

Learning From History

The Big Picture

It was the summer of 1974, and Lynne and I had been married two months. She informed me that the garbage disposal had quit working. I told her to call a repairman.

The war was on!

“What do you mean, call a repairman? Why pay fifty dollars for a job any able-bodied man can do?”

“Well, you don't expect *me* to do it, do you? I don't know anything about garbage disposals. I'd probably electrocute myself if I touched it. Besides, we're short on butter knives.”

“You could do it if you tried. You just don't care enough.”

The problem was that Lynne's dad fixed things, her brother fixed things, her uncles fixed things, her cousins fixed things, and so she assumed that *all* men fixed things. Unless, of course, they weren't interested in what was going on at home. Unless they were too preoccupied with concerns outside the home to devote thirty minutes to household needs.

From my side, I had never had a successful experience with anything mechanical in my life. I knew I would waste hours and probably money if I tried to fix the garbage disposal or anything else. I also believed, as my father had, that the sensible approach was to stick with what I was good at and pay someone else to do what I wasn't good at.

A Wide Angle View

1. Tell a story about a time you and your spouse discovered how differently you approach things.

A Biblical Portrait

Read Genesis 2:21-25

²¹So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²²Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

²⁴That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

- Expression of emotions
- Celebration of special occasions such as birthdays, holidays...
- Family vacations
- Discipline of children

4. Cite at least one difference in your personalities that can be traced directly back to your family backgrounds. How has this become an issue in your marriage, and how are you seeking to deal with it?

5. What aspects of your parents' relationship do you respect and want to see imitated in your own marriage?

What are you doing to develop these in your relationship?

No One's Perfect

Sadly, there are more to family memories that highlights. In addition to being one of the greatest determiners of personal identity, the family is also one of the greatest causes of personal pain. No one grows up pain free. The apostle Paul tells us that on one can live a totally righteous life (Rom. 2:23), and that includes parents. There is no perfect mom. No perfect dad. We are all products of parents who were sinners. They too were products of parents who were sinners, just as our children will be. We must realize that imperfect parents always cause some degree of pain to their children. The baton that is passed from one generation to the next is always at least a little disfigured, a little scarred.

6. What is one characteristic that marked your parents' relationship that you want to avoid in your marriage?

What would it require for you to confront and avoid these same patterns?

7. How could you creatively thank or affirm your parents for the positive ways they have impacted your life?

Putting Yourself in the Picture

Looking Back Together

Take time in the coming week to talk with your spouse about an incident in your past where one or both of your parents did something that wounded you. Discuss the following questions:

Could it have been avoided?

How have you recovered?

Are there steps you need to take to continue the healing process?

How do you plan to keep from repeating the same mistake in *your* family life?

Take time to pray for healing in the heart of your spouse and commit to continue praying for them in

the days and weeks to come. Also, take specific steps toward continuing the healing process in your lives.

Research Project

Call or meet with one of your in-laws and ask them how they feel their life has impacted your spouse. Give them freedom to talk about their positive and negative influence. Follow this up by telling your spouse what you learned. Take time to affirm your in-laws, honoring them as people who matter to you and to God.

How Are You Wired?

Reflection from Session 1

1. If you took time with your spouse to reflect back on some of the struggles and pain they faced growing up, what did you learn about how you can care for your spouse in your relationship now? If you are still in the healing process, how can your group help you to walk through this healing process with courage and hope?
2. If you contacted one of your in-laws, what did you learn about your spouse through this conversation? How can you use what you learned to more effectively love and support your marriage partner?

The Big Picture

Almost every person who walks a wedding aisle comes to a point in the development of the marriage relationship when he or she says, "I think I made a terrible mistake. I think I married the wrong person."

Often people in the throes of fear and confusion say things like this: "I don't feel like I know my spouse anymore. We had so much in common while we were dating, but now we seem to see everything differently. This isn't the person I fell in love with. My spouse has changed so much."

Actually, your spouse has probably changed very little. But reality often reveals what romance conceals. In the day-to-day routine of real life spouses begin to notice things they hadn't seen before. They tend to focus on their differences rather than on the common beliefs or interests that drew them together. They tend to become irritated by the idiosyncrasies that charmed them when they were dating, and they tend to look at the negative side of the very qualities they most admired in one another before they were married.

I see this pattern in many marriages. As a matter of fact, it is all too evident in mine. During our courtship, our feelings flourished in the rich soil of our obvious compatibility. We held in common our deepest values and our highest goals. We respected one another. We enjoyed an intense whole-person attraction for one another. Our problem was that we focused all our attention on these delightful points of contact and neglected to pay attention to some important points of difference. We didn't look at the differences in our family backgrounds discussed in the previous lesson, or the differences in our basic personalities.

A Wide Angle View

1. What are some of the common beliefs and interests that first drew you to your spouse?
2. What is one difference between you and your spouse that you did not discover until after you were married? What are some of the consequences of this difference?

A Biblical Portrait

Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

¹⁴Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will live with them
and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they will be my people.”

¹⁷Therefore,

“Come out from them
and be separate,
says the Lord.
Touch no unclean thing,
and I will receive you.”

¹⁸And,

“I will be a Father to you,
and you will be my sons and daughters,
says the Lord Almighty.”

3. This passage says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” What implications does this have on the union between fully devoted followers of Christ and non-Christians?”

Sharpening the Focus

Introverts and Extroverts

Introverts think before they speak and usually say little. They prefer a few close friends rather than many acquaintances, and would often opt for a quiet night at home rather than a social get-together. They may be warm, caring, and friendly toward people, but social interaction drains them (they feel slightly uncomfortable in groups), so they need a heavy balance of energizing solitude. They need to get alone where they can relax, “let down,” and be themselves again.

Extroverts, on the other hand, derive energy from interaction with people. Most extroverts enjoy working and playing on a team. They usually have friends and spend much of their time with others.

Extreme extroverts love nothing more than a party – and usually end up being the life of it. They tend to talk a lot; in fact, it sometimes seems they have to talk in order to figure out what they think. Extroverts enjoy solitude now and then, but too much of it drains them emotionally. They need the inspiration of interaction to keep their batteries charged.

4. After reading the definitions above, take a moment to write down which one you feel describes you and your spouse. Use this simple rating, 1 being mild and 10 being extreme, to judge where each of you “lands” on the continuum. This same rating system will be used on questions 5 – 7. (This will be fun. For example, you might say you are very strong introvert, but your spouse may think you are only a mild introvert!)

<i>Person</i>	<i>Introvert or Extrovert</i>	<i>Rating</i>
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Me:

My Spouse:

How do your self-evaluations compare with your spouse's evaluations?

How do these differences in personality reveal themselves in day-to-day life?

How can awareness of these differences help you get along better with each other?

Sensors and Intuitives

If sensors were to describe themselves in one word, it would probably be “practical.” Sensing people tend to base their reality on facts, facts, and more facts. They have their feet firmly planted in reality. Giving little thought to what might have been or what may be in the future, they focus on what really happened or what is. They look to the past, learn through experience, and highly value other people's experiences. When “sensing” employers interview potential employees, they tend to focus questions on the applicants' history, reasoning that past experience is the best basis for assuming future productivity.

Intuitives would probably describe themselves as “innovative.” For them, what is can always be improved upon. Their vague sense of dissatisfaction with reality propels them toward change. The future intrigues them far more than the past or present, and they are fascinated with ideas and possibilities. Intuitive employers interviewing prospective employees tend to pay more attention to what the applicant says regarding the future of the organization than what he or she has done in the past. Intuitives delight others with their speculation, imagination, creativity, and poetic imagery, but because their heads are often in the clouds, they are subject to error regarding facts and details.

5. After reading the definitions above, take a moment to write down which one you feel describes you and your spouse. Use the same rating system as described in question 4 (1 being mild and 10 being extreme)

<i>Person</i>	<i>Senser or Intuitive</i>	<i>Rating</i>
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Me:

My Spouse:

How do your self-evaluations compare with your spouse's evaluations?

How do these differences in personality reveal themselves in day-to-day life?

How can awareness of these differences help you get along better with each other?

Thinkers and Feelers

A third category – that of thinkers and feelers – shows how people differ in the area of assessing choices and making decisions. Thinkers take a logical approach to life, preferring to let their heads rule. They tend to be cool and calculated, cut-and-dried. They concern themselves with right and wrong, with prudence, with goals, with efficiency. In the legal system, they cry for justice, in business, for productivity and profit, in education, for unwavering truth. If something is right, they do it. If something is fair, they promote it. If something makes sense, they pursue it.

Feelers prefer to let their hearts rule. They feel deeply themselves and empathize easily with how others feel. They tend to base their decisions on how their choices will affect others. They hate it when people feel sad or hurt or discouraged, and long to be able to ease their pain. They prefer mercy over justice, put people ahead of profits, and sometimes see gray where thinkers see black and white.

6. After reading the definitions above, take a moment to write down which one you feel describes you and your spouse. Use the same rating system as described in question 4 (1 being mild and 10 being extreme)

<i>Person</i>	<i>Thinker or Feeler</i>	<i>Rating</i>
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Me:

My Spouse:

How do your self-evaluations compare with your spouse's evaluations?

How do these differences in personality reveal themselves in day-to-day life?

How can awareness of these differences help you get along better with each other?

Initiators and Responders

Initiators create ideas and action. They are aggressive, assertive, and willing to confront. They tend to be outspoken, often talking loudly and quickly, adding emphasis with intonation and body language. Initiators make decisions easily, and express them with directness and intensity. They know how to take charge and like to do it. They can be excellent leaders, though they sometimes seem overwhelming to others.

Responders prefer to let other people's ideas and actions come their way. They are less assertive and aggressive than initiators and avoid confrontations whenever possible. They are indecisive and cautious, and tend to speak quietly and unemotionally, hesitating to express their opinions for fear of imposing them on others. They listen carefully, avoid the use of power if at all possible, and have a generally supportive attitude. Others view them as shy, but likable.

7. After reading the definitions above, take a moment to write down which one you feel describes you and your spouse. Use the same rating system as described in question 4 (1 being mild and 10 being extreme)

<i>Person</i>	<i>Initiator or Responder</i>	<i>Rating</i>
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Me:

My Spouse:

How do your self-evaluations compare with your spouse's evaluations?

How do these differences in personality reveal themselves in day-to-day life?

How can awareness of these differences help you get along better with each other?

8. Explain to your group how your deeper understanding of personality differences will help strengthen your marriage. How might learning about others in our group help all of you build deeper community and authentic relationships?

Putting Yourself in the Picture

Finding Common Ground

In this session you discussed some of the common beliefs and interests you had that originally attracted you to your spouse. Identify one or two of these points of common interests from those early days and discuss what you can do to pursue these interests today. How can you get back to some of the root beliefs and interests that first drew you to each other?

Also, identify any new interests the two of you have in common. What can you do to spend time pursuing one of these interests together in the coming month?

Seeing Things From Where I Stand

Identify the area in this session, (e.g., Introvert vs. Extrovert) where you and your spouse are the farthest apart. Take time to explain to your spouse why you think you are wired the way you are. Be sure to affirm your spouse for who they are. There are no good or bad personality types – just different ones. Reflect on how you can celebrate those differences.

Planning For Peace

Reflection from Session 2

1. What is an area of common interest that you and your spouse are enjoying together at this time? What have you done in the past few weeks to spend more meaningful time together?

2. If you took time as a couple to identify the area in your personalities where you are least alike, tell the group what you learned about each other in this process and how you are seeking to affirm one another, celebrating each other's unique God-given design.

The Big Picture

Some time ago, when Lynne and I were still dating, we sat down to talk with a couple who absolutely amazed us. They had dated for three years and had never had a single fight. They were confident this pattern would continue.

Then they asked us, “What about you two? You've been dating for a long time. What's it been like for you?” We were more than a little intimidated. How could we sit across the table from this “perfect” couple and spill the truth about our stormy romance and our broken engagement? Would it hurt to “soften” the story a bit?

We responded, “Oh, we've had a few conflicts. But nothing major, and we've always been able to resolve them. Besides, we think it's healthy for dating couples to “go at it” now and then and learn to work things out. What better way to prepare for marriage?”

They remained confident and said, “Well, maybe that's true for you. But if we could make it through three years of dating without a problem, I don't see why we should expect trouble in marriage. We won't have the pressures of college, or living with our parents, or juggling part-time jobs. Marriage should be easy compared to what we're dealing with now. It'll be a snap.”

We wished them well and left the restaurant thinking that maybe they were right. Maybe marriage would be a snap for them. Maybe they could maintain their perfect record. They sure seemed like an ideal match.

But we – and they – were wrong. Establishing careers, maintaining a home, and just living with one another proved to be a bigger challenge than our friends had anticipated. They couldn't figure out how to divide household responsibilities. They discovered they had opposing perspectives on money. In-law tensions put them at odds. Colliding schedules caused frequent angry explosions. Sexual frustrations kept them awake at night. They couldn't agree on vacations plans...

And they desperately needed a vacation! They needed an escape from reality. After three years of marriage, they felt imprisoned by a solid wall of conflicts they did not know how to resolve. And inside the wall, the air was steaming with the heat of hostility.

A Wide Angle View

1. What would you say to an engaged couple who claimed to never fight and who were confident this pattern would continue for their whole marriage?

Tell a little about your courtship and dating experiences. Was this time in your relationship smooth sailing or rough seas?

A Biblical Portrait

Read Ephesians 4:25-26

²⁵ Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶ “In your anger do not sin” Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,

2. Why is speaking the truth so critical for healthy relationships?

Reflect back on a time when you failed to “speak the truth.” What consequences did you experience?

3. The apostle Paul does not say anger is wrong. However, he does warn us about sin that can come from anger. He says clearly, “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.” Why is following this teaching essential for a healthy marriage?

How can refusing to follow God's teaching on how to handle anger, and instead, just “keeping it inside,” give the devil a foothold?

Sharpening the Focus

What We Learned

Our style of fighting and the way we deal with conflict often mirrors what we saw in our home as we grew up. There are a variety of ways we can respond during times of conflict in our marriages. Here are just a few:

Freeze 'Em Out. This style of handling conflict leaves everyone cold. No one wants to talk about real issues or concerns so everyone backs off, detached, and holds their hurt and anger inside. This leads to withdrawal from relationship.

Let the Bullets Fly. In this cowboy style of conflict, everyone squares off and starts shooting verbal bullets. Intimidation is the tool used in this style. Feelings are expressed with anger and feelings are hurt. A great deal of damage is done.

Let Me Out of Here. This style is all about running. It can take various forms: a trip to the bar, to the shopping mall, home to parents, drugs, workaholism, or anything else that creates a temporary escape. However, when the person returns, the problem remains.

I Don't Know What Happened. Sadly, some people explode and express their anger with physical violence. A verbal assault escalates to a physical attack. Afterward, the one who exploded will often say, "I don't know what happened." But the damage is already done. These and many other unhealthy patterns can mark marriage relationships. We need to learn to identify what we learned in our home growing up and develop healthy ways to deal with conflict.

4. How did your parents deal with conflict and anger in their relationship?

How do you deal with conflict and anger in your marriage?

The Spirit of Reconciliation

We have observed that in addition to knowing practical tools for conflict resolution, nearly all couples who survive the minor and major conflicts of married life have discovered a key antidote for marital demise. It is called the spirit of reconciliation. This elixir produces a heart condition that predisposes people toward reconciliation and revolutionizes the way they approach conflict.

There are three steps in this process of reconciliation:

First, we need to acknowledge we have fallen short of the moral standard of our holy God and that we are therefore in conflict with Him.

Second, we must understand that God, "being rich in mercy," offered His Son, Jesus Christ, to bring us back to God.

Third, when we realize we have been adopted into God's family even though we don't deserve it, a joy of divine reconciliation begins to naturally overflow into every area of our lives, including our marriage.

5. Why are the first two steps of this process necessary for the third to become a reality in our lives? If you have taken the first two steps in your life, have you taken the third step? If so, describe the results. If not, what stands in the way of pursuing reconciliation in your relational life?

Is That a Plank in Your Eye?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus challenged His followers to point their fingers at themselves before pointing them at others. “Why,” He asked, “do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matt 7:3-5).

What does this say to spouses? It tells us that every time we feel slighted, offended, taken advantage of, or hurt, before we take out the guns and start shooting – or running away or freezing someone out – we need to get alone with God and ask some probing questions. *Am I the problem here? Am I being unreasonable or selfish or insensitive? Am I*

6. Take a few minutes on your own to pray, asking God to help you see specific areas in your marriage where you might be creating problems or tension because there is sin in your life. What “planks” do you see in your eye at this time in your marriage?

Take a few minutes to break into couples and honestly confess where you know you have brought pain or hurt to your marriage. What can you do to make things right?

Can We Talk?

Paul’s words about not letting our anger build up suggest daily peace talks for conflicts that have arisen in the course of that day. Busy schedules sometimes make that impossible, and serious issues may require more formally scheduled peace talks, but even those should be scheduled as soon as possible. In the meantime, couples must covenant together not to “sin in their anger.” They must both refrain from the kind of “cheap shots” – sarcasm, innuendo, and rudeness – that inevitably complicate the issues.

As you enter into discussion to resolve conflict and tension in your relationship, there are a number of very important guidelines:

Prepare with prayer: It is essential to pray for a tender heart and humility in this process.

Begin with affirmation: Be sure you verbally express your love and commitment to your spouse.

Be willing to take blame: You must be ready to acknowledge specifically how you have contributed to tension in your marriage.

Express hurt, not hostility: Communicate your hurt honestly but not in anger.

Make direct statements: Hints and offhand remarks accomplish little. Say what you mean.

Make “I feel” statements: Don’t accuse and antagonize by placing blame on your spouse. Tell them how you feel. “I feel lonely,” is better than “You’re never home.”

Avoid “never” and “always” statements: Seek to be accurate, truthful, and realistic in what you say. Don’t say, “You never come home on time,” but say, “I feel sad (or hurt) when you are late.”

7. This may be a stretch for your marriage. How do you feel about taking the risks to engage in an honest, truth-telling relationship in your marriage?

8. How can your small group function as a place where you can gain counsel, advice, and accountability for your marriage?

Putting Yourself in the Picture

SETTING GROUND RULES

Take time as a couple to set ground rules for how you will conduct your peace talks. Consider these ground rules to be a covenant. You may want to use the sample covenant below as a starting point for your discussion.

1. We will always pray as we begin to talk about any concerns.
2. We will seek to come to this time with a spirit of reconciliation.
3. We will be willing to look at where we have fallen short in the relationship and try to see the plank in our own eye.
4. We will always begin with affirmation of our love for each other and our commitment to our marriage.
5. We will seek to express our hurt but not hostility.
6. We will seek to communicate clearly and make direct statements.
7. We will seek to express feelings rather than assign blame.
8. We will avoid “never” and “always” statements.
9. We will seek the support and help of committed Christian friends as needed.
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

We commit to follow these guidelines as we grow in communication and see peace in our marriage relationship.

Signed: _____ and _____

COMMIT TO MEMORY

Take time in the coming days to memorize this passage:

“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry (Eph 4:26).

Fanning the Flames of Marriage

Reflection from Session 4

1. What would you say is your best time in the course of your day and your week? When are you the freshest and at your best? What are you doing to give some of your best time to your spouse and the building up of your marriage?
2. If you have taken your spouse on a creative and inexpensive date recently, tell your group members about it so they can grow in creativity in their dating life.

The Big Picture

On a Wednesday evening in May of 1989 Lynne and I loaded our luggage into our car and began a journey to a destination where we would spend our fifteenth wedding anniversary. After more than three hours on the road and a stop at an all-night restaurant for dessert, we ended up on the beach in South Haven. This was the very place we went on our first date a decade and a half earlier.

There was the same concrete breaker upon which we had sat. The same lighthouse under which we had talked. The same moon whose beauty we had admired. It was 3am. We sat on the beach, digging our toes into the sand, watching the moonlit waves shimmy up the sodden bank. With each wave came a memory that crashed into our consciousness. A memory of a slammed door and a canceled courtship. Of making up and of a carnival wedding. A memory of joy surrounding a baby's birth and of tears shed in a cracker-box home. Memories of criticism and of judgment and of celebrating uniqueness. Memories of feelings smothered by pain and of rekindled romance.

We were seventeen when we first sat together on that Lake Michigan beach – and naïve. We foresaw only sunny days. By thirty-seven our naiveté had been battered and finally destroyed by rainstorms and lightning and gale-force winds. But while our naiveté had not survived, we had. We had come face-to-face with reality, and we had stared it down. We had persevered and worked hard and won. We sat on that beach stronger and more mature and more tolerant and more in love than ever.

A Wide Angle View

1. As you look back on your courtship and marriage, what are some of the moments you remember with fondness? What are some of the experiences and struggles you are thankful to have made it through?

A Biblical Portrait

Read 1 Corinthians 7:3-5

³ The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. ⁵ Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

2. What does this passage teach about sexual expression in the marriage relationship?

3. The apostle Paul says that after a couple has been apart for a time, they should “come together again.” One reason for this exhortation is so that they will not be tempted by Satan. What problems and temptations can a couple face when they refrain from sexual intimacy for prolonged periods of time?

When is it appropriate for a couple to abstain from sexual intimacy?

Sharpening the Focus

“Talk, Talk, Talk”

Feelings grow best out of conversation, so that is where we need to start. Couples must devote themselves to talking – about anything, everything, important things, mundane things, pleasant things, disturbing things. Romance begins with knowledge of one another, and the key to knowledge is open, honest, consistent communication.

Is it any wonder we lose the warmth in our relationships when we only talk on the run, when we leave each other memos on the kitchen table and messages on the answering machine? Too often spouses don't feel love for one another anymore because they don't know one another anymore. They don't know each other's fears or dreams or goals or disappointments or plans. They don't know what goes on during each other's day. They aren't aware of the joys, the stresses, the responsibilities, the successes that fill their spouse's world. The truth is, the flame of marriage begins to die down when we stop talking.

4. When are some of the times in your day or week that you and your spouse naturally find time to talk together?

What topics tend to dominate your conversation?

What can you do to spend more time talking together?

“Don’t Bury the Hurt”

If the romance in your marriage has received a near-deadly blow, your conversations will undoubtedly have to begin by focusing on hidden hostilities. If you are like Lynn and me, you are probably tempted to bypass this and move to more pleasant conversations. “The past is past,” you say. “Let’s forget it and move into the future.” But that doesn’t work. Underground hurts will undermine even your most earnest attempts to rebuild romance, and you will end up more frustrated than when you started.

It is unrealistic to expect negative emotions that have built up over a number of year to dissipate in one conversation. People who have been deeply hurt need to give themselves the freedom to constructively express their hurt over and over again if necessary. Those who caused the pain need to listen patiently, understanding that while working through past hurts can be painful and sometime seem counterproductive, it is *essential* to rebuilding romance.

5. Why is it critical to deal with hurt feelings and talk about them rather than try to bury them?

“Court Creatively”

After you get rid of hidden hostilities and learn what it means to talk again, you can begin to court creatively. Most couples put the wedding gifts away and their courting days behind them. But if you want to rebuild romance you need to court again. Fortunately, courting is like riding a bike; you may get a little rusty, but you never forget how.

Here are just a few suggestions about how you can begin to court your spouse again:

- Write your spouse a short love letter reminding them how much they mean to you.
- Call your spouse during the day for the single purpose of saying “I love you!”
- Communicate love with nonsexual touching: a hug, a kiss, a backrub, or just holding hands with no expectations of further intimacy.
- Give unexpected gifts: flowers, candy, or anything that would touch their heart.
- Make time to date. Be creative and o out together regularly.
- Find opportunities to serve each other. What can you do to help lift the load your spouse bears each day?
- Encourage and inspire your spouse. Everyone should know you are your mate’s fan.

6. Tell about one of the most memorable dates you and your spouse have had.

Which of the items listed in the “Court Creatively” section would most communicate love to you and why?

“Language of Love”

For some people *touch* is the primary language of love. Their spouse can say “I love your” twenty times a day and prove it through countless acts of kindness, but without an embrace or a kiss or a squeeze they won’t *feel* loved. Other people need to hear *verbal* expressions of love. They need to

hear in concrete terms why their spouse loves them. “I’m glad I married you because…” assures them that their spouse recognizes and appreciates their individuality. *Service* is another thing that makes some people feel most loved. These people respond best to affection that is revealed in practical terms: cooking a meal, mowing the lawn, repairing a faucet, running an errand, helping with a distasteful chore. They see acts of service as indicative of what is in their spouse’s heart. *Gifts* make still other people feel loved – not because of the cost involved, but because of the personal attention and thought that goes into them. These people enjoy – even need – *tangible* reminders of their spouse’s love. Finally, spending *time together* makes other people feel loved. They don’t care particularly what they and their spouses do, as long as they are together. Having their husband or wife commit uninterrupted blocks of time to them assures them they are top priority. The key is to learn what says “I love you” to your spouse and speak it loudly, clearly, and often.

7. What is it that speaks the language of love to you? How does it feel to hear that language?

What do you think speaks the language of love most clearly to your spouse?

What can you do in the coming days to speak the language of love loudly and clearly to your spouse?

Putting Yourself in the Picture

CREATIVE DATING

In the coming month, have each of you plan an evening out. Set a dollar amount you are going to limit yourselves to and then be creative. The person planning the date should let their spouse know what time to be ready and how to dress (casual or formal). As you plan the date, think creative, think romantic, and think about your spouse.

LEARNING TO TALK AND LEARNING TO LISTEN

So often couples get to talk only on the run or in brief fragmented sections of time between all the business of life. Block out two hour-long sections of time to be together in the coming weeks. Pick prime time when both of you will be fresh and energetic. Designate each time for one of you to guide the conversation. All this means is that you get to pick what you talk about during the hour. Both of you need to agree to stick to the topic chosen by the designated leader of the conversation. Be ready with good questions that will open the door for meaningful discussion together.

Living in Crisis Mode

Reflection from Session 5

1. If you have been trying to develop a habit of dating your spouse and making sure you get out on a regular basis (this means just the two of you with no kids), how has this commitment to regular dating impacted your relationship?
2. If you took time to block out two periods of time for directed conversation and listening as outlined at the end of your last session, what did you learn about your communications style? What did you learn about your spouse's style of communications?

The Big Picture

It was Saturday morning in December a few years ago. I went to my office early to finish the sermon I had to give that evening at church. At 5:30am I was on page twelve of my message. By 1:30pm I was on page eight. I was in big trouble.

To complicate matters, I had to do a wedding before five hundred people that afternoon, and I hadn't given one thought to what I was going to say to the young couple and their gathered family and friends. I thought about my unfinished message, about the wedding, and about the evening church service, and in a moment of total frustration, I laid my head down on my desk and cried.

Almost before the first teardrop hit the desk I reminded myself that falling apart was a ridiculous waste of time, and I quickly mopped myself up. But in that brief moment of "losing it" I had seen the truth: The wheels were coming off my carefully constructed wagon.

That fall our church had added another weekly service, which meant that I taught Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights, and twice on Sunday morning. In between message preparation and actual teaching, I squeezed in an increasing load of administrative duties and travel commitments. I had thought I was up to the challenge of an increased teaching schedule, and I had charged into the autumn months prepared to run the kingdom race as hard and as fast as I'd ever run it before. But all of a sudden, it seemed I couldn't run at all.

I hobbled through the fall, hanging on till Christmas vacation. I left with my family for what was supposed to be a quiet family retreat. Through unforeseen events, we ended up instead in a hotel mob scene. It was the kind of place where you had to wait twenty minutes for an elevator, and when the elevator came it was so crowded you couldn't get in. That was the last straw. I was in a mild state of frenzy the entire week.

When we got home I went alone to Wisconsin for three days to recuperate, think, and pray. "God, what's happening to me? I don't understand what's going on in my life, but I feel like I'm going under. Help me."

I spent the following year putting the pieces of my life back together. By delegating certain ministry responsibilities I was able to continue working, but a greatly reduced pace. The remainder of my time I devoted to personal healing and to some long-overdue reflection on the pattern of life that had finally driven me to the breaking point.

A Wide Angle View

1. Tell about a time in your life when you felt your schedule and life were so busy that you had to slow down or you feared you would burn out.

What can you do about your schedule to slow down the pace of your life at this time in your life?

A Biblical Portrait

Read Psalm 46

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
³ though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.
- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
- ⁵ God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
- ⁶ Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
- ⁷ The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.
- ⁸ Come and see what the LORD has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
- ⁹ He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
- ¹⁰ He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."
- ¹¹ The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

2. What picture does this psalm paint of what life can be like?

According to this psalm, how can followers of Christ find peace and calm in the midst of the storm?

3. This psalm talks about troubles, the earth giving way, mountains falling, nations in an uproar, and other signs of turmoil and stress. What are some of the things in your life and schedule at this time that makes your life stressful?

What do you do that contributes to that stress?

Sharpening the Focus

Pegged in the Red

Crisis-mode living is when you spend every waking moment of every day trying to figure out how to keep all of the balls in the air and all of the plates spinning. In crisis mode you keep running faster and faster, from project to project, deadline to deadline, quota to quota, meeting to meeting, event to event, practice to practice. Your RPMs keep creeping higher and higher until you hit the red line.

Most active people have to spend a certain amount of time in crisis mode. Life just turns out that way. You're an accountant and it's tax season. You repair air conditioners and it's August in Phoenix. You're cramming to take the bar exam. Your kids are breaking out with chicken pox. You have two weeks to meet a sales quota.

The problem arises when you spend too much time in crisis mode. That's when crisis mode goes from being a season of life to becoming a way of life. When that happens – when you keep the needle pegged in the red week after week, month after month – you start doing the only thing you can do. You economize. You shortchange your investment of energy in certain areas of your life so you can invest it in other areas – usually in the performance-oriented areas to which your self-esteem is tied. Nothing matters but keeping those all-important balls in the air and those ultimately significant plates spinning, so you use all your energy accomplishing those feats. In every other area of life, you become a miser; you hoard your energy, you engage minimally, you touch superficially, you slide along the surface, you skim.

4. What are some of the potential consequences of keeping the RPMs of your life pegged in the red for too long?

- In your spiritual life
- In your relationships with your spouse and with your children
- In your physical health
- In your emotional health

A Shrinking Heart

The emotional depletion that results from living in crisis mode eventually produces a *shrinking heart*. This is a heart that does not worship as authentically as it once did or love God as passionately as it used to. It is a heart that is no longer sensitive to the needs of others, a heart that has lost the fire of compassion.

While the hearts of healthy Christians keep enlarging to encompass more of the heart of Christ, the hearts of Christians in crisis mode become shriveled and weak. A man from our church said, “You’re right about the crisis mode. I have a bigger staff, a bigger budget, a bigger building, a bigger house, and a bigger bank account than I had five years ago. And all I have to show for it is a hollow cavern where my heart used to be.”

5. How have you seen your heart shrink and grow hard during times you have stayed in a crisis mode for too long?

How did this affect your marriage?

What helped you turn this around and grow more tender-hearted again?

Opt for a Slow Charge

If you were to go in your garage and turn on every accessory in your car, you could probably drain the battery in about five minutes. To recharge it, you would have two choices. First, there is the quick charge. This is a fast-acting method that gets cars running in record time, but if used frequently it burns out the plates in the battery. Second, there is the method all responsible mechanics suggest: the trickle charge. With this approach, it takes six to eight hours to get a battery recharged to full strength, but it doesn't burn out the plates. It replaces the lost energy *and* preserves the life of the battery.

Drained *emotional* batteries need a trickle charge too. A trickle charge involves determining what replenishes you emotionally and then incorporating that into your schedule. It also means spacing your emotionally draining responsibilities in such a way that in between them you can trickle charge back up to emotional fullness. In our culture that is no small challenge.

6. What recharges your batteries and brings freshness to your life?

What can you do in the coming month to incorporate more of this into your lifestyle?

7. What tends to drain your batteries and leave you depleted?

How can you take some of these things out of your schedule in the coming month?

Dare to Downshift

Are your emotional batteries low? Has your heart shrunk? Has the love drained out of your relationships? Do you think you might be heading for a crash?

If you are living in crisis mode, beware. It *will* catch up with you, and it *will* undermine your marriage and family life. So please, don't rush from one emotionally draining activity to the next. Don't live so fast that you never have time for replenishing recreation or relationships. Don't neglect your need to trickle charge.

Perhaps you, too, need to make some radical changes in your life. Maybe you need to revise your job description. Or cut down on travel commitments. Maybe you need to resign from that board or drop

that extra class. Another answer may be to refuse to take on so many projects, or hire some extra help, or downscale your goals. You may even have to take a demotion or say no to a wonderful opportunity – or a whole fistful of opportunities. How good, after all, is an opportunity that throws you into crisis mode? How great is a lifestyle that never gives you time to enjoy life?

8. If you are living in a crisis mode at this time, or if you sense you are heading toward a crisis mode, what specific things can you do to downshift before things get worse?

As a group, commit to support one another in crisis mode, holding each other accountable to make wise choices and set appropriate lifestyle priorities.

Putting Yourself in the Picture

Helping Your Spouse Recharge Their Battery

Take time in the coming week to ask your spouse to list five things you can do to help lift their burdens and recharge their battery. List those in the space below and set personal goals to work at one or more of these in the coming month.

Take time in the coming week and ask your spouse to gently, but honestly, list three things you do that can deplete their battery. List those in the space below and set personal goals to work at not doing these things in the coming month.