have fun: What was the biggest blunder you've made when trying to address an issue in your marriage? _____

5) Be honest: What are some issues in your marriage that need to be addressed one day? _____

- 6) Be positive: When talking through the questions with your wise leader(s), what is the best advice that they gave to you? _____

CHALLENGE:

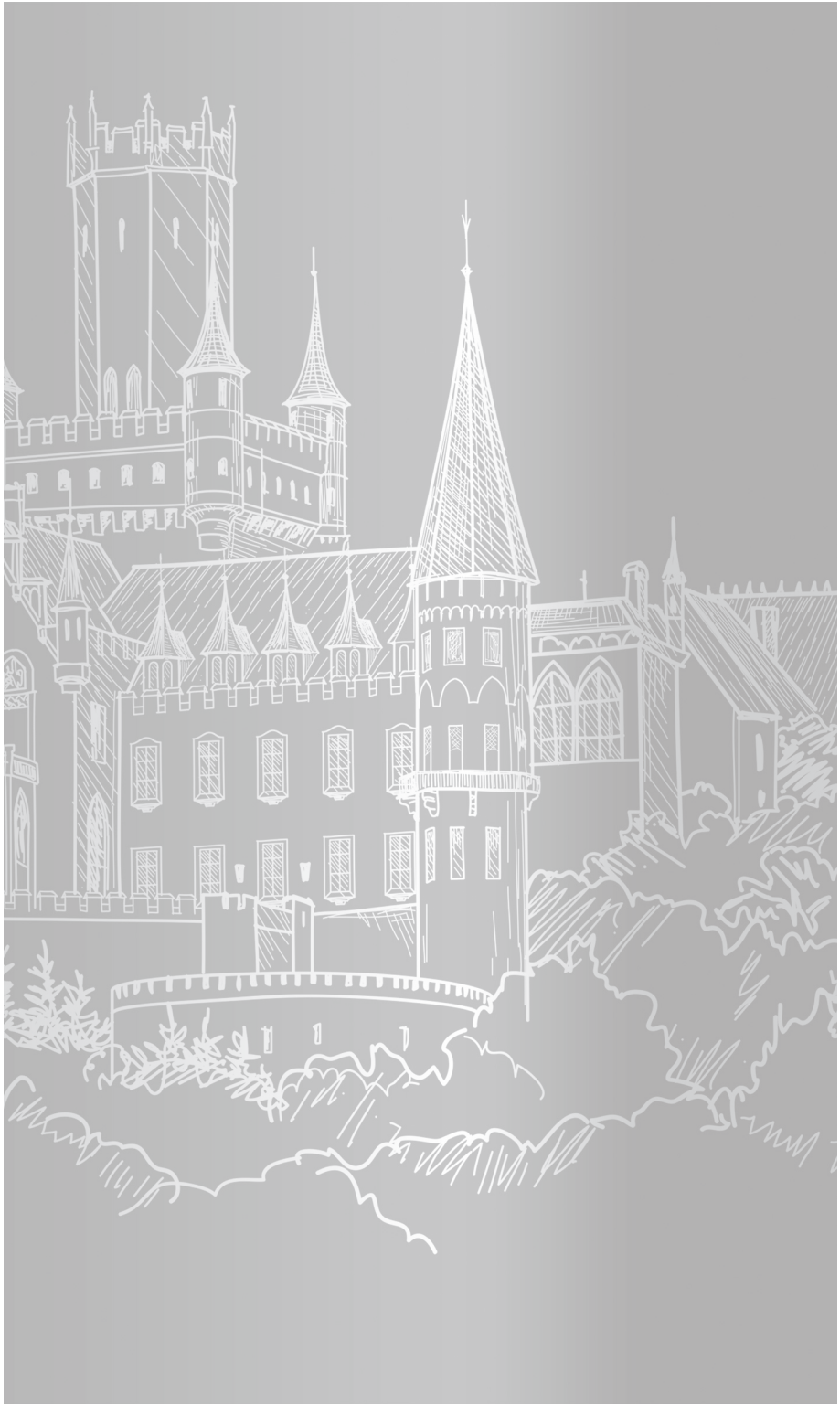
Pray about the findings of this assessment and come up with an action plan on how to one day address the issues in your findings (if you couldn't resolve them in that moment), as well as how to encourage and build on the (already great) strengths that you two have.



THE WALLS

Now that you've completed the segment on *The Foundation*, I pray that it has given you the tools you need to stand firm, steady, and ready. Your marriage is worth fighting for, together. It's worth building on together, too. That's why we're building on with the next segment of the book: *The Walls*. We're going to focus on the purpose of walls: *to protect everything inside (your marriage), by defending against threats on the outside (the "storms")*.

Without the walls intact, one or both of you could be led off the foundation and have some serious issues come about in your marriage. *Let's protect everything inside by defending against threats on the outside. WHATEVER IT TAKES!*



STEPPING STONE 5

Raise the Walls



PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Getting on the right foundation isn't easy, and I just wanted to pause and congratulate you for sticking with this study. If you've followed these steps so far, you've made it through the most difficult part of it all. Stop and ask each other before moving on: **How does it feel to not only know where to stand, but also to know what to do? How has it changed your mindset knowing what you need to do to be on the same page together?**

“It's one thing to know what to do, it's a whole new challenge to consistently put it into practice.”

It's one thing to know what to do, it's a whole new challenge to consistently put it into practice. Throughout this chapter, we're going to learn what it means to *raise the walls* for our marriage. As a reminder, here is the purpose of the walls: *to protect everything inside (your marriage) by defending against threats on the outside (the "storms")*.

When you see an inconsistency in your values, you're ideally going to see the issue before a conflict begins, a conversation (I mean . . . “opportunity for a resolution”) will happen, and you'll tackle this issue together. Imagine this: every victory you experience together where you end each “opportunity for a resolution,” becoming one in your values. It's just like adding a brick to *the walls*. Over time, as

“

Brick by brick, you're going to build the walls by consistently following through with the values that you have determined together.

”

you have successful discussions, you will eventually perceive this rhythm where you see the problem and work toward a resolution as you're beginning the discussion.

Brick by brick, you're going to build the walls by consistently following through with the values that you have determined together.

Imagine if you were co-managers of a business (yes, marriage is *far* more than that. Bear with me on this illustration). Imagine you determined what you would do as a business; how you would

manage your money, the goals you have set for the next quarter, etc. If either of you regularly defied the rules within that business, what would you do? After a certain point in time, you might do what you can to make the co-manager leave or get frustrated and walk away. A foundation of trust needs to be built in a business partnership, how much more important is it to have that for your marriage? Jesus talked about trust in this way:

“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.” — Luke 16:10

“

We're not owners of our marriage; we're co-managers of the marriage that God has given us.

”

In your marriage, you're not owners of anything, rather, you are “co-managers” of what God has given you. You get to “co-manage” your finances, your values, your struggles, your strengths, your children, and the list goes on and on. As a follower of Christ living on the right foundation, you are choosing daily to manage everything you have been given (including your

marriage) in a way that honors God. If we manage even the smallest of things now in a way that honors God, we'll build strong and healthy walls for our marriage. Take even the *smallest moments* as an opportunity to build trust within your marriage, brick by brick. Over time your partners' trust in you will grow, and yours in them.

SHALLOW VALUES?

Let's build on this idea of *building the wall* with the *vegetarian lasagna* story. Let's say that we have had the big blowup, the apology, and moved forward. If Christina and I were going through this book around the time that we had that "*opportunity for a resolution*," we'd be discussing the difference in values. I would have shared how it is important that it be made known to me if something is vegetarian. She would have shared with me how important it is to please me any way she can, and that I really hurt her feelings when I blew up over such a small thing.

Moving forward, we followed through with our values. What did that look like? She told me beforehand if I was about to eat something vegetarian. I agreed on my end that even if she *didn't tell me*, I would assume the best in her intentions (it was a loving act of service). Every time we followed through with such a shallow and easy-to-follow value, it's like we added a brick to the *walls* to protect where we stood. Over time we started to definitively know not only what those values are, but as we got to know each other better, we started digging deeper and asked *why*. This is a powerful question when asked with the right heart and perspective. Asking "*why?*" is how you find the depth in your values, whatever they may be. Hopefully during this time, you'll consider how you can find the depth of your values by asking "*why?*" in your own marriage. Let's look at why our values were out of alignment. We'll start with my reaction below.

Why would Shane feel so strongly about eating meat?

As Christina got to know me more, she learned just how much I've been bothered by the *unspokenly* emasculated culture we live in today (to my vegetarian friends, bear with me on what I'm about to say). I *unspokenly* determined that anything I can do to be more of a godly man is deeply important to me: from big things like managing our home, to small things like the food I eat. *It was misguided to react the way I did*, but it turns out the reaction over a vegetarian dish had *nothing to do with a vegetarian dish* but feeling less like a godly man. I had to learn over time that what you eat does not determine who God made us as men, and Christina learned over time that she needs to show me the godly values a man should have.

Why would Christina want to please her husband?

This seems like a straightforward thing; we should all want to please our spouses at some level. For her, as we dug deeper and asked "*why?*" I learned she's a people-pleaser. For people-pleasers, it can be their greatest strength, or their greatest

downfall. (Why? One major example is *blind loyalty*. An unhealthy people-pleaser would be allowing their spouse to do whatever they wanted without consequences or even bringing issues up.) My reaction was foolish. On top of that, it didn't just hurt her feelings, the way I responded crushed her spirit.

Once I understood her people-pleasing value, I've done my best to consider her feelings more. I also do my best to make sure she knows that I love her, even if things didn't go as I had expected. There are also times that the people-pleasing value she has means she takes too much on her schedule (by saying "yes" to too many things. Sound familiar?). As a result, her people-pleasing nature just exhausts her. As her husband, I have to protect her from unhealthy practices and be on the lookout for her so that she doesn't get overloaded in any way. As my wife, she has to protect me from unhealthy practices and be on the lookout for me so that I don't become emasculated in any way. When we both honor each other's values, we'll fall in love all the more!

There is no such thing as a shallow value, only a shallow view.

There is no such thing as a *shallow value*, only a *shallow view*. When something *seems* shallow or straightforward, always give the benefit of the doubt and dig deeper. You'll get to know each other better in the process. When you understand *why* something is important to your spouse, their values will become more important to you, too.

When you both value something deeper, especially if it's something that is a God-honoring quality, you should guard those values fiercely together. The beauty of it is this: brick by brick, the walls *guarding* the values within your marriage will start to form.

BRICK BY BRICK

The depth and consistency of your values determines the strength of your walls.

Consider this: *The depth and consistency of your values determines the strength of your walls.* If you love your spouse and want this marriage to last, you're going to do anything you can to get to know each other better and consistently follow through with guarding those values. When you hurt each other *by going against your values*, it's like taking a sledgehammer to the bricks that have

been placed. Over time, as you continue being faithful in marriage to both the Lord and each other, *strong walls* will form, and your marriage is going to weather the storms of this life well.

Let's look at this story about Jim and Mandy, and how their *financial values* helped determine the strength of their *walls*.

Jim and Mandy have been married for years. One of the things that Jim values is being a gift-giver, so he spares no expense when Christmas rolls around each year. For Mandy, she doesn't want to give any gifts outside of their household. Because of this, a conflict arises every Christmas between the two of them. If Jim has a shallow view, he can either quickly assume that Mandy is just being selfish, or he can dig deeper to find the root of the issue. So, they set out to have an "opportunity for a resolution."

In this discussion, Jim shares his heart with her to figure out the source of the conflict and asks questions on *why* she doesn't want to give gifts like he does. Mandy reveals that when she was a child, her parents poorly managed their money and ended up getting evicted from their home. As a result of her experience, she's *fearful* around Christmas time because she's financially insecure, and afraid that this extra spending can cost them their home. Remember: ***There is no such thing as a shallow value, only a shallow view.***

Their financial viewpoints are both important! How can they *become one in their values*? For Jim, he needs to recognize first that this *isn't an issue of selfishness, but of fear*. Jim needs to also recognize that even though this is an issue of trust, it's not because of anything he did. If Jim had a shallow view, he could quickly assume that Mandy doesn't trust him, which is simply not the case. Jim would serve Mandy very well over time as he shows her that he is financially responsible. What would that require? It requires setting up a budget and deciding together what they should *save, spend, and give*; and consistently following through with what was agreed on. (Side note: if this is you, it may take months or even *years*, depending on the past experiences of you or your spouse, and it may be one of those times of *extra grace required*. If you're struggling financially, Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University³ is a highly recommended place to get on a solid foundation for money management.)

Imagine this: what if Jim *went against* what they agreed on for their monthly budget? It'd be like swinging a sledgehammer at the foundation, breaking all the trust she had previously put in him, and the walls would come crumbling down. To succeed, they now have to start over and rebuild that trust.

But don't worry, that's not what happened. In this love story, I decided to give it a better ending! Keep reading on:

Even though Jim desires greatly to be a gift-giver, he would never do anything to violate Mandy's trust. Brick by brick, Jim proves that he is responsible with their money. *The values develop into walls*: Over time, Mandy sees that Jim is responsible with their money, and shows that he would never do anything to jeopardize that. She feels more secure as she sees the consistency and stability in him, and over time Mandy should eventually be willing to set up a part of the budget for additional gift-giving (in a way that he would want). What is the result? She knows that despite her past situations, there is financial stability. Over time, Mandy trusts Jim to do some amazing gift-giving. I chose to give a happy ending to this love story; the decisions you make today can give a happy ending to yours, too!

BUILD THE WALLS TOGETHER

Regardless of the conflict in values, you have the choice to make the *East* recede from the *West*. You have the choice to stand firm on the right foundation together. You have the choice to dig deeper by asking "why?" You have the choice to *become one* in your values. It's up to you. Build the walls together!

You've got this!

STEPPING STONE 5 CITED SOURCE

3. Dave Ramsey, "Financial Peace University" Ramsey Solutions, 1994, https://www.ramseysolutions.com/ramseyplus/financial-peace?exp=rplus-49439&gclid=Cj0KCQiAtiCdBhCLARIsALUBFcFyBQHNEvMp9ypjwRjEOUMxMuFIY9Hp520SwLsOf-1nRdVrK8ZzXb8aAu_cEALw_wcB



STEPPING STONE 5 QUESTIONS

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- *It's one thing to know what to do, it's a whole new challenge to consistently put it into practice.*
- *Brick by brick, you're going to build the **walls** by consistently following through with the values that you have determined together.*
- *When something seems shallow, always give the benefit of the doubt and dig deeper.*
- *We're not owners of our marriage; we're co-managers of the marriage that God has given us.*
- *There is no such thing as a shallow value, only a shallow view.*
- *The depth and consistency of your values determines the strength of your walls.*

REMINDER OF THE GROUND RULES:

- 1) **The things you discuss here stay here.**
- 2) **There is no place for SHAME or for BLAME.**
- 3) **If needed . . . “extra grace required.”**
- 4) **If needed, you can say “pass” on a question.**
- 5) **NEVER leave a session angry.**
- 6) **Be honest, be positive, and have fun!**

STEPPING STONE 5 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1) Have fun: Tell again of a time you may have had a petty reaction or shallow values. Dig deeper: was it because of shallow values, or was there something more to it? _____

- 2) Be honest: What about a bigger blowup? With the “How can WE win?” heart, discuss the conflict in values in a big argument from the past. _____

- 3) Be positive: What is one value that is stronger than *any* other value you have together? _____

- 4) Be honest: What is a value (or values) that you’ve struggled with in the past, but you’re getting on the same page about it today? _____

- 5) Be positive: What is one difference in values that you’re laughing about the most today? _____

- 6) Have fun: Calling all actors whether great or terrible (but shoot for terrible)! This challenge is ideally for a small group setting. If you’re not in a small group, consider getting together with a group for this one!

Step 1: Choose a topic.

- Wife rescues husband from a shark attack.
- Nuclear power plant: You are the only two that can stop a full-scale meltdown.
- Your flight crashed (safely . . . somehow) in the desert. Decide on a survival plan.
- You’re surviving the zombie apocalypse until one gets bitten.

Step 2: You’re going to act out a short love story based on the chosen topic.

Once you have the topic, what would a conflict in values look like between the two of you? Have a mock argument and come to a resolution together by digging deeper and discovering each other’s values. If in a group, each couple gets to stand up and have a turn! *The cheesier, the better.* If it doesn’t end as ridiculous and sappy as a *Candace Cameron-Bure* Christmas movie, you’re doing it wrong! Have someone set a 60-second timer for each couple.

3, 2, 1... GO!

- 7) What did you learn about your spouse in the previous exercise? _____

**REMINDER OF THE *KEEPSAKE* CHALLENGE
FROM STEPPING STONE 3:**

How is your creation coming along? Without giving away what it is, tell each other the progress of it. (Haven't started yet? A good cop-out is saying, "I'm still in the ideas phase," but that excuse won't last long. Get to it!)

FUN CHALLENGE:

"A full day their way." Husband: Flip a coin and let the wife call *heads* or *tails*. Whoever wins chooses who gets to go first. Set aside two days this next week as "*a full day their way*." On your day, you get to choose whatever meals or activities to do! Whether it's meals, activities, serving, creating, playing games; the day is yours!

VALUES CHALLENGE:

Consider your biggest "East" to "West" difference in values. Start making small habits to build the *walls* for those values together.

Be honest, be positive, and have fun!

STEPPING STONE 6

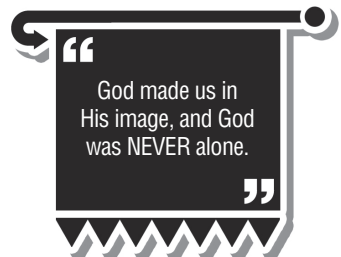
Defend the Walls



“WE’RE IN CONTROL”

We were married almost two years when we had our first child. This was an amazing time of life, but incredibly stressful, too. I firmly believe we were on the right foundation when we got married, but when my daughter was born in 2012, we *unspokenly* decided that we were going to do everything we could ourselves. After all, we *knew* what to do, and we could handle this whole parenting thing *on our own* (SIDE NOTE: as I’m writing this, Microsoft Word claims “unspokenly” isn’t a word, but I am declaring it to be a word anyway. *This is America*. I’m going to play my “Freedom of Speech” card here and write “unspokenly” a thousand times just because I can. But, I digress . . . let’s get back to the story).

We *unspokenly* decided that at 23 years old, we didn’t need any help. An “I can take care of myself” mentality can be a good thing, but our pride led us astray. We found ourselves meandering off the right foundation and were blinding ourselves from seeing the importance of a healthy support system. With that in mind, part of getting on the right foundation for your marriage requires us to put down the *wrong* types of walls (pride being one of them). For us, we unfortunately and *unspokenly* put up the walls of pride as parents: and that meant “no help required.” I talk about this often: **God made us**



in His image, and God was NEVER alone. Why would that not apply in our marriage, in parenting, and in every facet of our lives?

“WE’RE OUT OF CONTROL”

Ironically, this prideful mindset was what *unspokenly* built isolation: unhealthy walls between us, our friends, our church, and God Himself. Pride led us onto a foundation of *sand*. We were constantly *stressed*, chasing after the *wrong priorities*, and feeling *completely defeated*. Sound familiar? Maybe this highlighted the pride in your heart right now if you’re trying to make it on your own. Let me speak to you for a moment: **you weren’t designed to do life alone!** Getting a healthy support system in your corner will call you out when you’re in the wrong, but also lead and encourage you to do what is right.

Our local church tried to be the healthy support system we so desperately needed, but we were too prideful to open up for help or even see the need. *The perils of our pride led to complete burnout*. This was a moment in my life where I was so depleted that I even left the church. I swore to God that I was **never** going into ministry again (I wrote more about this in the blog titled “Never Again”⁴). Sometimes God leads us through tough times to teach us something that we didn’t yet know about ourselves. In this case, we were taught that we needed more than just the two of us to help raise this child, and just to do life together. *You can wander away from a healthy support system, but you have to be intentional about getting it back.*

GOD’S PROVISION

It was clear that we were not only *living on the wrong foundation*, but we had *walls* up where they didn’t belong. Once we realized what was happening and what needed to change, we let the walls down and asked for help. We had left our church near Ozark and moved back to my hometown of Inola, Oklahoma; my parents were gracious enough to allow us to stay with them for a time while saving up to buy a home. My siblings lived nearby, as well. For the first summer that we lived in Inola, my dad tilled a good-sized vegetable garden. That summer we bonded together in that garden more than I can remember. It was as if my dad led us through Stepping Stones One and Two (but we were getting on the right foundation as a whole family!).

What a blessing! It was a time of renewal and a much-needed *reset* for us. We got connected with my home church and found an incredible amount of support.

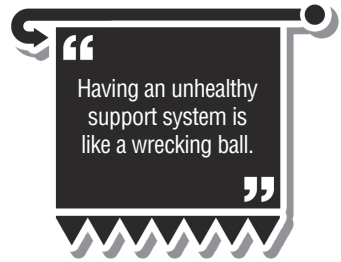
Because of the choice to let the *unhealthy* walls down, this *healthy support system* helped get us on the right foundation, and on top of that, they were doing what they could to protect our marriage and family as well. This is one of my favorite verses, and I really want to encourage you to take it to heart:

“Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.” — Proverbs 13:20

You need to know who is wise and can be a part of your support system (the *walls*) and who you can allow in your life; but it’s also just as important to know who to avoid.

UNSpokenly UNSUPPORTIVE

In your marriage, you have now laid the *foundation* for a healthy and holy marriage. A foundation will keep you from sinking, but a good home obviously has walls and a roof, too. **Having an unhealthy support system is like inviting in a wrecking ball;** it’ll take the walls out, but also go a step further and drive a deep “*East to West*” kind of wedge between the two of you, *knocking you off the foundation altogether*. What does that look like? An unhealthy support system will try to infiltrate by inviting *gossip* about the problems from within your marriage, temptation to *lust* after another, excuses to treat your spouse terribly, and so much more. You’ll be living with selfish motives, rather than for the Lord and your spouse. You’ll no longer submit to the other as the Lord is calling you to do. **This is no way to live!** Anyone with an unhealthy support system will lead one or both of you off the *foundation altogether*.

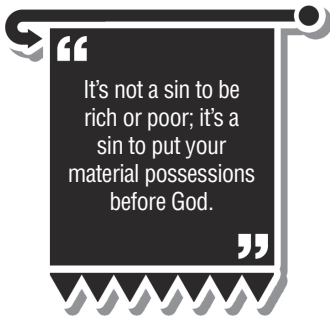


I can’t imagine anyone desiring that, but it’s unfortunately common. This is the incredible power of allowing the *wrong* kind of influences in your marriage. By contrast, a healthy network of support will be there to help you to keep the “*walls*” intact, brick by brick and layer by layer. They’re there to help you weather the storm by *shutting out* all the gossip, lust, etc. (and if you’re living on the right foundation, you’re doing the same for them). How do you see the signs of *unhealthy* support? There are three big things you should look out for, and they’re found right here:

*“For everything in the world—the **lust of the flesh**, the **lust of the eyes**, and the **boasting of what he has and does**—comes not from the Father but from the world.” — 1st John 2:16*

Let’s take a look at what might be three of the most *prevalent sin issues* all across the world; and it doesn’t seem to matter what era you’re from or what part of the world you live in. Think of these things as the *storms* that Jesus is referring to as you build your home on the Rock. I’m not saying there aren’t other issues (because there are many), but if you can watch out for these common *wrecking ball* issues, you’ll find yourself keeping the walls a lot more intact, especially as you’re walking with the wise (that healthy support system). In other words, you’ll stand firm on the right foundation and *weather the storm together*. What can you be on the lookout for, together? Let’s take a quick look at three of the most prevalent *wrecking ball* issues below.

1) Lust of the flesh (Materialism):



Weird fact: Whether you’re wealthy or poor, *materialism can affect you*. How? If you’re wealthy and start acquiring many possessions, you have the potential to look to your things for your worth. By contrast, if you’re poor and think about all that you *don’t* have, you’ll have the *potential* to long for the things you don’t have. Here’s the deal: **It’s not a sin to be rich or poor; it’s a sin to put material possessions above God**. Whether you *have* those possessions (or not) is completely irrelevant; it’s what you’re longing for the most that makes all the difference. If you’re living on the right foundation, put the walls up and make it a priority to be praying the same prayer as King David:

*“Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; **give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread**. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.” — Proverbs 30:7-9*

What a powerful prayer! I don't know about you, but I have *never* seen this prayer on the walls of homes or churches. Maybe that should change. He wanted the Lord to give him *enough to live on*, nothing more and nothing less. If you're struggling with materialism in any way, start praying for *just enough*.

Here's the next *wrecking ball*:

2) Lust of the eyes (Sexual Sin):

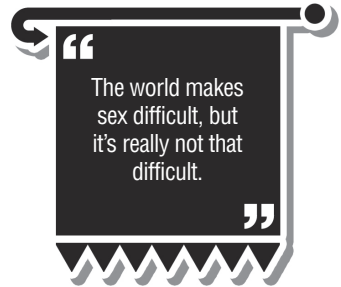
You can go several directions when it comes to “lust of the eyes,” sexual sin. It reminds me of counterfeit money. Do you know how the government can tell what counterfeit money looks like? **By really knowing what is authentic.** *Anything outside of that is quickly identified.* The same is true with sex.

Sex outside of marriage in any way is shown in the Scriptures as sexual sin. *God designed all that wonderful “business time” to be within the covenant of marriage.* The world makes sex difficult, but it's really not that difficult. If you truly love and trust the Designer, you'll stick to His design. His plan is greater than any plan we could come up

with. However, if you notice the passage we're about to read, it's not just sexual contact that we need to avoid, but *lust of the eyes*. Jesus shared with us the heart of the matter when it comes to sexual sin:

“Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” — Matthew 5:28

What is Jesus saying here? **Lust is a wrecking ball.** You don't have to look far to see the negative effects lust has in marriages and families; it has wrecked our entire culture. There's no place for even *leaning* in the direction of adultery because of the damning effects it'll have on you. Do you have *lust of the eyes*? Is it wrecking your walls and leading you astray? Make ANY changes needed to get back on track. This may mean that you need to make your phone accessible to your spouse any time they want or get an accountability app to lock your phone down from pornographic sites and pop ups. This may mean getting with a small group specifically about this kind of addiction. Furthermore: **lock it down.** Block that person from messaging you (even though you're “*just flirting*”). Lust will wreck even the most amazing of marriages. Get rid of it.



Whatever it takes. You've got this!

3) **Boasting (Pride):**

Pride is connected to *every* form of sin in some way. Why? Because when we sin, we're essentially saying that we somehow either know more than God or we don't care what He commanded us. So, if a *wrecking ball* in your marriage isn't like the first two (*materialism* and *sexual sin*), it'll probably fall under this category in some way, or at minimum lead you in that direction. Pride will lead you to close off anyone trying to help, like Christina and I did. Pride will lead you to share information that's supposed to stay within the marriage. Pride will lead you to spend well beyond what you agreed on in your budget discussions. Pride will lead you to believe that your happiness comes before your marriage (even if it means wrecking your marriage), rather than standing firm and restoring it.

Those are a few examples, but what are other *wrecking balls* in your marriage? What inside your marriage do you need to **protect** the most? What do you need to **defend** against the most? Knowing the enemy is crucial as you develop the *walls* for your marriage.

AN UNHEALTHY SUPPORT SYSTEM

If you're standing on the right foundation for a healthy marriage, then you're already seeing the goodness of God at work in you. Ideally, you are laying down your pride and you are already clearly seeing who *should and shouldn't* be present within the support system of your marriage. What is the quickest way to tell? By knowing what foundation *they're* standing on, too, and you can only know that if you see the fruit in their lives. When you see what is authentic, the counterfeits are easy to identify. Let's look at this passage:

“Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.” — Matthew 7:17-20

Jesus was talking about false prophets in this passage, but it is true for us all.

When it comes to allowing outside influences as your support system, you need to ask, what are the fruits of their lives? You might *want* them to be a part of your inner circle, but if they're poison to your marriage in any way, they need to go. Sometimes that's difficult. What if they're family members or coworkers? What if you can't change your physical proximity? If that's you, the challenge before you is to figure out how to limit their level of influence in your life.

*As a quick side note, I figure this story needs to be prefaced out of love and respect for both my beloved bride and my mother-in-law: **this story you're about to read thankfully did not actually happen!*** Let's look at an example of unhealthy walls with a close family member:

Let's look again at the *vegetarian lasagna* and my incredibly childish response. If you would, go ahead and put yourself in my shoes in this story. Imagine you had a big blow up of anger about being "lied to," and instead of having a conversation with you, she decides to tell her mother what happened and how much she was hurt. Your mother-in-law is now livid! She decides how wrong you were to do that, and to "help" the situation by taking matters into her own hands. Can we just say, "Oh no!" in this moment? Because this is one of those moments.

She comes over and tells you how wrong you were to decline her perfect little angel's wonderful meatless dish. She demands that you apologize, eat it (and *like it*), followed by a king-sized dessert of "humble pie" where you get lectured for your horrible attitude. You *unspokenly* do not want to eat the lasagna (it is clearly poison for your soul), but she also *just so happens* to be the one that paid half of your last month's house payment because you were going to be late if she didn't "rescue" you. Proverbs 22:7 says, "*the borrower is slave to the lender.*" Ouch! If you don't follow through with her demands, next time you need help with rent, there's only *one way* she's going to help pay for that house, if YOU are not in it! You're hosed, buddy!

Not only were you foolish enough to eat vegetarian lasagna (Father, forgive them), but now you and your spouse have enabled an *unhealthy influence to have power* in your life by becoming dependent on them. Your spouse inevitably became *emotionally dependent* to their mother, which means they'll be called upon to "help solve" even more of the problems that the *two of you* should be resolving within your marriage in the future. They look like walls at first, but they're the kind of walls that crash in on top of you. Nothing good can come from this type of toxic relationship!

When you have a financial dependence on someone *outside* of the marriage,

it will quickly warp your relationship with them in some way. Why? Those you're dependent on can feel empowered (proudful) and go down the path of feeling superior to you, and you'll be treated accordingly. *Here's where it gets wild:* When your spouse becomes emotionally dependent, they can also fall into the same trap of pride. Because when anyone has an emotional dependency present, they're naturally going to feel an unhealthy draw to make their own spouse feel *inferior* (on top of them already feeling inferior for having to depend on another! It *falsely confirms* what was already suspected.). To top it off, your spouse just had a poorly won victory in this fight by calling on her own mother for help. She may have won the battle, but if this continues, you will both lose the war. The mother-in-law (or whoever it is) will become the "storm."

Remember: Shift from "How can I win?" to "How can we win?" *Please lay down your pride.* When you shift from fighting each other and start fighting the problem, that's when you can both win. When there's an outside influence leading either of you back to the selfish question, "*How can I win?*" they need to go. It's the only way to win the war together. Maybe you've been in a similar situation and allowed the wrong influences to infiltrate your relationship. If so, it prevents you from living *as one* in your values, and it will create incredible amounts of strife in your marriage.

A TRULY HEALTHY SUPPORT SYSTEM

A healthy support system would never infiltrate your values as a couple, rather, they'd point you to how to reinforce them.

What would a healthy support system look like? One that helps lead you to ask, "How can we win?" *A healthy support system would never infiltrate your values as a couple, rather, they'd point you to how to reinforce them.* Imagine the same scenario; your spouse went to her mother for advice on your big fit over how hurt she was over the lasagna.

A truly healthy person to support your marriage wouldn't be saying, "you deserve better," or, "what a dirtbag," or, "keep saving that money in that separate account just in case you need to make an exit." **One on a healthy foundation** would be pointing you to "*How can we win?*" leading you on the right foundation to love the Lord, getting consistent in your values so that you can love each other more. Those are

the kinds of people we all need in our corner! What would a healthy support person say in that moment? Here are a few examples:

“Why do you think he responded that way? I can’t imagine him trying to hurt you.”

“I’m sorry he hurt your feelings, but why do you think he reacted that way?”

“I’ll keep praying for you as you work through this, but he might have been stressed about something else going on, and I know that the two of you will work it out and do just fine!”

Or maybe, “if you’re going to poison him like that, you should at least have the decency to tell him first!” (I’ve officially taken this too far!)

They’re not sweeping it under the rug or taking sides either way, but instead pointing you to God’s love and your marriage values. They’re going to be honest, be positive, and have fun as well!

A healthy support should help lead you to loving God and loving your spouse even more than you are right now. If they do anything other than that, it’s time for a major change. Maybe you’ve become dependent on an outside influence that’s negatively affecting your marriage. Let me speak to you for just a moment: **Please do not make your spouse be the one that has to tell you to get rid of that influence.** If you’re both on the right foundation and have fallen in love with the Lord and your spouse, *you should already have some ideas* on who or what could be poisoning your marriage, and you should both be willing to make the changes needed. **Whatever it takes.** Declare war! You need to submit to the other in this moment and get rid of any negative influences, so that you can move forward together.

Developing a healthy support system means getting the right people in your lives, ones that are also seeking to get on the right foundation. *They’re not a “gossip echo-chamber” but a “holy sounding board.”* They’re going to lead you onto the right foundation, and that means sometimes they’re going to say what you *need* to hear, not what you *want* to hear. Take a moment to discuss this: Do you have someone like that now in your life?

Your local church should be a safe place for a healthy support system. In our church, we’ve been incredibly blessed to find many married couples that have the same *values* as us and are standing on the right foundation, as well. We’ve weathered many storms together because we know the importance of being there for each other. In doing this, God has even enabled us as a church to lead others that were on the wrong foundation in their marriages, as well.

An adage I've heard over the years in ministry: if you want to really grow in the faith, you need a "Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy" (**a leader, a friend, and someone you lead**). Side note: I'm not trying to leave the ladies out by using all guys' names, it's just an easy and commonly used reference point. Having a leader, a friend, and someone you lead applies to a healthy support system for your marriage, too. If you do not already have a few couples as a healthy support system (*specifically the leader and the friend*, we'll worry about *someone you lead* later), try to find them.

I should add, there are some cases in which I would say that you don't have to specifically be led or encouraged by married couples! Perhaps there's someone in your life that's been in a bad relationship in the past and has learned *what not to do*. Maybe there's someone who has been widowed but has some amazing wisdom to offer, or even someone that has *never* been married but has a deep understanding of what healthy relationships look like. Just like there are married people who would be horrible influences; there are unmarried people who could be spectacular supporters. Either way, you will know them by their fruit!

As you continue this study, consider other people that *could be* a healthy support system for your marriage. Pray about it and make sure you're in alignment with your values within your marriage before approaching anyone about it. If one of you thinks that a particular couple would be perfect for you, but the spouse doesn't trust them, keep putting this on hold until you can figure out why (it doesn't matter the reason: just bring it back to what you want as values for your marriage). From there, you can *become one* in your values and see clearly who you should or shouldn't approach. If the couple you're considering does *not* have similar values as you, they're not the right couple.

Why? Because they're going to lead you to do what they think is right; at some point or another this will likely create a divide for your values and produce conflict in your marriage. Maybe the way they manage their money or raise their children is completely different than you; we all do life differently, but you have to decide if the different way they do things is a result of your conflict in values, or just a difference of personalities.

A "Paul" kind of couple: You need a spiritually mature couple to lead you, ones that are in alignment with your values, and are willing to love you like Jesus loves you and point you to a happier and healthier marriage.

A "Barnabas" kind of couple: You also need friends who are there as encouragers for you both, a couple that you can laugh and do life with. The more that you have those healthy influences in your lives, the stronger the *walls* become

as you stand on the right foundation and weather the *storm* together. **Whatever it takes!**

You're about to discuss how to weather the storm together and to have a healthy support system to help you do just that. Let's lay down our pride and pray that God can give clarity to what to do next. You've got this!

STEPPING STONE 6 CITED SOURCE

4. Shane Thacker, "Shane Thacker," Blogs—Never Again—Shane Thacker Ministries, 29 Sept. 2021, <https://shanethacker.org/Blog?index=4&action=Index>



STEPPING STONE 6 QUESTIONS

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- *God made us in His image, and God was NEVER alone.*
- *Having an unhealthy support system is like a wrecking ball.*
- *It's not a sin to be rich or poor; it's a sin to put your material possessions before God.*
- *The world makes sex difficult, but it's really not that difficult.*
- *A healthy support system would never infiltrate your values as a couple, rather, they'd point you to how to reinforce them.*

REMINDER OF THE GROUND RULES:

- 1) The things you discuss here stay here.
- 2) There is no place for SHAME or for BLAME.
- 3) If needed . . . “extra grace required.”
- 4) If needed, you can say “pass” on a question.
- 5) NEVER leave a session angry.
- 6) Be honest, be positive, and have fun!

STEPPING STONE 6 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1) Have fun: What is the funniest blunder you've ever made by trying to do things on your own? _____

2) Be honest: What part of a healthy support system has been *missing* in your life that you always wished you had? _____

3) Be honest: “*God made us in His image, and God was never alone.*” In what ways have you seen the effects of this (individually or in your marriage)? _____

4) Be positive: Who do you have as a healthy support system in your marriage? If you don’t have anyone, discuss some potential people that can help you change that! _____

5) Be honest: What are some potential *wrecking balls* in your marriage? If you have any that you cannot *freely* discuss with your spouse, keep going forward together, but also refer back to Stepping Stones 1 & 2. _____

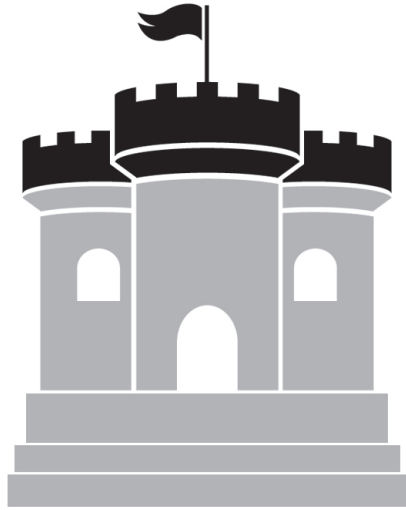
- 6) Have fun: Who could you approach as *another* couple to help you along the way and offer a healthy support system? Are *either of you* hesitant about approaching them for any reason? If so, explain why. _____

CHALLENGE:

Once you've decided on a couple to approach from question 6, reach out to see about a double date! Ask them about going through this study if they're not in it already and getting on the same page in your values.

Also, as a friendly reminder, you'll be presenting the special gift you've been challenged to make for your spouse at the end of the next chapter.

Be honest, be positive, and have fun!

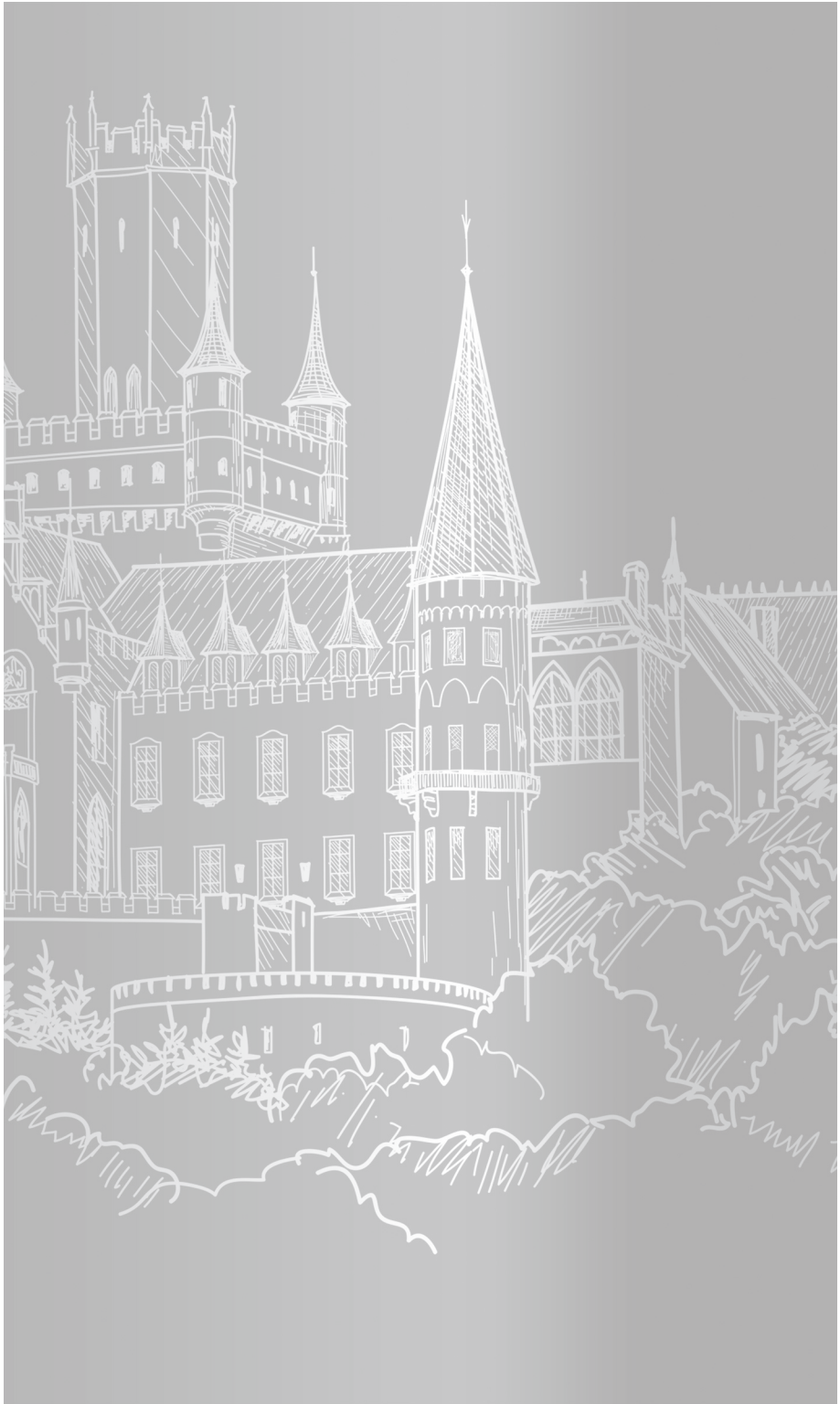


THE ROOF

Hopefully, now that you've completed the segment on *The Walls*, you've been able to really define what the term *healthy* is for your marriage! You're standing firm on the foundation, and you've built the walls, you're ready for the last Stepping Stone in this final segment: ***The Roof***.

There are undoubtedly marriages around you that are struggling to get on the right foundation. Hopefully what God has led you through has given you a heart of gratitude, and you can lead others by what you do. *From a distance, the roof is what you would usually see first.* I've envisioned the *roof* like a beacon of hope for other marriages. What part of your marriage could be a beacon of hope for others? *It's still **standing firm** in the storm.*

If you've followed the steps thus far, you've shifted your focus heavily toward your love for God and your spouse. Your values are not only in alignment, but *brick by brick*, you have developed healthy walls and you have a wonderful support system to thrive with. In this final section, we're going to look at what it means to be a *beacon of hope* for other marriages.



STEPPING STONE 7

Lead Together



AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Hopefully as you've gone through this book, you've really drawn together as a couple with the same mission in mind: to get on the right foundation for a healthy and holy marriage. No doubt there's still plenty of work to do, but that's ok! As a reminder: *this is not a 100-yard dash, but a marathon*. The distance between the "East" and the "West" will recede as you continue following through with these steps. Be patient! You'll get there if you're standing on solid ground and protecting what you've built, together. **Whatever it takes!**

If it hasn't happened already, this stability will one day bring a *mountaintop moment* for you both. Your love will continually grow. When these *mountaintop moments* hit your life, there should be nothing short of gratitude to the Lord for all that He has done for you. Take a moment and consider; even if you're not seeing monumental success yet, what is something you can be grateful for? Has God rescued you from deep division in your marriage, or led you to become more mature together? Have you been able to work through a difficult issue? No matter your situation, with the right perspective, there's always something we can be grateful for.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
— 1st Thessalonians 5:16-18

No matter your situation, a *heart of gratitude* is crucial for you to continue moving forward together and even more as we see victories within our marriage. Think about it: if you're grateful for even the smallest of victories, how much more grateful will you be with the larger victories? We've been so incredibly blessed by God. When we shift to a grateful heart, we start thanking God for what He's doing now, rather than what we're waiting on Him to do next.

A BEACON OF HOPE

“What part of your marriage could be a beacon of hope for others? It's still standing firm in the storm.”

Stepping Stone Seven is referred to as *The Roof* of the home. Why? Because when you have a marriage that is healthy and holy, *it can become a beacon of hope for others in their marriages, too*. From Stepping Stone Six, hopefully you found the “Paul” (the leader) to help lead you to a better marriage. My hope is that they will continue mentoring you (you should never stop growing). Ideally, you will also become a “Paul” for someone

else, too. Consider this: After all that God has done for you in your marriage, wouldn't it be great to help others in theirs?

Dream with me for a moment. What would happen to local communities all around if couples would take these simple principles and stand firm on the *right foundation, raise and defend the walls*, and then in turn *be a beacon of hope, helping others to accomplish the same*? What would happen if couples would find themselves so incredibly grateful for all that God has done; they'd be willing to be a *beacon of hope* and mentor other couples by leading them through these same principles? ***What would happen if we would put an end, not to our marriages, but to divorce?*** What would happen if families all across the nation would cry out to the Lord, get on the right foundation, and be restored once more?

It's a pipe dream, I know! But if the principles here could change the course of marriages all around, It would spread like wildfire. If God led you to this study and used it to rescue your marriage, *how could we not* take what God has given us and reach out a helping hand to guide others that are struggling? Our culture is already on *shifting sands* and headed for self-destruction; we want to help play a role in *rescuing* as many marriages as we can before it's too late, especially among those whom you love dearly.

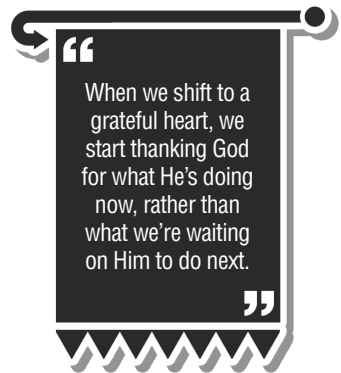
THE POWER OF RETENTION

Once you've learned something, you retain it for a time, and it will naturally be lost over time. However, if you teach it, it will be fresh on your mind for your own marriage. Now picture this being constantly fresh on your mind: *getting on the right foundation for a healthy and holy marriage*. Simply having those tools in front of you all the time will help you as you stand on the right foundation and guard your marriage fiercely. In other words, mentoring others in their marriage will also help you in yours! You'll regularly be considering if you're on the right foundation, if your values are out of alignment, and how you can love your spouse even more; all while knowing that you're helping others do the same.

You'll weather the storm together, and you'll be standing firm together, too. Now, I know what you're thinking; things like *teaching others* and *mentorship* might sound intimidating, and that's ok. If you're walking with the wise, you'll become wise. *With a heart of gratitude, you'll help others become wise, too.*

To be a mentor, you don't have to stand in front of a classroom and give a lecture, you just need to love people like Jesus loves them, submit to a plan that would help them do the same. How can *you* mentor others in their marriage? Here shortly, we're going to go through a *crash course for mentorship*. I think you'll find that it's not that complicated, once you see how it's done. Before beginning, I want you to stop and pray to God, asking these questions: "Lord, how can we be used by You to mentor others in their marriage? Who should we be available to?"

You might have someone in mind, or maybe you can't think of anyone. Either way, continue praying how you can be used as you proceed.



“When we shift to a grateful heart, we start thanking God for what He’s doing now, rather than what we’re waiting on Him to do next.”

A CRASH COURSE FOR MENTORSHIP

Let's be honest, be positive, and have fun! I told you it wouldn't be that complicated! Here's how you can mentor others well. It follows right in line with the principles covered in this book:

STEPPING STONE 1: Fall in love with the Lord.

Consider again just how much God has worked in your life. Even if you had nothing else, you have God's grace, which is of far greater worth than anything in this world. If you love God with all of who you are, you will do all that God has called you to do. What is God calling you to do right now? The Greatest Commandment is our greatest goal; so, when leading others, that needs to be our greatest goal for them, too. It is only through knowing God's love that they can know what true love is. It's the fastest route to the very heart of God, and the fastest route for them to have a healthy, holy marriage.

STEPPING STONE 2: Love Others Like Jesus Loves Them

Notice I did not label Stepping Stone 2 as "Fall in Love with THEIR Spouse" (Ha, that's obviously **not** the goal here! Guys, if you even joke about that with your wife, she will be dropping by with that *calf bander* that I mentioned earlier in the book).

Mentorship doesn't just happen. When you are in a healthy and holy marriage, the *foundation*, *walls*, and *roof* are intact. You're a bright beacon of hope, and people will see the love that you have for each other. They'll see that there's something vastly different about you (as compared to many others that are struggling). They'll know where to turn when times get tough. Like I wrote before from Matthew 7, Jesus said: "You will know them by their fruits." Over time, people that you connect with will see the fruit of your marriage. Over time, if someone is struggling in their marriage, they'll know a good friend they can talk with. Having no guidance when lost, no help when their marriage is injured, would just be horrible. It reminds me of a passage out of Ecclesiastes:

*Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. **But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them.** — Ecclesiastes 4:9-10*

There should be no one around you that "*has no one to help them*"! When we think of the people that God led to mentor us, it should spark a renewal in us to serve others in the same way. Or you might consider this: what if you *didn't have a mentor* in your life? I'm terribly sorry. That wouldn't have happened if someone else yielded to God and made themselves available to you. ***Don't let the same***

pattern continue with you! As you live out the principles in this book, you'll have opportunities come to help others; if not, pray that God would lead people to you.

What does loving people like Jesus loves them look like? **God's love is selfless, sacrificial, and unconditional.** You can be selfless with your time and resources, *so long as* it does not encroach on your own values in your marriage. Too much time invested in others means that you're not giving enough time to your spouse. You also do not want them to become dependent on you (I gave the illustration of the mother-in-law in the last chapter, *don't be that person!*).

You're going to tell the truth in love, even when it hurts. You're going to give them far more grace than they deserve, because you've been given far more grace than you deserve. Loving them like Jesus means you would call them out of darkness but at the same time recognize that it's up to them to make the change in their lives. Be patient as you lead them.

Everyone obviously has different values. You're patiently leading them to what God would want for their marriage. With that in mind, as you lead someone to Christ and His love for them, their values are going to eventually become aligned with God's values. (Spoiler alert: it's *not* going to happen in your timing!)

Pray that God would transform their hearts in any way needed to have a healthy, holy marriage. That's the goal. That's the mission. Don't rush them to change their values; let them struggle through it and experience *why* doing things God's way is so much better for their lives. *Mentorship is not dragging others where they need to go but calling them out of the dark.* They're going to mess up (just like you and I have many, many times). Hopefully if they mess up, you'll be there to patiently help them pick up the pieces.

What if they continue to do the same things that you're telling them *not* to do? There's a point when you need to prayerfully consider if they actually want help or if they're looking for someone to complain to. If you continue helping people that don't want help, you're not only wasting your time, but you're also enabling them to become emotionally dependent on you without having to make any changes in their marriage. Don't enable a toxic marriage!

Call them out of darkness, inspire them to make the changes needed for a healthy, holy marriage. Lead them through the first four steps so they can get on the foundation together. We've already covered what the first two are, so let's look through the next two below.

STEPPING STONES 3 & 4:

Lead Them to Determine & Become One in Their Values

The next few steps are simple; lead them through the same assessments you did in Stepping Stones 3 & 4. As you lead them through the assessment, pray that God would convict them to change their hearts in any way needed to be in alignment with Him. This is what changes everything with our values! Continue to encourage them any way you can, but above all else, keep them in prayer for clarity in vision. When they're taking time to go over these principles together, share as a married couple what *you* value the most, and why. It not only solidifies the walls that you have built together, it also might give them ideas on what they value, too. Once again: call them out of darkness. Encourage them any way you can and pray that God would inspire them to change in any way needed. **Whatever it takes!**

STEPPING STONES 5 & 6: Lead Them to Build & Defend the Walls


 “

What would happen if we would put an end, not to our marriages, but to divorce?

”

They're building the walls, brick-by-brick, by consistently loving one another and putting their values into practice. Imagine this is like a football game. They have the ball, and the end zone is in sight (the *end goal* of course being a healthy, holy marriage), but there's a long way to go. They're the only ones handling the ball. Play by play, they're going to get taken down, bruised up; they might even go out of bounds, *but they're heading to the end zone*. What's your role during this time?

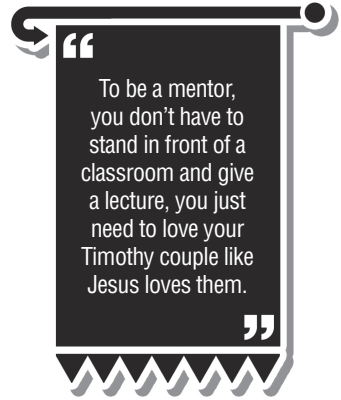
You're not the cheerleader on the sidelines; you're holding the line and defending them any way you can. The stakes are too high to lose this one. You need to open up any opportunity you can to help them see the end zone and lead them to victory.

Okay, that's enough of the football analogy. I think you get the point. *While they're building the walls, you're helping to defend the walls*. Satan will be on the attack! The storms will come, but if you're standing on the Rock together, you'll weather the storm together. Remember: your job is to defend, **not** build! They need to consistently follow through with becoming one in their values, and with that, *building the walls of trust and stability* for their marriage. Ask for wisdom and pray for them often that the Lord would protect them as they build this beautiful marriage, together. All this will take time, patience, and love. Sounds like what God does for us, doesn't it? Once they have built something beautiful together, they'll be

able to do one day what you are now doing for them.

STEPPING STONE 7: Lead Together

Have you ever *mentored a mentor*? It's amazing to witness. Once you've led someone through difficult times, now they can have the opportunity to mentor others, too. You're on the outside looking in, and as you ask God for wisdom, you'll hopefully see the things in their *blind spots* and be able to speak up when needed. Pray with them on how to become a beacon of hope for other marriages and encourage them to remain steadfast on the right foundation for a healthy, holy marriage. They'll hopefully be a beacon of hope that others can see and lead others onto the right foundation, too!



CONCLUSION

Christina and I hope and pray that just as we've been led through these same principles, that you've been incredibly blessed and transformed by God to be more like Him daily. Even if you haven't seen the results yet, stand firm in following these principles consistently. The best is yet to come. Regardless of the distance you've traveled from one another, we pray that through Christ you can be restored in full, thriving in your marriage, and able to be a beacon of hope for others.

I'm incredibly grateful to you all for entrusting me with this resource, and pray that through the struggles, you'll be continually seeing the end goal: *to become one in a healthy, holy, thriving marriage*. You need to celebrate as you complete this book! (Ladies, brace yourselves, because there's almost a 100% chance that he's going to suggest "business time.") Don't forget that in the last set of questions, the final challenge is to present what you created for your spouse! I will close with this blessing from the Lord:

“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.” — Deuteronomy 6:24-26



STEPPING STONE 7 QUESTIONS

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- *What part of your marriage could be a beacon of hope for others? It's still standing firm in the storm.*
- *When we shift to a grateful heart, we start thanking God for what He's doing now, rather than what we're waiting on Him to do next.*
- *What would happen if we would put an end, not to our marriages, but to divorce?*
- *To be a mentor, you don't have to stand in front of a classroom and give a lecture, you just need to love your Timothy couple like Jesus loves them.*

REMINDER OF THE GROUND RULES:

- 1) **The things you discuss here stay here.**
- 2) **There is no place for SHAME or for BLAME.**
- 3) **If needed . . . "extra grace required."**
- 4) **If needed, you can say "pass" on a question.**
- 5) **NEVER leave a session angry.**
- 6) **Be honest, be positive, and have fun!**

STEPPING STONE 7 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1) Have fun: What has been the most fun part of this study? _____



2) Be honest: What has been the most difficult part of this study? _____

3) Be honest: Where were you at the start of this study, and where are you today?

4) Be positive: What is the greatest quality you see in your spouse today, and why? _____

5) Be honest: Do you feel like you're a *beacon of hope* for other marriages? Why or why not? _____

6) Be honest: If someone approached you and asked for help in their marriage, would you be willing to help? What is the best way that you could help them?

7) Be positive: How has this study impacted your legacy as a family? _____

8) Have fun: Whether it's just you two as a couple, or if you're in a group, you've finished the study, woo-hoo! What can you do to celebrate?! Make a plan and have fun as a group! _____

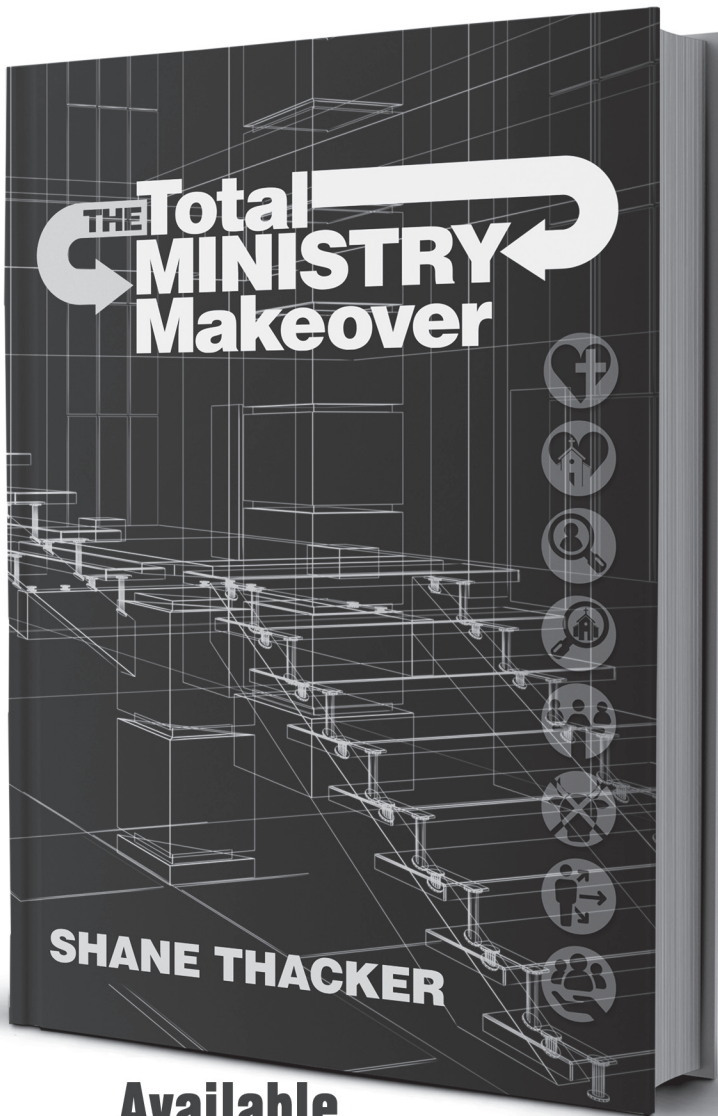
CHALLENGE:

It's time to present what you've created for your spouse! Bring this and explain the meaning of it, if words are even necessary!

We'd love to see your creations! If you're willing, share with us on social media what you've given each other, and maybe even write about the victories you've been led through together. We'd love to encourage you and to see how God has led you on the right foundation for a healthy, holy marriage! (Use the hashtag #thetotalmarriagemakeover as well! Check there and you'll be able to see all the unique creations that couples made, and encourage others in their journey, too.)

In all things: Be honest, be positive, and have fun! May God continually bless you on your journey together!

Pastor Shane Thacker



Available
now on **amazon**

The right foundation. What does that look like for church leaders, or entire churches? **The Total Ministry Makeover** shows you how to gravitate to the right foundation (found only in Jesus Christ), and how you as a leader can gravitate your church on the right foundation as well. Healthy leaders lead healthy churches. Healthy churches lead communities to Jesus. How much more of an impact could your church have for Jesus Christ if we all were on the right foundation? In this book, you will learn the **8 Stepping Stones** of **The Total Ministry Makeover** and get on the right foundation for sustainable and healthy ministry!

