

SIX-SESSION BIBLE STUDY GUIDE + STREAMING VIDEO

GARY THOMAS



SACRED  
MARRIAGE

*What If God Designed Marriage to  
Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?*

REVISED & UPDATED

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BASED ON THE MILLION-COPY BESTSELLER

*Sacred Marriage Bible Study Guide (Revised and Updated)*

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# A NOTE FROM GARY

Lisa and I have been married for more than forty years—and we still really like each other. Our love has grown as we have laughed, played, prayed, and celebrated the joys of marriage for about two-thirds of our lives. Our love has also matured as we have struggled, wept, fought, and pressed through times of unspeakable pain and loss. Every step of the way God has surrounded us with his grace and given us strength to persevere even when we felt uncertain about exactly how to press forward.

We have raised three children and are now grandparents. When the book, *Sacred Marriage*, was first released, we were in a season of marriage with a home filled with kids and constant activities. Now we are empty nesters who live in the middle of the country, and we look for opportunities to spend time with our children who are scattered in two different states from coast to coast.

Through the years and seasons of marriage, we have discovered that so many of the lessons found in *Sacred Marriage* speak truth every step of the journey. We also know that the unchanging message of God's Word can be expressed in fresh ways for each generation. With this in mind, you hold in your hands an updated study guide based on the book, *Sacred Marriage*. Many of the major themes have stayed the same, but the introductions, video teaching, questions, and activities have been updated to speak with clarity to a new generation of learners and to those who have already been familiar with these resources.

May the God who made you and who delights every time that two become one fill your hearts, home, and marriage with his presence.

— GARY THOMAS

# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

*What if marriage was designed by God to make us holy more than to make us happy?* This was the question addressed in *Sacred Marriage* when it was released two and a half decades ago. It is a question that has struck a chord in the hearts of many people through the years. Now, to be clear, happiness is a great blessing, and a Jesus-centered marriage is the pathway to the happiest marriage. But the deeper question is . . . *Did God invent marriage for more than our personal pleasure and happiness?* The answer is a resounding *yes!*

The purpose of this study is to help married couples (and couples considering marriage) get a biblical and God-honoring vision of marriage. From moments of prayer as a couple to the richest places of physical intimacy, God wants to use marriage to transform our hearts, motives, dreams, and every part of who we are to be more like our Savior. This study guide is designed to work in partnership with the book *Sacred Marriage* and the video content to take you on a journey of growth in one of the most important relationships in your life, marriage.

Before you begin, know that there are a few ways you can go through this material. You can experience this study with others in a group (such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or other gathering), or you can go through the content on your own. Either way, the videos are available to view at any time by following the instructions provided in this study guide.

## GROUP STUDY

Each of the sessions in this study is divided into two parts: (1) a group study section, and (2) a personal study section. The group study section provides a basic framework for opening your time together, getting the most out of the video content, and discussing the key ideas presented in the teaching. Each session includes the following:

- **Welcome:** A short opening note about the topic of the session for you to read on your own before you meet as a group.
- **Connect:** A few icebreaker questions to get you and your group members thinking about the topic and interacting with each other.

- **Watch:** An outline of the key points covered in each video teaching along with space for you to take notes as you watch each session.
- **Discuss:** Questions to help you and your group reflect on the teaching material presented and apply it to your lives.
- **Respond:** A short personal exercise to help reinforce the key ideas.
- **Pray:** A place for you to record prayer requests and praises for the week.

If you are doing this study in a group, make sure you have your own copy of the study guide so you can write down your thoughts, responses, and reflections in the space provided—and so you have access to the videos via streaming. You will also want to have a copy of the *Sacred Marriage* book, as reading it alongside this guide will provide you with deeper insights. (See the notes at the beginning of each group session and personal/couple study section on which chapters of the book you might want to review before the next group session.)

Finally, keep these points in mind:

- **Facilitation:** If you are doing this study in a group, you will want to appoint someone to serve as a facilitator. This person will be responsible for starting the video and keeping track of time during discussions and activities. If *you* have been chosen for this role, there are some resources in the back of this guide that can help you lead your group through the study.
- **Faithfulness:** Your group is a place where tremendous growth can happen as you reflect on the Bible, ask questions, and learn what God is doing in other people's lives. For this reason, be fully committed and attend each session so you can build trust and rapport with the other members.
- **Friendship:** The goal of any small group is to serve as a place where people can share, learn about God, and build friendships. So seek to make your group a welcoming place. Be honest about your thoughts and feelings, but also listen carefully to everyone else's thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Keep anything personal that your group members share in confidence so that you can create a community where people can heal, be challenged, and grow spiritually.

If you are going through this study on your own, read the opening Welcome section and reflect on the questions in the Connect section. Watch the video and use the outline provided to help you take notes. Finally, personalize the questions and exercises in the Discuss and Respond sections. Close by recording any requests you want to pray about during the week.

## **PERSONAL (OR COUPLE) STUDY**

This section is for you to work through on your own *or* you and your spouse to work through together during the week. Each exercise will help you explore ideas presented during the group time and delve into passages that will help you apply those principles to your life. (You will also find excerpts from the video teaching interspersed throughout this section in gray shaded boxes.) Go at your own pace, doing a little each day, or tackle the material all at once. Remember to spend a few moments in silence to listen to what God might be saying to you.

If you are doing this study as part of a group, and you (or you and your spouse) are unable to finish these studies for the week, you both should still attend the group time. Be assured you are still wanted and welcome even if you don't have your "homework" done. The group studies and personal studies are intended to help you hear what God wants you to hear and how to apply what he is saying to your life. So . . . as you go through this study, be listening for him to open your eyes to a fresh new understanding of marriage that reflects the heart of God, the Word of God, and the dreams that God has for your marriage.

# WEEK 1

<b>BEFORE GROUP MEETING</b>	Review chapters 1-3 in <i>Sacred Marriage</i> Read the Welcome section (page 2)
<b>GROUP MEETING</b>	Discuss the Connect questions Watch the video teaching for session 1 Discuss the questions that follow as a group Do the closing exercise and pray (pages 2-6)
<b>STUDY 1</b>	Complete the personal (or couple) study (pages 8-10)
<b>STUDY 2</b>	Complete the personal (or couple) study (pages 11-13)
<b>STUDY 3</b>	Complete the personal (or couple) study (pages 14-16)
<b>CATCH UP &amp; READ AHEAD</b> (BEFORE WEEK 2 GROUP MEETING)	Read chapters 5-7 in <i>Sacred Marriage</i> Complete any unfinished personal studies (page 17)



SESSION  
**ONE**

# GOD'S PURPOSE FOR MARRIAGE

*Marriage is a divinely designed relationship that can make us more like Jesus and grow us in holiness with each passing year. A healthy marriage can bring joy and lead to happiness, but God offers much more.*

## WELCOME | READ ON YOUR OWN

God does not waste any life experience. Each day offers opportunities for growth, joy, meaning, sacrifice, and more. God loves to see his children grow to be more like Jesus and reflect our Savior's love and presence in this world. Our Maker accomplishes his will in us through things such as meaningful labor, parenting, family relationships, friendships, church life, neighbors, difficult people, hobbies, and almost everything we experience.

But among our life experiences, there is one that seems to dig the deepest into our soul and shape our character more than any other: *marriage*! The US Census Bureau still says approximately 90 percent of Americans will get married at some point in their lives. Some see the marriage relationship as primarily a fusion of body and soul that leads to happiness and pleasure. For some, marriage is a responsibility or a duty that must be endured. There are people whose primary framework for marriage is self-satisfaction and enjoyment. But God's design for marriage is richer and more profound than any of these outlooks.

Marriage has a God-ordained and sacred purpose. The intimacy and closeness of a man and woman in the covenant of marriage is the perfect setting for God to grow them into the image of Jesus and develop personal holiness. If we approach marriage with a heavenly perspective, it can be one of life's most glorious pursuits. On the other hand, when we see marriage as the guarantee of personal happiness, unending pleasure, and having a partner to meet our needs, it can quickly deteriorate into frustration and pain.

Building a healthy marriage is one of the greatest challenges we will face. Yet when we listen to God's wisdom and walk where the Holy Spirit leads, it can be a life-transforming adventure that shapes our soul and connects us deeply to our spouse and God's heart.

## CONNECT | 10 MINUTES

If you or any of your group members don't know each other, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves. Then discuss one or both of the following questions:

- Why did you decide to join this study? What do you hope to learn?

— or —

- Share one way that being married has stretched you, grown you, and made you more like the Savior who died on the cross to win your salvation.

## **WATCH** | 25 MINUTES

Watch the video for this session, which you can access by playing the DVD or through streaming (see the instructions provided with this guide). Below is an outline of the key points covered during the teaching. Record any key concepts that stand out to you.

### OUTLINE

- I. There is something about a wedding.
  - A. What if God wants to give us more than just one big happy day?
  - B. What if God desires to make us holy more than happy?
  - C. Wise words from John Wesley.
  - D. Holiness is the pathway to the happiest of marriages.
  - E. Gary and Lisa's "ice tray" moment . . . what is yours?
- II. How marriage shows you deeper parts of yourself.
  - A. Some of us don't like mirrors.
  - B. The perspective of Frances de Sales.
  - C. You can't have a healthy marriage without a spiritually healthy you.
  - D. How personal sin impacts a marriage.
- III. Seeking God first transforms a marriage (Matthew 6:33).
  - A. Understanding holiness.
  - B. Holiness is becoming whole or spiritually healthy (2 Corinthians 7:1).
  - C. A one-time decision that leads to an all-the-time pursuit.
  - D. Story of Rhett and Kristy.
- IV. What if God's agenda is very different than ours?
  - A. Marriage as a spiritual gymnasium.
  - B. Using our marriage to destroy sin instead of letting sin destroy our marriage.
  - C. The problem of wrong expectations.
  - D. Compare your righteousness not to your spouse but to your Savior
- V. Marriage is not about being fulfilled, emotionally satisfied, or romantically fulfilled.
  - A. It is a way to become more like Jesus.
  - B. When we die to false expectations, we can find real joy in marriage.
  - C. Too many people think they need a new partner when they actually need is a new perspective.
  - D. Being married for the glory of God gives great hope for the future.



## DISCUSS | 35 MINUTES

Discuss what you just watched by answering the following questions.

1. Gary shared about his ice tray encounter and facing family history differences between himself and Lisa early in their marriage. Tell about an “ice tray” moment you have faced in your marriage. Why does it seem so silly when you look back now?
2. Ask someone to read Matthew 6:33, Galatians 5:22–23, and Ephesians 5:22–23. How can seeking God's kingdom first (his will in all things) grow us in holiness and fortify our marriage relationship? What is one fruit of the Spirit that you need to grow in your life? How can others encourage you in this part of your spiritual life?
3. Ask someone to read 2 Corinthians 7:1. What are some of the things that contaminate our body and spirit that negatively impact our marriage? What are ways we can avoid these and orient our lives toward holiness and the things that please God?
4. How is it true that you can't have a spiritually healthy marriage if there isn't a spiritually healthy *you*? What can you do at this point in your life to more earnestly pursue spiritual health and grow your marriage accordingly?
5. Sometimes, when marriage is hard, we think the solution is to find a new partner. A better outlook is to realize we need a new *perception*. In light of what you have learned in this session and in being married, what fresh perceptions about marriage can help you align with God's plan for this mysterious and glorious relationship?

## RESPOND | 10 MINUTES

Identify one way your patterns, attitude, or behavior might be irritating to your spouse. Make a commitment to do your best to change this behavior as a sign of love for your spouse. (For instance, if your spouse loves a full ice tray and you don't normally fill it up, make a commitment to fill it every time you take ice.) Now read this passage:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

I CORINTHIANS 13:4-5

Think about an “ice tray” irritation you deal with. Is the problem primarily that you *let* it annoy you? How can you navigate it as a couple?

How can you begin to use “ice tray” moments to reveal your heart and attitudes? How does an earnest desire to grow in holiness change the way you view such moments?

## PRAY | 10 MINUTES

Close by thanking God for the gift your spouse is to you, including your spouse's role as your brother or sister in Christ. Ask him to grow your personal holiness and make you more like Jesus so you will discover new expressions of happiness in your marriage. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide and grow you through the “ice tray” moments you experience. Pray for discipline to devote more time in the “gym” of spiritual growth so it will lead to greater health and happiness in your marriage.



# SESSION ONE

## **PERSONAL (OR COUPLE) STUDY**

Use these studies to go deeper into the topics discussed during your group time. It is ideal to do these studies as a couple, but some may want to do them on their own. The most important thing is that you spend time digging in deeper before your next group gathering. As you work through these exercises, be sure to write down your responses to the questions. (If you are engaging in this study as part of a group, you will be given a few minutes to share your insights at the start of the next session.) If you are reading *Sacred Marriage* alongside this study, you may want to first review chapters 1–3 of the book.

## STUDY 1

# HOLINESS LEADS TO HAPPINESS

Holiness is a great theme for worship songs and old hymns. We can lift our voices and sing, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” Every word is true. We mean it when we sing it. We might even get a little misty-eyed and nostalgic as a whole church lifts up these words in unison with voices and hearts joined together.

Those who follow Jesus and who take the Bible seriously know that God is perfectly holy. The problem is that we often fail to see how holiness fits into our lives. Theologically, we might know that through faith in Jesus, we will be made holy one day, but few of us wake up, look in the mirror, and say, “You are looking pretty holy today.” If anything, we live with an awareness that holiness evades us much of the time.

As for holiness in our marriage, this is likely a new thought for most people. With all the demands and expectations set on husbands and wives, the idea of paying close attention to our personal holiness does not come up on the radar of most of our marriages.

The truth is that few things are more important for a healthy, thriving, happy marriage than becoming more like Jesus. Turning from worldly and personal sin and seeking the will of God is a powerful gift to a marriage relationship. Marital thriving is closely connected to our pursuit of holiness. Pause right now and ask the perfectly holy God of eternity to open your eyes, heart, and life to a new understanding of his will, Word, and ways as you seek holiness in your life, heart, and home.

1. When you think of holiness, what ideas, pictures, and practices come to your mind? (Use the space provided to write words, draw images, or list spiritual practices.)

2. Read Colossians 3:8–9, 12–14. How can the negative things that Paul tells us to “put off” and the positive virtues that Paul tells us to “put on” affect the health and happiness of a marriage in negative ways?

When I say that God designed marriage to make us holy even more than to make us happy, notice I didn't say instead of happy. I love the words of the great evangelist John Wesley, who said, “I've never met anyone who is truly happy, who is not pursuing holiness.” If somebody doesn't have his or her anger under control, that person ends up pushing people away. They're not happy. Addicts have moments of pleasure but far more moments of misery. I would say holiness preserves happiness. It doesn't undercut it. So when I say that God designed marriage to make us holy even more than to make us happy, we could say that holiness is the pathway to the happiest marriages.

3. If husbands and wives are growing in holiness (they are becoming whole in Jesus) and their attitudes and actions are aligning with God's will in growing measure, how could this affect their marriage for the better?

4. Read Hebrews 12:14–15. How does holiness draw us closer to God? How does a lack of holiness in our life drive us away from God?

None of us can change our spouse, but all of us, with the power of the Holy Spirit, can change our marriage by pursuing holiness out of reverence for God. Marriage isn't primarily about being fulfilled, emotionally satisfied, or romantically charged. In the heart of God, marriage is a powerful way for each of us to become more like Jesus and to fulfill God's call for us to seek his kingdom first. A holier you leads to a healthier you, which leads to a happier you, which leads to a happier marriage. We will all face the normal struggles of becoming more like Jesus, but here's the great hope: God designed marriage to make us holy even more than to make us happy. And, when we grow in holiness, happiness seems to blossom in our homes and marriages.

- 5.** What is one specific action you are going to take to do your part to grow in holiness?  
▪ How can your spouse pray as you take this step in spiritual growth?

An area where I need to grow in holiness:

What is keeping me from moving forward in this area of my life:

My actions:

My prayers:

## STUDY 2

# MIRRORS AND MARRIAGE

Mike had always had a bit of a temper. As a kid, Dad and Mom mostly laughed it off and called him passionate. Through the years, his coaches fanned the flames when he got fiery because it made him play harder. His friends thought it was kind of funny, and they would do all they could to push Mike's buttons until he "lost it."

Amanda seemed to have a gift. She could see people's faults and was comfortable pointing them out. She was not intentionally malicious. But she did have a way of frequently bringing up people's mistakes. Most of her friends and family members grew so used to it that they gave Amanda a pass when she was being "a little negative."

All of us have our faults and weaknesses. God wants to refine us and make us better people, but many of our places of brokenness and sin can go unnoticed or unchecked. The holy and God-ordained relationship of marriage provides a mirror to show us our sins with clarity.

When God brought Mike and Amanda together, a transformation process started. Amanda was quick to point out Mike's fiery nature. Mike's response was to get even more intense. Rather than thanking her for honest perspective, he pointed out that she was critical and negative . . . "all the time!"

Over the coming years, God used Mike and Amanda like mirrors to show each other places of needed growth. With time, prayer, lots of conversation, and humility in each of their hearts, God used their marriage to make both Mike and Amanda more like Jesus. Mike was still intense and had to watch his temper, but he was learning to tone it down and even grow in gentleness. Amanda still saw negative things intuitively, but she was learning that it was not her role to tell everyone where they were in the wrong.

Marriage is a mirror that God uses to help us become more like Jesus.

1. Think about one way God has used your spouse to help you see an area where you needed to grow. Think also about how God has changed your life for the better and made you more like Jesus because of your spouse. Now answer the questions below.

Write an area of growth God has used your spouse to accelerate in your life:

Now write a note of thanks to God and your spouse for this gift of partnership in spiritual growth and read it to your spouse:

2. Read Psalm 139:1–6, 23–24. What do you learn about how God sees you and knows everything about you? How does God use your spouse in the process of searching you and helping you see areas of needed growth?

Marriage is like a giant mirror that reveals what people are really like—and some people don't like mirrors that much. It makes them want to run from what they're seeing. They might be ashamed of what they did and said in their marriage. So they are unwilling to look into that mirror of their spouse and believe what they see. Instead, they are quick to blame things on the person they married. Sadly, they get into their second or third marriage before they realize the same issues arise over and over because they brought them along. This is why we need to look honestly into the marriage mirror and deal with what we see.

3. Why is it often hard when God uses our spouses as a magnifying glass to help us see an area of needed growth that we have failed to notice? Why do we need to be very humble in these moments?
  
4. Read 2 Corinthians 7:1. We are called to be purified from everything (big and small, inside and outside). What is an area in which God has been purifying you or one you know he wants to grow you in holiness? How can your spouse pray with you and encourage you in this area?

Write down three ways your spouse can be praying for you in this specific area, and share these to help direct his or her intercession for you.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

It is easy to justify our faults and say, "I don't think I'm that bad." But Paul doesn't say to purify ourselves from only the worst things. He says we should purify ourselves from *everything* that contaminates body and spirit. Not just the gross scandalous sins, but also the attitudinal ones. In the original Greek, this is in the present tense. It's an ongoing process. We will never be perfect, but out of reverence for all that God has given us—his forgiveness, the power of the Holy Spirit, the direction of his word—we are to make the pursuit of holiness our earnest aim. In other words, Christianity is a decision that unleashes an all-the-time pursuit.

5. What is an area of spiritual growth that you have seen increasing in the life of your spouse? (Encourage and celebrate this area of growth.)

## STUDY 3

# PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST

In the classic movie *The Sound of Music*, there is a scene where the Von Trapp children are learning to sing. Up to this point, music was not allowed in their home or lives. They are taught a song titled “Do-Re-Mi.” Their new nanny explains to the children (in song) that there are fundamentals for everything in life. When you read, you begin with A-B-C. When you sing, you begin with Do-Re-Mi. What follows is a music lesson in the beautiful mountains of Austria.

The point is obvious: *Fundamentals lead to learning and growth.* Math teachers begin with 1-2-3. Few of them sing these words, and even fewer math teachers dance around the room as they educate the children in these mathematical basics, but they know their students can’t move on to the complex stuff until they nail down the fundamentals. Once the kids know the numbers and basic counting, then addition, subtraction, and even multiplication and division all make more sense. You get the picture.

Jesus, likewise, began with the foundations of spiritual growth. He said, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33 ESV). Our Savior knew that if we were not seeking God’s will and ways, nothing else in life would really make sense.

This lesson applies beautifully to marriage. The best gift you can give your spouse is a vibrant and growing spiritual life. Love Jesus. Grow in his Word. Seek his face. Increase in holiness. Care about his kingdom more than you care about your own. Everything else will follow. On the other hand, if you miss these basics, nothing else in marriage will fully make sense.

A-B-C, 1-2-3, Do-Re-Mi, “Seek first the kingdom of God.” The fundamentals.

1. Why is it necessary to get fundamentals right before we move to the more complex things in life? What problems might we face if we fail to start with the basics?

Write down one area of interest in your life (from baking to law to martial arts to dance . . . anything):

Write down three basics or fundamentals that are needed to do this well:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

2. Read Matthew 6:28–34. What is the heartbeat of what Jesus is saying in this passage? Why do you think seeking first God's kingdom and what he wants is the best starting place for a healthy marriage?

You can't have a healthy marriage if there isn't a spiritually healthy *you*. Anger isn't a marriage issue. It's a personal issue that can be devastating to a marriage. Arrogance, being full of yourself, having a critical spirit, laziness . . . these are personal issues that undercut marital health and happiness. If you want to have a better marriage, engage in what Jesus calls everyone to do: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33 ESV). If we are seeking first his righteousness, we are dying to the character traits that destroy most relationships.

- 3.** We are all tempted to seek other things first. Make a list of five things you can be tempted to seek first rather than the kingdom of God and his righteousness. (For example: looking younger than you are instead of growing in character, earning more money and saving a certain amount for retirement, or getting a bigger house.)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Share this list with your spouse and ask for prayer and encouragement as you learn to put these things second, third, or further down the list in your life.

- 4.** What is one spiritual practice that will help you grow in faith and keep Jesus and his kingdom on the front burner of your heart and life? How can you increase your engagement in this practice?

We all know it takes commitment, work, and discipline to get into physical shape. So why do we think it's any different for us to stay in spiritual shape? We work, sweat, and push our bodies because we know the results will be worth it. We want to be stronger, faster, healthier, and live longer. So what if we looked at marriage as a spiritual gymnasium? Why do we keep forgiving? Why do we ask for forgiveness? Why do we learn to serve? Why do we seek to walk in humility? Because our marriage is helping us become more like Jesus.

- 5.** Consistent workouts demand a plan, time, place, and measurable goals. When it comes to your spiritual health, describe the details of your plan. (If you don't have one, that might be a clue to your struggles. Make a plan and share with your spouse.)

# CATCH UP AND READ AHEAD

Take some time today to reflect on everything that you have learned this week. If you have been doing this study section on your own, connect with your spouse and discuss some of these key insights. Use any of the following prompts to help guide this time.

- What did you like best from the content in this session, including both the group study and personal study? Why?
- What are some of the unrealistic, idealistic, and eventually dangerous expectations we can place on our spouse (or the concept of marriage), and why is it helpful to identify these and name them for what they are?
- What are some examples of what it might look like as a couple to seek God's will and ways (to seek his kingdom) in your marriage relationship in the flow of normal life? How can you take a step forward in actively doing one of these things as a couple in the coming weeks?
- Tell about a time when you were really connected with Jesus and were doing your best to seek the will and ways of the Savior, including prioritizing his kingdom (his authority and rule) over your own. How did your consistent seeking of Jesus affect your marriage relationship?
- What do you feel most excited to explore in the sessions ahead? Why?

Use this time to go back and complete any of the study and reflection questions from previous days that you weren't able to finish. Make a note below of any revelations you've had and reflect on any growth or personal insights you've gained.

You may wish to review chapters 5–7 in *Sacred Marriage* before the next gathering. Make note below of anything in those chapters that stands out to you or encourages you.