

Revitalize



your Marriage

Jim Hohnberger

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A GUIDE TO A CHRISTIAN UNION

Jim Hohnberger

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INTRODUCTION

"I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye" (Psalm 32:8).

Modern life has produced many changes. As men and women place their faith in the material world and the technological advances aimed at making life easier, more fulfilling, they have found only emptiness.

Author and speaker Jim Hohnberger and his wife, Sally, were living the American dream—a successful business, status in their church, and the prized possessions of today's modern rat race. It was also robbing their marriage of a genuine walk with God. Their search for real spirituality and the simple life led them to a wilderness experience that revitalized their lives, their marriage, and their family.

They now dedicate their lives to helping people pull the tattered threads of their existence into a rich tapestry of empowered living. Through their experiences you can discover the power of the gospel in your marriage.

If you see problems in your life without a lot of solutions, rejoice because God has a solution for you. "We can live an empowered life, acquire empowered marriages, and enjoy empowered families. It has worked for others, and it will work for you as well. The choice is yours."

You *can* change. Revitalize your marriage.

CHAPTER 1 LOST AND FOUND

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee because thou has left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first work" (Revelation 2:4, 5).

What follows is the story of Edwin and Maria, told in their words. Their story is but one of many. They had lost their way. Their marriage was in trouble. They needed to catch a vision of hope for their marriage, no matter how hopeless things seemed. At one time they loved each other, and somehow things were not what they used to be. Their love needed to be restored by finding what was lost.

Maria says, "Edwin was so wonderful. Even though he was a busy family-practice physician, I would come home after working the evening shift as a nurse and find little things that he had done to help me. During our first year of marriage, we scarcely saw each other, but I still considered myself blessed to have united my life with such a kind and thoughtful man.

"Eventually I found flaws in my seemingly perfect companion. On weekends when I was off, I coveted time alone with him. I began to resent friends and church members, who seemed to compete with me for his time and attention. He was an elder in the church we attended and had many responsibilities. We stayed for potluck after church every week, had afternoon meetings, and were often the last ones to leave.

“His attention was wanted by so many, and he did not resist, even though I was always longing for more time with him. One afternoon after church, I began feeling more and more angry. It was hours after potluck, and one person after another wanted to talk with him about church business or other matters. It was so hard to wait patiently for him to finish and come home with me. I tried to busy myself talking with the other women who were there that day, but what I really wanted was my husband. At last I lost my patience and decided to do something to get him out of there and home with me.

“He had been having a lengthy conversation with another elder from our church, when I walked up to him, tried to interrupt politely, and informed him that I really needed to go home, intimating that I wasn’t feeling well. I asked if we could leave now or if he preferred, he could give me the car keys and find a ride home later ... never dreaming that he might choose the latter. The friend he was visiting with offered to drive him home himself, which Edwin accepted. I took the car keys and left feeling extremely hurt and angry.

“The negative feelings I had been harboring all afternoon overwhelmed me as I drove home alone. When Edwin finally got home, I was cold toward him and non-communicative. But as it was not in my nature to hold my feelings back for long, I soon exploded, expressing my hurt and anger.”

Edwin says, “Maria certainly did explode and it’s consistent with my temperament to be more passive than active in relationships. This might be because I grew up with a mother, sisters, and cousins who were direct. I preferred the

passive role because it was easier to know what a person felt or wanted if I just listened, and I did not have to work very hard or discuss things at length. I wanted to be liked, so I would be a peacemaker rather than a confronter. I would ‘go with the flow’ rather than act on principle. Taking a stand was not the thing to do, if it meant disturbing the peace. Compromise was the name of the game. This was the first time that Maria had become very upset with me. She was certainly direct. So I apologized and did what I could to restore the peace.”

Maria continues, “I thought things would be different with Edwin from that time on. As the months went by and I started working the day shift, I discovered that my hunger for intimate fellowship and communication with my husband was not to be easily satisfied, even though we now had every evening together. He still seemed very thoughtful, often performing little acts to help me in the home, but he never seemed to want to take time to just sit and talk enough to satisfy me.”

Edwin says, “Before Maria and I got married, I could and would read for hours, or put on music and listen for hours. I had an active imagination and often sought to feed it with exciting stories—especially science fiction. If someone called on the phone, I would respond graciously, but rarely did I initiate a call. I preferred friends who accepted me as I was and who did not try to change me. I could flip between being an introvert or extrovert. When by myself or with family, I would do my own thing, but when I chose I could also be the life of the party.

“Maria encountered the same behavior from me in our home. I didn’t mind housework. I often did the dishes for her, vacuumed, or cleaned bathrooms on occasion. I would often get into trouble with my male friends, because their wives would point out my helpfulness as an example to them. Maria’s friends always envied her. Because of this, Maria grew to tolerate my lack of communication. She wanted to communicate. I wanted to read. She wanted to spend every opportunity sharing. I wanted to become absorbed in listening to the news, reading a news magazine, watching TV, or working on the computer. I made it quite difficult to be intimate.”

Maria says, “Although I never felt satisfied, in time I came to accept Edwin’s behavior as ‘normal’ for his personality. I reasoned that he had plenty of good qualities to outweigh those that I did not like. I still considered myself happily married, but sought deeper friendships with other women to satisfy my need for sharing.”

Edwin says, “Maria was baffled by my behavior, but everyone else thought I was wonderful and told me so. My patients would affirm me, people at church would affirm me, and naturally I sought more of that attention! I was always available for others. As time went on, Maria became more and more dissatisfied. And I became more passive in our relationship. I hadn’t made spiritual matters a true priority.

“Our spiritual lives don’t exist in a vacuum. They are part of real life filled with ‘real life’ problems, and one of our problems was money. While I made a good living as a physician, we were going deeper and deeper in debt. We knew the Lord didn’t want us in debt, but we weren’t quite sure what to

do. One morning when Maria was out jogging, she noticed a small house for sale in our neighborhood. Maybe this is the Lord’s answer to part of our debt problem, she thought. We decided to pursue it and several weeks later we were moving from our 3,000-square-foot home into this little 900-square-foot house with garage. The little house only cost half of what our large one had!”

Maria says, “Edwin went along with my idea of downsizing the house, but our parents and our friends thought we must have lost our minds. Whatever they thought, the little house proved a blessing to us in many ways. It was so much easier for me to maintain, and it taught us in a simple way that less really was more. All the things that wouldn’t fit easily into the house were stored in the garage. As the months passed, I was struck with the thought that I couldn’t remember what was in the garage. It was so stuffed that I couldn’t even go out and check. We hadn’t needed all those things after all. We didn’t even miss them.”

Edwin says, “I had noticed for some time that Maria was seeking a closer walk with God. Although I, too, longed for something better than we possessed, I didn’t share the same spiritual hunger and I felt her leaving me behind spiritually. As usual I went through the motions and didn’t let her know I was discouraged and distant.”

Maria says “Edwin acted like he was on board with the changes I desired and certainly he didn’t mind the loss of the larger house payment. I may not have been aware of all Edwin’s struggles, but I did know all was not well. I longed for my husband to be the spiritual leader in our home. He had

started to lead out, but looking back I realize that I was one of the biggest obstacles to Edwin's leading because I would criticize his efforts and try to make him lead the way I thought he ought to.

"We had started a Bible study group with some of our closest friends. One of the topics we chose to study was country living. It seemed to us that God's ideal for his children is not in a heavily populated city, but rather in rural areas, where the works of creation greet the eye and can lift the thoughts heavenward. Our friends felt impressed to step out in faith and put their house on the market. The Lord blessed them and opened the way for them to move. Within months we helped them load the moving van.

"I longed to be in a country setting too, and as my yearnings increased, Edwin agreed to put the house on the market, but he was skeptical and logically I couldn't fault his reasoning. We had only been in our little house a year, and Edwin was sure we couldn't recover our money so soon."

Edwin says, "Maria was so eager to move to the country, but I wasn't convinced it was the right time for us. However, houses were not selling in our neighborhood and rather than refuse and disappoint her, I figured we could put it on the market and I would be safe for a while. So we listed the house on Sunday, but I refused to have a sign on the lawn. And I certainly wasn't going to tell anyone at work that I was planning to move to the country. That was for sure! Tuesday, a realtor brought a client to see our house. He couldn't have picked a worse time. We had just had a heavy rain and the roof started leaking badly! The people came and went. They

couldn't miss seeing the problem for themselves. They won't be interested, I thought.

"Maria called me at work on Wednesday. It seemed that the people who had viewed the house were interested. Their realtor was coming that evening with an offer. I'll be frank. I was less than happy with the news! I wasn't ready for things to move that quickly! I arrived at home just as our realtor pulled up. I told him we were not selling unless the buyers offered a specific price and would take it without the roof being fixed! Maria was uncomfortable with my bold assertion. She felt I was making it impossible for the house to sell—and I was!

"A few minutes later the buyer's realtor arrived and proceeded to name the exact price I had just quoted to our realtor. The client didn't even want the roof fixed because they planned to tear it off to build a second story. Our realtor's mouth dropped open, as did mine. I couldn't believe my ears. I gave in. The Lord was in this. There was no way I could fight against it anymore. I learned not to challenge God, unless I am ready to act when He answers heart-felt or even half-hearted prayers if they are according to His will."

Maria says "Edwin may have been dismayed, but I was thrilled. We moved to a lovely old house in Michigan. The house was in great need of repair and remodeling, but it was set on 40 quiet acres of lovely woods and hills. The presence of the Lord was easily felt in this location, but soon we were too busy to take full advantage of it.

"After Edwin and I moved, I longed to make real changes in our family and put into practice the principles of true Christianity. As the months passed I felt we were not mak-

ing any real progress, and I couldn't put my finger on the reason. We attended a family camp meeting sponsored by Restoration International. The meetings were wonderful, and I came home inspired, ready to succeed, but still we seemed only to take small steps."

Edwin says, "Maria may have been inspired, but I sure wasn't. I had, in my mind, placed the camp meeting speakers up on a pedestal and in so doing unconsciously placed the experience they spoke of out of reach for mere mortals like me. Hence, Maria was once more striving on her own, and as usual I didn't share what was really going on in my heart.

"Late that year we faced the prospect of losing a child to what was initially thought to be malignant melanoma. God was merciful, and the original diagnosis was incorrect, but it did bring into sharp focus what was most important to us.

"I had become involved with many things in our new location and now I realized I needed to let them go and refocus on my family. It took a crisis to get my attention, but now I knew what I needed to do. I resigned from the board of the local hospital, I resigned from committees, and I resigned from all those activities that used to keep me away from home in the evening. I wrote in my journal, 'I am convicted I have some serious spiritual growing to accomplish. At the present time I have been called of God to serve in my home. I am not called of God to serve in the community or even in the community of believers at the present time. I shall not trifle with God. I cannot serve in any outreach program until the Lord gives me permission to do so. This is contrary to my inclina-

tions for I dearly love doing it, but I am determined to serve the Lord. I have set myself on this course and will not be dissuaded, even at the expense of losing love and acceptance from those I regard highly. This is my struggle.' My resignations were not all graciously received, and it was a very difficult thing to do, but I knew then and I know now it was the right thing to do!

"We attended the next year's family camp meeting, and what a joy awaited us in the coming year. I confessed my feelings of spiritual inferiority, and for the first time Maria learned what I had been struggling with. Suddenly I desired more than anything else to obtain the experience with God I longed for."

Maria says, "Wow! After that camp meeting, it was like I had a different husband. Edwin was suddenly engaged in all our efforts, and our family grew by leaps and bounds. He sought more and more to protect his time with us.

Edwin says, "In the summer of '97, we spent time camping in New Mexico, captivated by the beauty of the forested mountains and frequently tried to envision living in that environment. About this time I felt the Lord was calling me away from the practice of conventional medicine. I wasn't sure what I would do, but I was ready should the Lord open the way for me. The following year we made another trip west to explore the possibilities. We visited with realtors and talked about properties. I could see my wife and children were excited and participating in the process, yet I felt like this move required more faith than I had. And as usual, I wasn't ready to admit that to anybody.

"It was the day before we were due to leave for home. We had been camped near a lovely lake surrounded by hills. Maria wanted to see the sunset so she suggested we drive deeper into the forest and find a better spot. We proceeded farther and farther, traveling a loop that would eventually take us back to the main road. As we drove we found ourselves traveling through increasingly larger patches of snow. Then we came to a little hill and got stuck. Oh, no, I thought. Here we are, stuck in the middle of a national forest, miles from anywhere, with no help until spring! My family thought it a great adventure, but I was not happy!

"We settled in for the night, warm, well-fed and sheltered, but stuck. I didn't sleep well. I struggled most of the night trying to think of a solution and squabbling with myself for going down a road without knowing the conditions.

"As morning dawned, I started talking with the Lord, but what sticks out in my mind most is the question He asked me, Do you trust Me?

"When God asks a question like that, you can't lie. No, Lord, I guess I don't. It broke my heart. I called myself a Christian, was born in the church, a missionary's child, a preacher's child. I was an ordained elder, I had preached and taught, but the bottom line was I didn't fully trust God. I had to be in control.

"That confession of unbelief was the beginning of a deeper walk for me. As the morning dawned, we had breakfast, dug out our car, and drove out of the forest and then back home. A week later, while I was having my private devotional time with the Lord, I pondered with anxiety the prospects of moving.

What would my employment be? What about a home? Where? When? How? The fear of the unknown loomed before me. I wanted to have faith, but I didn't. My inclination was to postpone any decision until I had every option fully researched, and thus leave no room for a faith-based choice. Again that familiar question echoed in my mind, Do you trust me?

"I made my decision, regardless of my feelings. And before I could change my mind, I announced to my delighted family that we were moving to New Mexico. We now live a few short miles from that memorable spot where we were stuck in the snow."

Maria says, "Edwin and I have no regrets. We have lived in this remote setting for over a year now, and the trials and problems we have faced here have been harder than ever. These trials have fostered the life of dependence on God that we longed to have. It's been wonderful to explore the forests together. Our hilltop home overlooks a canyon where elk graze and bugle in the fall. We have befriended a hummingbird that comes in and out of our window and eats from the feeder set for him on our table. The children delight in these activities and many, many more. By God's grace we have rediscovered each other, and our children love being together. Together we are learning to walk, moment by moment, surrendered fully to the will of God. He took our marriage—a good marriage by worldly standards—and made it far better. He reshaped it after heaven's order, and we will be forever grateful!"

CHAPTER 2

KINDLING THE FLAME

“Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me under the shadow of thy wings” (Psalm 17:8).

In this section, you will learn to take practical steps to begin, once more, to pursue your spouse. Everyone who has ever been in love has won someone’s heart at least once, and you can do it again. It doesn’t require youth or good looks to answer the plea of your partner’s heart, as you will see in the case of my wife and I.

After Sally and I sold our house and business in Wisconsin and moved to the wilderness, we learned so many lessons that it astonished us. In that real-life environment, the application of principles to our spiritual life was not only more clearly understood, but also more easily implemented. Our life in the wilderness was so satisfying on every level—physical, mental, and spiritual—as well as so conducive to growth in our marriage and family that I have trouble finding adequate words to describe it. But of all the lessons learned in those first years, perhaps none had a broader application or a more practical appeal than those taught by our old cookstove.

Our log cabin needed a real cookstove, and while we desired the best, we could only afford a used stove. After some searching, we located a used Majestic cookstove that was nearly eighty-five years old. I know that very few of my readers have ever used a wood cookstove, so let me explain. In my

opinion the Majestic we found was, in its day, a top-of-the-line appliance with its beautifully trimmed chrome.

The casual observer might not have agreed with this hopeful assessment if they had seen that old stove when we got it. It was covered with grime, baked-on grease, and plain old-fashioned dirt and rust. It took me a month to get it back in shape. First I had to scrub off the grime. Then I went to work on the rust. I brushed, scraped, ground, sanded, and polished that old stove. We repainted the areas that needed it and had a water jacket made for it so it could provide our hot water. At last it was installed in our home, glistening in its new paint and polished chrome. While I didn’t know it, that stove was destined for greatness.

It was just a cold piece of steel, but with a fire kindled within, it heated our entire home. The food it cooked was spectacular, and unlimited hot water was available from this tireless servant. I constructed a drying rack above it, and the old Majestic became a food dehydrator. In the bitter cold Montana winter, you could come in from many degrees below zero and stand beside it as waves of heat encircled you like the arms of a friend. When my feet got cold, nothing beat propping them up beside its warmth. I couldn’t even guess how many times we came in from some adventure in the snow and hung our wet wraps by the stove, which uncomplainingly had them warm and dry by the time we were ready to head back outdoors.

That old cookstove became the single most important tool in our wilderness home. We couldn’t eat, bathe, or even stay warm without it. Yes, that old stove performed admirably,

but that doesn't mean it made no demands. I soon learned that of the five types of wood that grew around me in Montana, the stove was much more efficient with one than all the others. I strove to provide it with the wood that helped it function best. From the needs of the stove I began to understand that my relationship to the girl I had married was a lot like that stove. If I wanted a marriage functioning at peak performance then I had to provide the very best fuel for the fire of that special person I had married.

Thus began a twenty-year odyssey of reexamining my marriage. Along the way I have been privileged to counsel hundreds of couples and gain an understanding of the different fuels their marriages needed to succeed and thrive. The principles I will be sharing are Bible-based and practical. While I came to understand most of these principles myself, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the work of Gary Chapman, who has done a masterful job of presenting these principles in his book *The Five Love Languages* (Northfield Publishing, 1992).

Most of us would hate to admit it, but love, at least the fulfilling long-hoped-for, soul-feeding type of love is at least as rare as rain in a desert country. Most of us look at our partners, and there is so much we wish we could change. Oh, some of our spouses are trying to feed the fire within our hearts, but how many of us long for the right wood? Some provide us with Douglas fir when we'd rather have spruce. Others feed us, but it is unseasoned—green and unpalatable. We tend to turn wistfully away from what might have been, from the true longing of our hearts. We look at the positives

in our spouse and try to convince ourselves that these matter more than the right fuel. We sputter and smoke through life, struggling to maintain the fire when it could be so much easier with just a little of the right combustible substance.

Most of us are truly trying to kindle the flame, or at least we did try until we gave up in frustration. Why is it that we fail? Because we lose the perspective we had when we were courting. All of us know there's more than one way to say "I love you," and at some level we know that this special person we are interested in responds best to one of those ways—those fuels, if you will. When you're first getting acquainted you intuitively try every available wood to feed the flame of your partner. Some go over better than others, and we soon learn what they like and enjoy, but somehow after we marry them, we stop those special attentions and inadvertently slip into old habit patterns of thinking and acting. So how do we discover our spouse's special area of fulfillment?

You know, I was always told that some day the honeymoon would be over and after a year or two our marriage would lose its spark and become like everybody else's marriage. As time went on, my experience confirmed the words of these prophets of doom. But when I discovered the principles we will discuss in this chapter, I found the feelings I had toward my Sally during our courtship that had died of neglect—my neglect—were rekindled. I found that married love doesn't have to become cold, formal, boring, and sedate. Today I feel the flames of love for that girl I married more than I did when we were dating, and you can experience this too, by discovering what your spouse needs and then putting forth

effort to see they receive it. It works both ways—for husbands and wives. Your partner is longing for you to provide the right fuel. Will you do it? Husbands, are you groaning and thinking, What am I going to have to do now? Do you need some extra motivation? I'll share a secret I have learned through experience. It is impossible to out-give a woman! The more you give her, the more she returns in ever-increasing waves of love. It is an investment in her happiness and yours, and it will pay dividends far beyond any earthly investment.

But let me caution you with this: if we are sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading in our life and are responsive to His guidance on when and how to apply this knowledge, we will experience a marriage far beyond our wildest dreams. Your home may actually become a little bit of heaven on earth, where peace and harmony reign. I am beginning to experience this with the girl I love, with my Sally, and since I know her so well, let me begin with her and the fuel she needs.

Sally thrives on encouraging words and compliments. These words cost us so little and yet they can do so very much, especially when they are uttered under the Spirit's guidance. So often we think that it's some big thing our spouse needs to feel fulfilled, but the rule in all of these areas is "little attentions," often. That is the way it is with my wood stove, and that is the way it is with those we love. We are focusing here on our spouses, but these principles work with our children, our parents, and our family and friends equally as well. To give sincere compliments requires that self be dethroned and that we develop an attitude of gratitude toward others. For example, even today, as I wrote these words, Sally put a new cover on the

photo album we take with us to speaking engagements. These albums get a lot of handling because people are naturally curious about our home and lifestyle, and the old cover was looking a little worn. So Sally replaced it with a new cover. It was simple, attractive, and most of all conveyed the essence of who and what we are. She put herself into the project, and it looked nice. When I came in and saw it, I could have responded in different ways. I could have said, "Thank you," which Sally would have appreciated, but it would have been the wrong type of wood. Worse, I could have said, "About time you put a new cover on that. I thought the old one was going to have to fall off first." This is the verbal equivalent of throwing water on that fire. But as I saw what she had done, I sensed the Spirit's impression in my thoughts to praise Sally, to acknowledge her efforts and encourage her. So I said, "Wow! That is great! Honey, it is really attractive and will definitely draw the people's attention. You were really creative!" If only you could see a video of her reaction to my words. It was wonderful. Her whole face lit up, and she was so pleased and encouraged.

Simple courtesies like "please," "thank you," "you're welcome," and "excuse me" are socially required among strangers but too often ignored at home. Who is more deserving of politeness than those we love most? Do we really want to send the message that strangers are more deserving of our efforts? I've seen families where this message is coming through to the wife or the children loud and clear, and this is ruinous to relationships.

Sally is special in so many ways. I could fill this book with things she does that I appreciate, but one area that real-

ly stands out is the way that she takes care of herself. She is always dressed nicely; she doesn't just hang out in sweats. She looks good and put together. This costs her time and effort. It's not as though she has a shortage of things that demand her time either. She does this just for me, whether or not company is coming, because she wants me to know that I'm just as important to her as any company. I make sure she knows I enjoy these efforts. A woman wants to know that her husband finds her attractive, that she still catches his eye. I don't mean this in an overtly fleshly or carnal manner, but she wants to know he is still interested in her.

Too many women are not encouraged and praised for their intellect, and this is also very important. She may think differently than you do, gentlemen, but that does not make her an airhead, as so many men seem to want to accuse their wives of being. I look for those times when Sally provides just the right idea or just the right comment, and I praise her. "Where did you ever come up with that idea? I wouldn't have thought of that in a thousand years! You're really something!" And you know, that is not empty praise. God promised man a helpmeet, and Sally is a helpmeet to me, bringing a beautiful balance into my life. She looks so pleased when I say this, and you know, she should be, because I'm sincere and honest in complimenting her. This brings up another point: we should be sincere in these areas or we will not provide what our spouse is longing for. You can, and I do, exaggerate a little in a flirtatious way, and this is acceptable in the context of flirtation. Flirt with your spouse, wink at them, share a secret look, hold hands under the table, or exchange little notes. Even a wave

across a crowd conveys so much love. It says, "You're special, and I notice you even when everybody else is in the way." Your words can flirt as well. "Wow! You sure catch my eye!" Don't neglect those cute pet names you developed for each other back when you were dating. Dust them off and use them if they've sat idle, because shared secrets build intimacy.

Encouraging words are so important, especially when these are the primary fuel we desire. Remember Edwin and Maria? He longed for approval and allowed himself to engage in all sorts of activities and jobs, neglecting his wife's desire for his time, anything so long as people approved and affirmed him for the great job he was doing. Yet, even though he was fulfilling his need with praise from others, he really desired praise from Maria, which was not forthcoming. Edwin was filling his need elsewhere, but in the process he found that he was miserable. Only when he and Maria started to fill each other's firebox with the right fuels did true happiness and fulfillment enter their experience.

The attitude of gratitude and encouragement is a foundational principle of God's character. God is an encouraging God. He says:

"I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you"
(John 14:18).

"I have loved you, saith the Lord" (Malachi 1:2).

"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5).

"Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world"
(Matthew 28:20).

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness"

(Isaiah 41:10).

Even our Lord Jesus Christ needed affirmation, and the Father provided it in these words. "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Heaven is not a place of stodgy, self-righteous attitudes but rather the origin of a great stream of love and encouragement flowing out to the universe for the benefit of every living creature. The words God spoke to His Son He desires to say to every one of us: "This is My beloved son; this is My beloved daughter—in whom I am well pleased." God encourages us ever upward, always onward with the thought that yesterday's triumphs can be the steppingstone for still greater victories today, and His ideal for us is almost beyond our poor ability to contemplate. Like a parent with a timid child He is there telling me, "You can do it, Jim. I know you can. Take My hand and depend on Me; I will show you how." With such a God to lead and direct us, showing us the pathway of encouraging others, how can we refuse to provide what others long for?

Perhaps it has been so long since you said such things that you don't know how to start. Many people are afraid they'll sound silly or fake when they first try to speak encouraging words—especially if they have been used to using harsh and unloving words. But even the most verbally inept of us can write a note.

A note of encouragement is such a blessing for those for whom conversation is a trial. Some are articulate on paper

but in conversation just can't think fast enough. But, provide them with time for reflection and writing and a masterpiece of encouragement can flow from their pen. Unlike the spoken word, the written note is often read repeatedly and treasured by its recipient more than a casually uttered phrase. Recently I received this note from Sally:

*Dearest Jim,
You are the treasure of my life, the heartbeat of
my day, an the joys in moments.
Love, Sally*

On the other side of the note was a heart with the words, "You're my man," with a smiley face. Her note was in every respect equivalent to my having a beauty attack.

Pet names are expressive of your special intimacy, but pet expressions can draw hearts together also. I often tell my wife she is the missing color of the rainbow. My son picked up on this and started telling his girl that she is the missing star in the heavens. A compliment paid in an unexpected way or in front of other people, especially with an element of surprise, can be delightful.

While backpacking I saw one of my sons provide a vivid example of this. We were crossing an open meadow filled with little wildflowers of various hues, but one was almost white with just a hint of pink. Noticing this, he called his girlfriend over to him and said, "Look, even the flowers blush in your presence." Then the flowers suddenly weren't the only things blushing in that mountain meadow. How true are the words

of Scripture in Proverbs 18:21: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” In your marriage and my marriage, death and life are truly in the power of the tongue.

I have visited, counseled, and stayed with so many couples that aren’t stoking the fire. Many of them consider themselves good Christians, and perhaps they are not throwing water in the stove but they have allowed the flames to die of neglect. If you want to let the flames of love die out in your marriage it is really simple—just do nothing. It is guaranteed to work every time. Just tell your spouse, “Not now, I’m too busy. Can’t you see I’ve got important things to do?” You can see the flame start to sputter and die right on their countenance.

Another way that we encourage or reinforce the love we share is the giving of gifts. No, I don’t mean on holidays or special occasions, but the giving of what one of my friends refers to as “just because” gifts. A gift is a visible token that says to the receiver, “You were in my thoughts today.” In the gift is embodied the love that cared enough to pick out something just for our special someone.

I have never outgrown the thrill of receiving a gift, especially if it comes from my wife or sons. They know me so well that their gifts, more than any others, convey their thoughtfulness as they choose an item that would enhance my lifestyle or the enjoyment of my recreational pursuits. For example, Sally knew I wanted a certain knife and tool combination for backpacking. I hadn’t requested it, but when she saw it she picked it up for me. She had read my desire, even while it remained unvoiced and she had gone to the trouble to make it a gift “just because” it would please me.

One day I felt the impression of the Lord that I should give Sally a “just because” gift. Now we live where a trip to town is at best a three-hour round trip, not counting on the time spent shopping. How was I to give her a gift that day? I got out the picture of the blouse she had been eyeing in the catalogue, and I put it on her desk with a note: “Order it. Just because.” I had given her the gift even though I didn’t have it in my hand.

When a couple is in love, it’s obvious to everyone around them. Why? It’s more than the look in the eyes, more than the utter joy they take in each other’s company. It’s also the tender touches: the protective arm about each other; the hugs that are a taste of heaven; the kisses they hope will never end; and the hands that are held at every opportunity, that so mark this phase of courtship. The problem is that most of us gradually leave this phase behind, but we do not outgrow our need of touch.

An infant that only has physical needs met but is never held, cuddled, and played with will be severely hindered in development and likely die before long. All because tender touches are not an option, but an absolute need for every human being, no matter what stage of life in which they find themselves.

Sally loves tender touches. We hug and kiss frequently, but there is much more than hugs and kisses involved. At times I have come up behind her while she is typing on the computer and I can see she is getting tired. Her energies have started fading and she looks like a plant in the garden that needs a good drink of water. So I gently massage her shoul-

ders and arms. Before long she, just like those plants that get a drink, perks right up. My energy has flowed into her through the medium of my touch and the knowledge that she is loved. Sometimes she can see I am stressed, especially if the day has been filled with lots of counseling or public speaking. She can just tell by the way I turn my head that I am getting a headache or a kink in my neck. She takes over, and soon the problem is resolved under her skillful hands.

Traditional touches are very important. Hugs and kisses at hello and goodbye bind the heart and can be much more than mere form. I have watched many a man kiss his wife goodbye out of a sense of obligation after he sees me kiss my wife, and believe me, the wife knows he's only doing it to save face in front of me.

I vividly remember one such wife, who tried so hard to give her husband the message that tender touches were important; they were her type of universal pursuit. She saw me sitting with Sally and how we held hands during prayer, how I always kiss her hand before I let it go. I can't walk beside Sally and not want to hold hands, and when we are near each other, my arm naturally finds its way around her. This wife watched this as they visited with us, and soon I saw her scoot closer to her husband, and you know what he did? He moved farther away. I watched as she chased this dumb ox in a subtle manner across the entire sofa. Still he didn't get the idea! You could just sense her frustration. Her husband was the type to say as he was leaving, "See ya." If she was really fortunate he might even say in the same tonal inflection, "Love ya."

I felt so bad for this poor woman that I invited her husband on a walk and explained what it was that his wife wanted. Then I sat back and watched the next day. He had his arm around her; there was real warmth in his words toward her; and she was swooning for him. She was so happy and fulfilled with just those little gestures that I thought she would burst. These little things mean a lot, and if you have neglected them, you don't know what you are missing.

I would, however, add one word of caution. If you've let these attentions die of neglect, and the only time you engage in these activities is when you two are physically intimate, your partner may not respond the way you would like them to at first because you have trained them that any such activity is a prelude to something more. They may notice these new attentions on your part and get the wrong message. Time and consistency will quickly win them over; don't despair.

At last we come to my favorite personal pursuit—the one that tells me above all others that I am loved, and that is acts of loving kindness. When someone goes out of their way to help me, they are telling me they love me. When someone serves my needs, they are reaching my heart. I have had people share a meal with us, and after watching Sally, they think she must be an abused wife. Not in the physical aspect, but because she is constantly serving my needs. Sometimes I will be eating a meal and glance toward the refrigerator as the thought of something extra I'd like floats through my head. Sally will notice my glance and be on her feet to get whatever it is before I can get up or even get the words out. She serves me because she loves me, not because she is forced to. She

loves serving me and enjoys the love it calls forth from my heart toward her.

Actions might be as simple as fixing a leaky sink or painting the bedroom on your day off. It might mean making his favorite pie or just seeing that his clothes are clean and pressed. None of the simple acts that we use to serve others are glamorous, but they don't have to be to win the affection of one who responds to them. For someone like me the motivation and the love shown are more important than any other factor.

So did you find yourself or your partner in any of the subjects covered? If so, you know what to do to provide them the special fuel that will enable them to keep the flame of love burning brightly in their hearts for you. Are you willing to do that? Will you take the steps needed so that when others see you, they think you are a newly-wedded couple?

Marriage was given to you by God to provide you with pleasure and fulfillment as nothing else can do. Marriage was provided for Adam and Eve before sin entered the world, and God desires your marriage to be as happy as that very first one in Eden. I challenge you to pursue these principles as an experiment in exploring how to fulfill your partner and yourself. May God richly bless you as you work to kindle the flame.

CHAPTER 3

SWING TIME

“Come now, and let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18)

Communicating in a new and different manner will be challenging, but we can learn to leave arguments behind and enter into the experience of reasoning together.

“Father, you know I’m supposed to complete a wood-working project as part of home school this year,” Andrew announced rhetorically, giving me a worried look. Of course I knew about the requirement; I had been the major force behind incorporating it into our school program. It was that worried look that concerned me. That look belied a struggle going on in a twelve-year-old mind, and his next words vividly stated the problem: “I don’t want to make another bird-house or any other ‘baby’ project. I want to make something large and challenging.”

A dusty memory suddenly rose from the depths of my mind, and a picture of my grandmother’s front porch clearly displayed itself in my mind. I could see the adults gathered on lawn chairs in the cool evening hours. The little ones were playing with toys on the spacious wooden floor of the porch. I usually brought my trucks, and there at Grandma’s feet I would listen to the merry talk of aunts and uncles and the endless click of Grandma’s knitting needles, as the old porch swing creaked with her gentle rocking. The picture was so warm and reassuring. I told Andrew, “Why don’t you make us

an old-fashioned porch swing like the one at Great-Grandma's house?"

I wish you could have seen his face as the worry vanished. Andrew threw himself into that project, but it wasn't easy. He had to use his inventiveness to solve a number of problems, and some of the things he came up with were quite ingenious. Soon he had a swing that was both attractive and comfortable. When he finished we purchased some chains, and he was enormously pleased as it sat proudly between the trees, a testament to his tenacity and his growing skills.

However, now that it was done, what were we going to do with it? We decided to try setting aside a half-hour at noon to share whatever was on our hearts. We would set our work aside, no matter how pressing, and go out and sit on that swing and relax together. Soon we were both looking forward to it, and "swing time" was born.

I just want to share a word of caution. I have found that too many of us don't really know how to effectively communicate with each other. Nothing kills the desire to spend time together more than experiencing it as an unpleasant, stressful time rather than something that binds our lives together in bonds of sympathy and understanding.

Let me tell you about Marvin and Sue. Sue called me one afternoon about a month after I had spoken in her church, and she was disturbed. "We heard your sermon on swing time, and we really liked the idea. So we started having swing time too, but after two or three weeks my husband won't do it anymore. Can you call him and talk about it?"

"No, Sue, I can't do that. If he is willing to talk about it, ask him to call me, and I'll be happy to discuss it with him. But I won't do it without his permission."

A few evenings later I heard from Marvin. "Jim, I am sick and tired of swing time! It has turned into lynch time! Every time I come home and we try to talk, she digs up something from the past and has my head in a noose before I know it. I'm tired of it. So I stay at work in the evening and don't bother to come home early."

"Marvin, you're within your rights to feel that way, and you're not alone. It's a common trap. When couples haven't communicated for some time, one or even both partners has a long laundry list of all the issues that were neglected when there was no communication at all. In many ways, our marriages are like a sink that has gotten clogged up and needs to be unclogged to restore a free flow, but all the garbage that has backed up can be very distasteful and the longer it sits there, the less we want to deal with it. That's why swing time, like every other aspect of the Christian life and family, must be guided by the impressions of God upon the heart. Your wife has all this stuff backed up, and when you showed willingness to deal with it, she was so thrilled that she started dumping on you. She's not used to asking God what she should share, anymore than you have been. She just tried to deal with things the best she knew how and made a mess of things as we humans are apt to do when we control our own affairs."

Marvin didn't say anything for a minute and then slowly admitted, "I guess that makes sense, but what about swing

time? I don't mind talking, but I can't stand it the way we're going about it."

"Marvin, the Bible says there is a time to speak and there is a time to keep silent. Both of you are going to have to learn which is which. You guys took the first step to effective communication—setting aside a time to talk—and that's good. Now comes the harder part of refining that time into a period of growth and enjoyment for both partners. This doesn't mean that you will never discuss difficult subjects, but that you will approach these hard things in God's timing and work together for a solution, rather than trying to pin the blame on each other.

"Sally and I have had to work through many of the same issues. Let's get Sue back on an extension, and we'll see if we can get you guys back on the right track with something that really has the potential to transform your relationship." When Sue got back on the line, I went over what I had shared with Marvin and then continued, "Every relationship we have, be it in our marriages, our friendships, or even with our business associations, all will reflect our ability to effectively communicate. Whatever we practice at home tends to carry over beyond the marriage into our other relationships. For years, you two have stuffed down the hurts and ignored the conflicts between you, and I bet you do the same when others have hurt you or when you have a clash with someone in the office or the church as well. It is time you transform this bad habit into one of effective communication. The first step is to go back and revive swing time.

"Use the time not only to discuss problems but also to choose to admire each other, to simply chat, to plan vacations, to dream like you did when you were dating; and when you do hit a difficult area, approach it like peeling an onion. Just take one small layer at a time, instead of trying to do it all at once. Each layer may have its share of tears, but you'll find that each layer you work through brings you that much closer to getting rid of the root or core issue. If either of you find an area too painful or you find yourself beginning to get angry and wanting to force or compel the other to see it your way, it's time to table the discussion for another day. Never allow your feelings to have sway. Instead, strive to make this time pleasant for your partner. Even when the hard topics have to be discussed, reaffirm that you would rather be going through these hard things with them and not with anyone else.

"Commune with God before you begin communing with each other. Ninety percent of the problems we have between husband and wife arise because we don't filter our words through God for His approval before we utter them. We are driven by emotion, passion, or impulse in the heat of the moment, and as you two have discovered, that very thing destroys swing time with its open communication. We have to learn, as it says in James 1:19, 'Let every man be swift to hear and slow to speak.' The golden rule of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us is an absolute must, especially with that special person we married.

"Filtering means more than just words. We can communicate volumes with attitudes and body language. We need to make sure we come into situations of communicat-

ing with others submitted to God, with self subdued, and our aim being to seek the will of God, no matter how much it crosses our desires. As it says in 1 Samuel 12:7, 'Now therefore stand still that I may reason with you before the Lord.' Here is the key to effective resolution of a conflict. Reason must carry the day, and both parties must hold self and deportment in check as if they were in the presence of God, for though unseen He truly is present with us."

"Jim, that seems like a pretty lofty ideal. Are there really other couples doing this?" Marvin quizzed me.

"Yeah," Sue agreed, "I don't know of any."

"Yes, there are some," I assured them, "but you're right, not many. Thankfully those about us are not our example, and if the truth is told we don't want their kind of marriages either. The ideal we are striving for is to be Christ-like in our conversations. 'The words that I speak to you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me,' says John 14:10. Everyone can think of times when our words caused a problem in a relationship with someone we loved. Christ sometimes had to say hard things, but I have found that the times when I want to say hard things, to set someone right or straighten things out, are the very worst times to do it because my flesh is controlling me. And often when God asks me to deal with something hard, that's the very time I least feel up to the challenge of conflict. We cannot trust our feelings and must have the guidance of an all-knowing God whose timing is never wrong and who desires nothing but our happiness."

"Jim, I've tried to approach Marvin with the right spirit, but I never get to complete my thought or point before he's

interrupting me. Then I get angry, and all my good intentions seem to go out the window."

"You're not alone, Sue. This is our third rule for effective communication. Each one needs time to express their concerns without interruption. Now anyone can sit and let someone else talk on, but it's a lot harder to be a good audience and show you are honestly receptive to what they want to say. There have been many times when I interrupted Sally or cut her off completely without actually saying a word. I didn't have to say anything because my body language clearly told her how I felt. By my impatient fidgeting, I conveyed the fact that I couldn't wait for her to hurry up and finish. Other times, my eyes betrayed me. If Sally didn't see any empathy or could tell that I was already planning my rebuttal, she'd clam up. Let me share a story.

"One day after Sally had gone off to town, she came home all excited and pleased with herself because she had purchased three pairs of blue jeans for the boys for twenty-one dollars each. Now, in our family Sally has always been the spendthrift. She is always more willing to part with a dollar than I am. The reason she was so delighted with her purchase was the jeans were marked down from the list price of twenty-six dollars and she felt she had gotten a bargain. However, I wasn't so charitable in my judgment. I didn't even give her a chance to explain fully. I thought to myself, There she goes again. She knows we can get jeans just as good for fifteen dollars a pair in the catalogue. What a waste! I calculated it all out in my head and could clearly see she had lost eighteen dollars on the deal, the equivalent of another pair of jeans.

Sally was trying to finish her presentation, but I stopped her and said determinedly, 'You can tell me anything you want, but it wasn't a good deal. You're taking them back. Nothing you can tell me is going to change my opinion, so you might as well not waste your time.' I was right, wasn't I? I could see she was flustered and frustrated, but I just let it go. I knew she had made a bad deal, and I wasn't concerned about whatever silly impulse had urged her to purchase them. The problem in this situation was not, contrary to my opinion, my wife's shopping, but that fact that Jim was not listening. I wasn't hearing her out. I had interrupted her by making a decision before she had made her case, and once I had done that, I saw no logical reason to listen any longer.

"The next morning in my quiet time, the Lord brought the situation to my mind. While my opinion about the purchase hadn't changed, I realized I hadn't given Sally adequate time to express her reasons. Now I felt bad about it because I knew I hadn't treated her with the respect she deserved. I went to her that morning and confessed that I had cut her off and I wanted her to have the chance to say what she wanted. This has always been a trial for me because Sally expresses things in a much less direct manner than I do. I have a struggle because I need to provide her the opportunity to express things her way, in her personality. My natural tendency is to say, 'Come on, get to the point!'

"So, Sally, finally seeing I was earnest about letting her talk, explained, 'I know we could get them cheaper from the catalogue, Jim, but we need these for the month-long trip we are taking in just a couple of days. We would have never been

able to get a catalogue order up here that fast unless we paid for express shipping, and if we did that they would cost more than the ones I bought in the store.'

"'Why didn't you tell me that?' I queried. I mean, I'm reasonable. It made perfect sense when she explained it. Why hadn't she just told me that the day before?

"Sally just looked at me, a knowing smile playing about her lips, and in the quiet of the moment I could hear what she was saying: 'Because you wouldn't let me.'

"Now, Sue and Marvin, even though this wasn't a 'swing time' conversation, you can see how the same principles of communication apply. God says, 'Let them come near: let them speak' in Isaiah 41:1. If the God of the universe who, unlike Jim Hohnberger, never makes a mistake in judgment, invites failing human beings to come near and to speak to Him, God must have tremendous faith in the power of this communication principle. It's as if He's saying, 'Let them speak and do not interrupt them, even if they don't share in the most graceful way.'

"Jim, I can't believe you did that to Sally! I can't tell you how many times Marvin has done that to me. You really do understand, don't you?"

"Unfortunately I do, Sue, and it doesn't stop there. My son Matthew was a talker from the time he could first make sounds. When he learned words, they poured forth from him in an endless supply of childish prattle. It was so tempting to ignore him or shush him up. After all, I didn't have time for such nonsense. At least I thought I didn't. It's no wonder that when kids get to be teenagers, they won't talk to us anymore.

If we establish a pattern of non-communication early in their lives, it's just a natural outgrowth. If you have shut off a free flow of communication in your marriage or your family, it will require extra effort on your part to reestablish them, just as I had to go back to Sally and apologize for cutting her off.

"The other thing to remember in this category is the need to understand what is really being said, rather than just listening to the specific words that someone is using. Some people do not express themselves as clearly as others do, and we must give them the freedom to be who they are by listening for the intent of their conversation and not picking on their specific words. We do this in everyday conversation without thinking about it. If someone asks me to crack the window, I know that they don't want me to throw a rock at it and literally break it. Likewise, if you say, 'I going to run to the store,' I'm not going to assume you are lacing up your running shoes. If we can do this in everyday things, surely we can give others the same understanding in our conversations. The reason we often don't give each other that leeway is that we get hung up on what the other person says, and rather than dying to self and accepting what is said, we become defensive and then attack the words of the one who has dared offend us.

"God's kingdom does not operate on such a setting. He invites you to 'produce your cause, ... and bring forth your strong reasons,' as it says in Isaiah 41:21. If God is willing to hear, then we must hear others as well—not just the words, but also the meaning.

"The fourth principle to effective communication is to be solution oriented. We spend 5 percent of the time on the

problem and then all the rest of the time looking for a solution. In truth, it only requires a few minutes to state a problem from every angle, and then we implement our family rule, which basically states that no one is allowed to talk again unless they are going to present a solution.

"Sally and I have had multiple conflicts over the years about what she wants to buy and what I don't think we need! One day Sally told me she wanted swing time about this subject. We each came armed with our arguments and stated our cases. We could fight for years about this one because we both felt strongly about the subject and there really wasn't a right or wrong involved. We just had different perspectives that led us to different conclusions.

"We laid the problem out in just a couple of minutes and then we used the same rule I shared with you and Marvin. We didn't allow ourselves to talk unless it was to offer a solution. Finally I told Sally, 'You have a right to access the money too. After all, it's as much yours as it's mine. What if we set aside a certain dollar amount each month for you to purchase whatever you desire? If I question it and you tell me the money came from that amount, then I'll not say another word.' If you can catch hold of this simple principle, your home will be so much happier.

"One of the most solution-oriented people in the Bible was Daniel. After Daniel's capture and removal to Babylon, he had a problem in that his religious beliefs, the prohibitions given by God to avoid unclean meats, were not understood or accommodated by his Chaldean captors. The Bible says that Daniel 'purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself

with the portion of the king's meat nor the wine that he drank. Therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself,' says Daniel 1:8. But when the prince, for fear of the king, refused his request, Daniel did not restate the problem, nor did he demand his own way. Daniel was solution oriented. He proposed another option and asked to try it for just ten days as an experiment. The man agreed this time, and God so blessed the trial that the prince of the eunuchs was convinced that Daniel's course was better and yielded to his wishes.

"If Daniel had stubbornly insisted on his way, the king would have gladly removed his head and our story would be over. Ironically, that is what most of us are doing. We are stubbornly insisting on our way as the only way, and most of us are losing our heads in the heat of argument."

"I never thought of Daniel's story in that way before. It gives you a whole new perspective on an old story," Sue commented.

"I agree, Sue, and I think you're going to find the fifth principle just as helpful. It's what I refer to as 'time-out.' When I was playing football and things were going poorly, if the other team had us off balance or we were confused as to which play we should run, we could call a time-out and have a minute to recover our equilibrium. If you find a conversation is starting to deteriorate, if passions are rising, if emotions are stirred and threatening a loss of self-control, then either partner must be able to call for a time-out and the issue must be put off for another time, without argument. This principle is a lot harder than it looks and will require a choice based on

principles, because after your passions are stirred the last thing you want to do is deny them expression. You will have to restrain your need to give vent to your feelings, and most of us are not used to that. I guarantee it will not be a pleasant thing to do the first few times, but the result of this exercise in self-control will sell you on its value. Just not having to face the result of words spoken in anger is worth every discomfort to self when the brakes are applied and the discussion is stopped for another time. Agreeing to allow time-out not only prevents a conversation from collapsing into hurtful accusations, it makes each partner more willing to listen to some hard things from the one they love because they know they can cut off the discussion if it gets to be too much for them.

"Psalm 60:3 states, 'Thou hast shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us drink of the wine of astonishment.' If you open up communication, real open communication, you may drink of the wine of astonishment when you find out just what others are thinking. You may need some time to grapple with these new thoughts.

"When we demand that others give us an immediate response without time to consider, if they are pushed to respond in the heat of the moment, they will likely choose to follow the normal human inclination to justify and defend themselves. Yet that same person, given time to prayerfully consider the matter, may humbly admit to being in the wrong and repent. Our attitude toward them, and the consideration we demonstrate in our conversation, has a lot to do with their willingness to respond and what their response will be.

"I know I have hit you with a lot of information, Marvin, but I want to share one last principle for developing effective communication. It's so basic to the Christian life, you'll probably wonder why I mention it, but it's something we all tend to do—harboring past wrongs. When we are confronted with a problem area in our life, it is the tendency in all of us to bring up the other person's past failings instead of dealing with the issue at hand. But if Sally is troubled by my temper, is it going to help the situation for me to discuss her lack of promptness? This doesn't mean you can't deal with past issues, but there is a time and a place for everything, and when she wants to talk about my temper, it is probably not the time to bring up her lack of promptness. If there are issues that haven't been properly dealt with in the past, those same character flaws are bound to resurface and cause present issues. That is the time to deal with them. In marriage, it is very easy to forget that our husband or wife is different today and to try and hold them in the mold of the past, without appreciating the growth and changes they have made, even if they are only small ones.

Let me close with the words of a young lady, whose parents have taken this principle of communication and used it to bring joy to their home, as well.

*Learning to communicate in a new and different way,
Leaving arguments behind, having swing time every day.
It will truly change your marriage as you reason with each
other*

Opening your hearts to love and grace, one unto another.

—Janice Van Petten

CHAPTER 4

REMOVING THE THORNS

*"Because they have no changes, therefore they fear not
God" (Psalm 55:19)*

Each of us harbors characteristics and behaviors that irritate the one we love like a thorn in their flesh. Removing these is a vital part of our Christian walk. Seeing practical progress in our lives is essential both for our own encouragement and for the enlightenment of others.

I love cutting wood; there is just something about the task that satisfies me in a deep and personal way. Now, before you think I've been up in the wilderness too long, let me explain. I know it's hard work, and that is partly why I like it, but not totally. There is something else, something deeper, more intrinsic and harder to put into words, but nonetheless tangible and real.

For me, my wood represents freedom and independence. There is a tremendous sense of self-sufficiency to know we can heat our house, cook our food, and take long hot showers all for the price of our labor. Beyond the practical considerations of economics, there is something almost magical about a fire. Out of ordinary-looking pieces of wood pour light and heat in a fascinating, ever-changing display of flickering colors and crackling voice. A fire just lends itself to intimacy, banishing pretense and opening the spirits of all who gather around it. Even when you are alone in the wilderness a fire makes an utterly fine companion to spend the evening

with, never tiring of your company while at the same time illuminating and sharing your innermost secrets.

With this attitude in their father my boys quickly learned to enjoy cutting wood, and by the time they were ten and twelve, there was almost nothing they liked so well as helping with the wood. And why not? I think the urge to wrest a living from the land, to make our way in the wilderness is as inbred and American as apple pie. In fact, all over the world people relate to my wilderness stories, perhaps because some long-dormant primal instinct recognizes familiar threads of life, long lost to us in that happy Eden home to which we all trace our roots. I truly believe that every man has, to some degree, the desire to live up to the rugged ideal of being a “real man,” and my boys, as young as they were, liked cutting wood precisely because it was the “manly” thing to do.

Unfortunately their age, size, and still-developing judgment precluded them from using the chain saw and made it impossible for them to split the wood. They were tremendously helpful in loading, unloading, and stacking the wood I had cut and split. I loved their company, and I’m sure they knew it.

It was on one of these wood-gathering expeditions that Andrew let a chunk of split wood slide through his hands, and as it brushed by his hand on the way to the ground, it left a large, and I mean large, splinter embedded in his flesh. It really hurt. I knew it had to. I felt so sorry for the kid because I could just see this huge splinter sticking out of his flesh, and my first impulse was to remove it. Andrew would have nothing to do with this idea, so I suggested that he let his mother do it. After all, she’s a registered nurse and she, I was sure,

would be very gentle. But the very thought of removal was out of the question. This splinter, this thorn in his flesh, was painful, but the idea of taking it out was even more painful. Every parent can relate to his or her child having a splinter, and many a mom and dad have held a child down and with a maximum of misapplied strength removed the splinter from the child’s flesh. But Sally and I decided that at ten, Andrew was old enough to learn an important lesson in life, so if he didn’t want to remove it, we would wait until he did. We knew what would happen, and we explained to Andrew that swelling and infection were likely to set in as his body tried to rid itself of the foreign body. This would make his hand increasingly painful, and unless his body was able to expel the splinter the infection could reach the point where amputation of the hand was necessary.

Now Sally and I had no intention of letting things go that far. We were confident that the pain in the hand would bring him around to the idea of removal long before he entered the danger zone, and that’s exactly what happened. It took just a few days of pain and infection before Andrew approached his mother rather sheepishly and laid out his injured hand for her sympathetic care and the removal of the splinter.

The thought of removal was still scary. Big tears glistened in his eyes, but he was trying to be brave. In an incredibly short and painful time the splinter was out. True removal cost Andrew some pain and suffering. Removing the splinter might have even cost him some tears, but I won’t confirm that because to me he was a hero. He had learned from his experience and had chosen a little hurt that he might obtain

the greater pleasure of a life free of the pain and irritation the splinter was causing. In so doing, he vividly demonstrated the problem that exists in many, if not most marriages. Unlike Andrew, we have not learned to remove the splinters, and we continue to suffer needlessly.

What are the splinters or thorns in your partner that irritate or hurt you daily? I bet that even as you read this, one or two came to mind. If so, you have some thorns to be removed in your marriage. Generally what happens is that we look at these thorns and every time we've touched them they are so painful that we simply try and avoid the thorn in the future. As the years pass by, we find more and more thorns and they become increasingly painful, until at last not knowing how to remove them or because we are too afraid to try, we choose amputation and divorce our partner. Then we look for a new partner, whom we naively believe will have no thorns. Of course, we are living in a fantasy world when we think that. Our new partner may have a different set of baggage than our first, but we will start the same process all over again. How much better to fix what we have, and I don't believe that means lowering your sights and learning to be happy in a less-than-ideal situation.

No matter how hopeless your marriage seems, you can change it for the better. This won't happen in a week. Rather, it's an ongoing process that will put you on the road of change and restore hope that maybe, just maybe, things can be different between you and your spouse.

Friends, it can work for you as well. Remove the thorns from your relationships, and when you get rid of one, remove

another and another. In a year's time you'll find you've taken care of four, six, or even eight thorns, and very few relationships have more than that. It is a simple method but so very rewarding. May God guide you as you allow God to get out his divine tweezers and begin the process of removing the thorns in your life.

A CHRISTIAN GUIDE TO MARRIAGE

When dealing with deeply personal areas it can be hard to separate emotion from fact. Too often we tend to justify self rather than look honestly at the cause-and-effect in our relationships.

- Seek the wisdom of God and a willingness of spirit that may reveal to you just the message He has for you. Look for solutions.
- Spend special time with your spouse and with God. Make your devotional life more than a formality. Make sure you're seeking to know God as an individual.
- Ask God to grant you the freedom of thought to really see what your marriage might become through His power.
- Ask God to give you a clear mind to recall what was so special about your relationship.
- In seeking God, think about what it was like for Adam and Eve when God walked with them in the Garden.
- In your quiet time with God, ask Him to help you develop the principles of effective communications. Use them as effective tools under His guidance.
- Ask God to remove the defensiveness that just seems natural with the sinful flesh we all share, and to give you a sense of objectivity.
- Draw close to God and seek to lose yourself in Him, that you may go into each day submitted and willing to consider openly and objectively your partner's point of view.
- Ask for divine help in removing the thorns that come with our old and sinful ways and attitudes.
- Enjoy each day with your spouse and with God. Rejoice that you have begun the process of change. This is the greatest evidence that God is working in your lives.

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