



WHEN MARRIAGE
MEETS REALITY

An Everyday Toolkit for a Christ-Centered Marriage

Tammy L. Smith, Ph.D.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Contrary to what you might believe, the road to a better marriage is not found in turning your spouse's heart toward your own hopes, dreams, and desires. Rather, the road to a better marriage is about turning your heart more toward Jesus. It is traveling a path of beauty from ashes, maturity through suffering, perseverance through trials, and life from death. At every turn, Christ equips couples with his power and perspective as a means of displaying his glory.

In *When Marriage Meets Reality*, Tammy diverts us from the trap of trying to change our spouses and challenges us to instead examine and discard our own assumptions and unhealthy expectations. She reminds us to fight from Christ's victory as we engage in the spiritual battle by choosing to see a bigger picture, reject lies, and speak God's truth. Filled with practical tools for how to better express the power and love of Jesus, this book is written to equip you for a healthy, thriving marriage!

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When Marriage Meets Reality: An Everyday Toolkit for a Christ-Centered Marriage

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Mike, you are the bedrock of our marriage. Christ in you has made me more the woman and wife than I ever dreamed possible as I consider my weaknesses and wounds. God perfectly selected you for me, and I love you more now than ever before. You have loved and served me for the long haul in a way that I know is only possible by the very lifeblood of Jesus flowing through you.

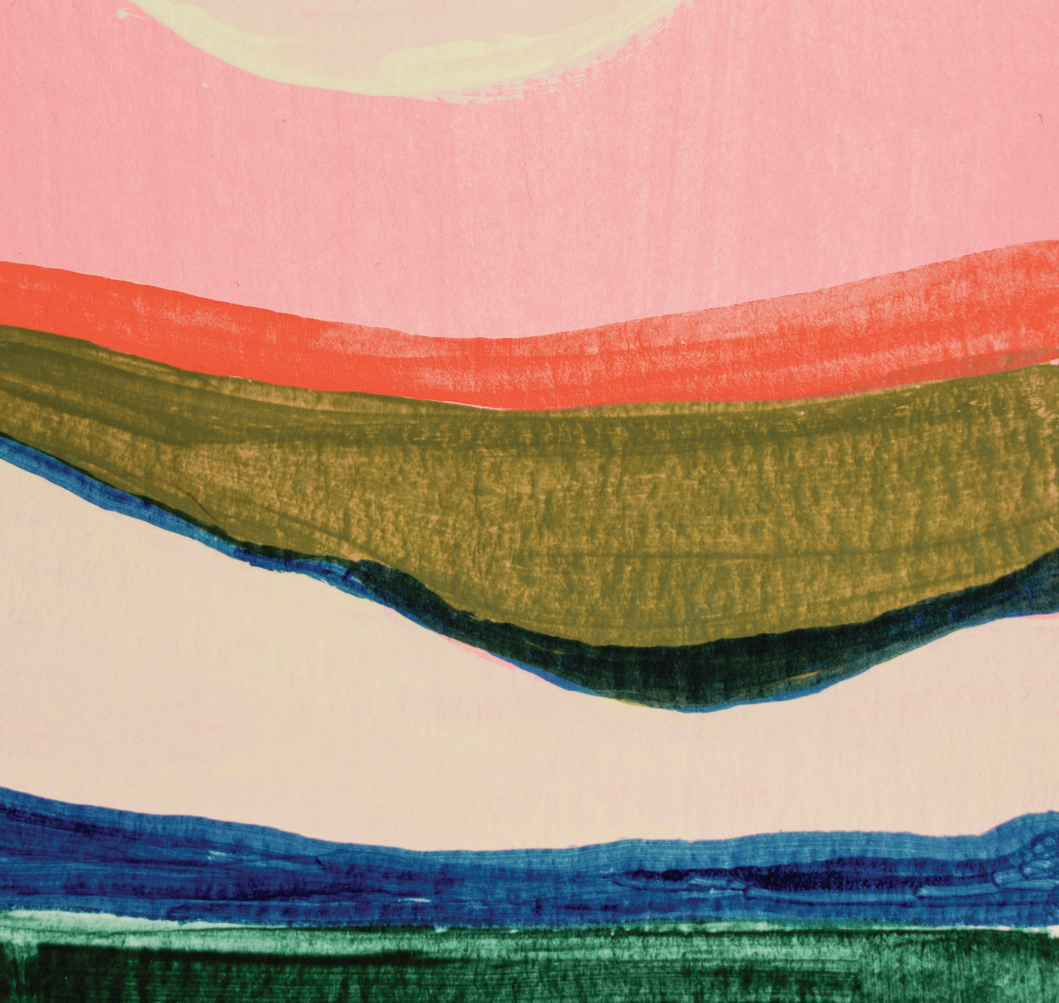
Zoe, Kim, Carol, Ali, and all the soul sisters who aren't named here but supported these works of God in so many ways—you are an army of true warriors who live what you believe and inspire my heart to keep forging on in the power and love of Jesus for his truth to go forward. I cannot express in words what it means to have you as friends and family of heart and soul.



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FOREWORD

There are a myriad of reasons I'm proud of my wife, but topping the list is that she's the real deal. Everyday she listens to God and tries to follow Jesus. She rests in his mercy just as much as she works in his strength. In relationships, she lets her story be known and loves to know the stories of others. She lives according to *his* Book, and she practices what she writes in *this* one. I suppose this book is what it is because it is so like Tammy: authentic, helpful, encouraging, practical, and decidedly dependent on Jesus.

I've had a front-row seat watching Tammy study and learn from the educators and experts ahead of her, deepening her understanding as she helps many people along the way. She works tirelessly to assimilate and distribute this knowledge to all kinds of people—including me, and now you.

Her motivation has been consistent throughout the nearly forty years I've known her. She really, really cares about people and wants to help. If her heart were ever restrained from helping, I fear it might stop beating. You'll sense this as you read because she writes as she is. You'll feel as though she's talking with you, not at you.

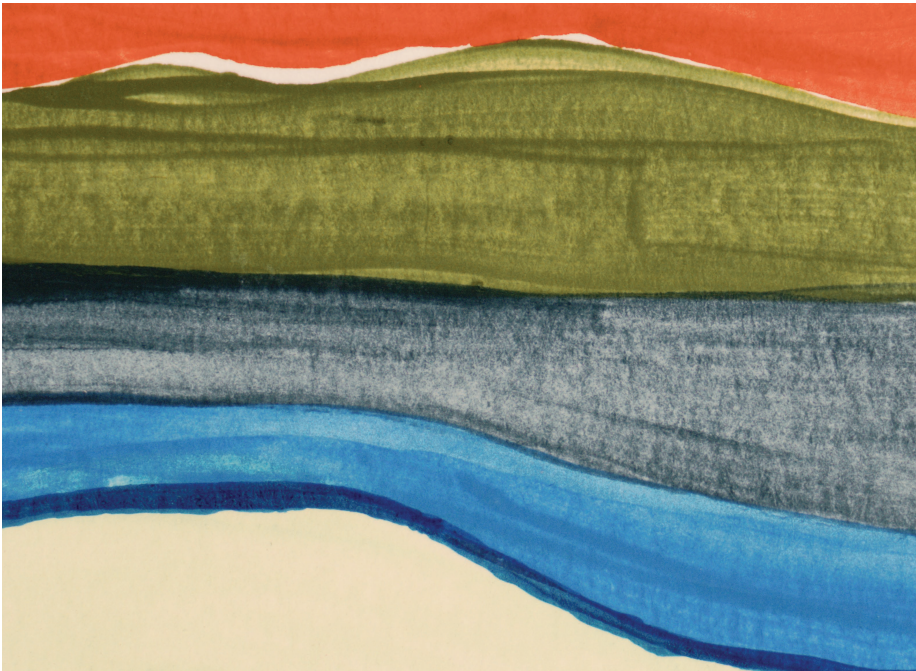
You'll be encouraged by her compassion and stories of hope, but the core substance herein is a wealth of concrete application. *When Marriage Meets Reality* is intensely practical. You're going to learn some stuff you didn't know, and you'll need to unlearn some cultural stuff that's been unconsciously accepted and ingrained. There are sentences in this book that will begin to change your marriage as soon as you read them—chapters that will make you sit back and mutter, “How did I not know this? Why hasn't anyone explained this? This is so true and helpful!”

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Much of the goodness that we experience in our marriage is directly related to our long commitment to the practices you're about to discover. If you apply what you're about to read, it won't just change your marriage; it will enhance all of your significant relationships. This transformation doesn't make relationships perfect, easier, or free from disappointment, but it grounds them in reasonable human expectations and directs them toward a greater purpose.

Buckle up. You're about to get after it.

—Mike





A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

My earnest desire is for people who choose marriage to know that despite finding it to be more difficult than they imagined, there is a path toward deep joy, blessing, and richness when two lives and hearts meld together. I write because I know God has promises that, when applied, allow marriage to be beautiful and enjoyable, despite a culture that fights against this truth.

This book focuses on universal truths and Jesus-centered perspectives that can lead you to sense God's hand in your relationship, see his work in and through your spouse, and learn to give and receive love to a degree you have never before experienced. As such, I'm not going to address the particulars about roles, infidelity, or divorce. However, I wanted to provide you with actual tools and help so that you can have a real marriage, not one based on misunderstandings and misinterpretations. This work is for those with inner *gravitas*, as it will be wrought by the hard work of mature, disciplined focus on Christ and his completeness. It is not for the faint of heart.

I trust that if you are holding this book in your hands, you long to see God in your heart, in your life, and in your marriage, and that in itself is a huge step. I pray that you sense the Spirit of God in and on every page, pressing you forward into his grace. I am honored to share a part of your journey with you.

I also hope you will take in the fun context of the Prelude, Interlude, and Postlude and engage with the Study Guide found at the end of the book.

Sammy



PRELUDE

Is It Really Worth It?

When we opened the door to the cabin, the immediate rush of must and memories overcame our senses. It was Cabin 2. *Our cabin*. Deep in the woods of a beautiful national forest, thick with pines, we spent our wedding night in this very cabin. Ten years to the day later, we had returned to celebrate. Here we were, another decade having passed, and Cabin 2 hadn't changed a bit. We could not say the same about the two of us.

It was surreal, returning twenty years and two teenagers later. We stood in awe, taking in the goodness of the moment. Not many people with two opposite personalities make it to their twentieth anniversary. We could have laughed again at the personality test results that told us it would never last. We could have exchanged our classic joke:

“Whew, twenty years.”

“Yeah, feels like twenty minutes.”

“*Underwater.*”

We loved that quip for the tongue-in-cheek truth of it. Instead, we just allowed the victory of it all to wash over us. It felt

holy, and in all honesty, it was. Only God could have kept two people as ridiculously opposite, self-reliant, independent, strong, and self-protective as us together for a day—let alone two decades. *Only God.*

In a very real sense, that is where this book is being written—from an “only God” stance. I have counseled too many married couples and overcome too many challenges in my own marriage to think that marital unions can be maintained by anyone or anything outside of God himself. It makes sense, though. It was his idea in the first place.

As Mike and I stood beholding our own God-story birthplace, I looked at him and said, “Do you think it’s still here?” Without hesitation, he said, “I know where it is.” He quickly turned and moved to the bedroom on the right, reaching his hands up until his fingertips were in the crack between two ceiling boards. Moving them around, he said, “It’s got to be right here. I remember.”

You see, at the celebration of our first ten years, we wrote a letter to ourselves, recalling the past decade and looking forward to what the next decade might hold. We hid it in the cabin, hoping it might remain there until we returned another ten years later. “I’ve got it!” Mike exclaimed, and out from the sliver in the ceiling came an envelope, complete with browned edges, bearing Mike’s familiar handwriting. It was so exciting and brought a rush of emotion. Unlike “antiqued” stationery from the store, our envelope had *truly* aged. The darkened coloration was the result of changing temperatures, seasons, and pure longevity.

What a perfect picture of a rich marriage, right? Nothing forms telltale signs of aging like just *staying put*. When the lust comes, stay put. When the bitterness comes, stay put. When the opportunity for an affair—ultimately a counterfeit—of any kind comes, stay the course of commitment. Stay in the place where God has put you, and through his faithfulness, a beautiful maturity will result.

Still in excited shock from having found our paper time capsule, we sat down to read.

Prelude: Is It Really Worth It?

“Dear Mike and Tammy,” Mike read. “Many years have passed . . .”

It was intense to feel the reality of being ten years older clash with our feelings of youth. That reality check struck with force when Mike read a line we had written about our boys. It was then that he got so choked up he couldn’t read any longer. The man who has cried a total of six times in twenty years was overcome. Of course, I lost it too—my cheap no-one-will-see-me-today mascara cutting into my eyes with razor-sharp pain. But it was worth it. *This is what life is all about*, I thought, and nothing could capture the magnitude of that peace and joy. I repeat: *It was worth it*.

I am not referring to the pain of cheap mascara. I am talking about the times when I felt hopelessly trapped in a mismatched marriage. The years where we assumed anything but the best about each other. The sexual struggles. The sleep-on-the-couch nights. The sore-eyes-the-next-morning reminders of another sob fest. Yes, staying through those, holding on by a very thin thread to marital vows, continuing to try year after year . . . yes, it was worth it.

After we somehow managed to read the rest of the letter and drink in the sheer emotional and spiritual blessings God had given through it, Mike found his own way to say it was worth it. He said, “You just don’t get *this* without sticking it out and hanging in there.”

Mike is right; those rich moments do not come easily, nor do they come quickly. And we certainly do not get them by crumbling under the requirement of hard work. Let’s be clear, though: We are not the ones who beat the odds. It’s the Lord Jesus—who, through his sacrifice, willingly calls us his own and demonstrates enduring faithfulness to those who cry out to him—who beat the odds. Jesus can beat any odds. He specializes in it.

Truth be told, it’s actually a little embarrassing and utterly intimidating to write on this topic. And honestly, I write reluctantly. It is frightening to offer some thoughts on marriage

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because people might mistakenly assume that we think we have achieved the perfect marriage. We absolutely do not think that.

As Mike says, “The world does not need another book on marriage.” (I am actually envisioning the husband whose wife has just handed him this book with the thought bubble over his head reading, “Puhleez, not another book on marriage!”)

What the world does need, though, are men and women of depth, substance, and internal fortitude. Those who welcome Christ’s refining presence and process in their lives and characters and who understand the path to joy and peace in the soul is through sacrifice and suffering. These are the people who will have amazing marriages.

Maybe it would be better if you think of this book as a toolkit instead. We want to put more tools in your toolbox so you will have what it takes to be married. This is the most sincere reason for *When Marriage Meets Reality*. We have seen these tools help people experience radical change in their marriages, and they have asked for more. I am honored that you would take the time to pick up this toolkit and root through to find something that might change your life—one nut and bolt at a time.

Our marriage has been hard. At times, bone-on-bone, grueling, exhausting, *why-is-this-still-so-challenging?* hard. The enormity of melding two independent people into a one-flesh union cannot be underestimated. It especially cannot be romanticized or minimized. Over and over again, we have encountered people who love Jesus but who cannot imagine how their faith in him could save their marriage. Not enough people are talking about how difficult marriage really is. It is almost as if most Christians are afraid to come out of the shadows with this truth for fear that it might somehow diminish the attractiveness of Jesus. I have been guilty of such thinking. But Jesus is quite capable of being winsome all by himself, and he is pretty clear that he gets more credit when we stop whitewashing the picture we hand out and instead reveal reality. So, if you and your marriage are a mess, or you are in need of expanding your toolkit, then read on! God has great plans for you!





CHAPTER ONE

Do You Need Glasses to See Your Marriage Honestly?

Have you ever picked up an old letter or journal written during your dating relationship? Does it strike you as odd that the very characteristics you once found endearing are now maddening? That the differences you used to celebrate are now frustrations? Why does this happen? When did things change from “we’re perfect together” to “was this a mistake”? How did we go from “he’s amazing” and “she’s awesome” to “he’s substandard” and “she’s controlling”? Why was it so easy to believe he or she loved you then, but it’s not so easy now?

There are all sorts of reasons why, but the reality we have to face is that a massive perspective shift occurs after we say, “I do.” We can take heart in knowing that these feelings and changes are extremely common after marriage. At the same time, it’s critical that we understand we are the only ones who determine our own perspective. No one can force us to view things a certain way. No one. You might struggle with this truth or even argue with it. I sometimes do. However, this reality cannot be denied.

In the extreme, Viktor Frankl, a concentration camp survivor, has taught that no human being can steal your choice of what your thoughts focus on. He said, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s

attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."¹ Less extreme is a phrase you might have heard: "Don't let anything steal your joy." So, in your marriage, what has stolen the perspective you had of your then boyfriend or girlfriend? Where did it go? What happened to it?

Before we can get to that answer, we have to change our vantage point; we need to climb thirty thousand feet for a minute and take in a few broader perspectives.

First, it takes two to make a good marriage, and it takes two to make a bad one. Period. Even if one person's role is 80 percent in the wrongdoing and the other's is 20 percent, both people in the relationship share some responsibility. We will never improve our marriage by focusing on the percentage we didn't cause; growth comes by taking responsibility for what is ours to control.

Second, your spouse is your spouse. You have only one. This means that there is no other relationship you can compare it to and wish it were like. Your spouse is not supposed to be a friend like one of your posse or golfing buddies, nor as kind and laid-back as your coworker. This is simply because your spouse falls into a category completely independent of other categories, and they cannot be expected to make you feel like the other relationships in your life do. While obvious, it is also subtle. It is not fair when we wish our spouse were a friend like so-and-so because your friends don't have to sleep, eat, breathe, maintain a household, and navigate sex with you like your spouse does. Be careful not to criticize your relationship based on unmerited and inequitable comparisons.

The third and most important point about our perspective on marriage is viewing it (and all relationships) through the broad scope of God's Word. When we do that, we actually find concepts in direct conflict with the American mentality of self-preservation, self-centeredness, and self-promotion. God's design and purpose for marriage is countercultural because his primary concern is your eternal development, not your temporal happiness.

God communicates: "Lose your life to gain it" (Matthew 16:25, author's paraphrase). "In humility value others above yourselves"

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(Philippians 2:3). “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44). “Take up your cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24, author’s paraphrase). These are the building blocks God gives for all effective relationships. They will most certainly secure and solidify your marriage.

From a scriptural perspective, we need to ask:

What if God is more interested in my holiness than in my happiness?

What if God values my character refinement over my comfort?

What if all of God’s purposes and all of my circumstances are intended for my holiness?

Our natural tendency in life is to view everything through the lens of happiness by asking, “Will this make me happy, or will it make me unhappy?” We pursue those things that we perceive will make us happy and avoid the others. It is universal. But God has a much greater and more profound purpose than simple happiness. He is determined to add the human race to the throng of angels and creatures that worship him and live in eternal purpose and peace with him. Scripture says that “we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2). That end requires holiness to be developed in each of us—a process God begins here on earth, largely through the fires, sacrifices, and challenges of life. Undeniably, this includes your marriage.

Is this the perspective we hold on relationships? It is truly life-changing when you begin to consider that your relationships are not about *you*—period. They are about the glory of God.

Why do you think God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18)? Think of the deductive reasoning technique you might have learned in your Philosophy 101 class: God is complete love (1 John 4:8). Love, by its nature, requires relationship—there must be an object to love. Humans are created in the image of God, who is love (Genesis 1:27). Therefore, since humans are made in the image of a relational God, it is not good for man to

be alone (Genesis 2:18), because love cannot be fully expressed in isolation.

First John 4:16 says, “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.” It is very clear that where there is love, God is on display. “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). When we function interdependently, we manifest Christ to the world. Relationships are for a much more magnificent purpose than a human’s definition of happiness.

The wonderful secret about coming under the lordship of God’s purposes is that our caring God has destined our relationships for both his glory *and* our good. In other words, our relationships really will be satisfying when we are living his way and not our own. God’s Word declares, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity” (Psalm 133:1). People do not naturally get along, even in families. (Is that not the most obvious and exasperating thing?) Not only does God receive glory when his people are united but also when we—his children—have true joy.

Imagine the monumental difference this understanding would make in our lives if we believed that our relationships, including our marriages, were not primarily about *us*. You may be ready to shout, “Well, if marriage is not for my happiness, then what is it for?” Our marriage relationships are for the glory of God, shown through the refinement of our souls, our effectiveness in his kingdom, and the advancement of the gospel as we live out the reality of being his body.

From this big-picture vantage point, can you see that God is using your marriage to make you holy? His intent is to manifest his glory in your life. But did you also know that we can give glory to God in return? For instance, when you realize that relationships are a tool to glorify God and attempt to give him glory through your marriage, then you will have the peace and joy that you so desperately seek from the people around you. It is a paradoxical paradigm, as are many things in the kingdom of God.

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Is it not profound to begin thinking through this paradigm, both in general and in terms of our marriages? You have great power in your marriage, whether you feel like it or not, and part of that power comes from realizing that the purposes of your marriage and your spouse are not to make you happy.

Furthermore, not all faults in your marriage lie with your spouse. Are you beginning to sense the magnitude of this paradigm shift? When was the last time you told someone, “I am really frustrated with my marriage. I have been so selfish and focused on getting my own needs met that I am messing things up”? Or “Wow. My boss has a really strong personality and can be controlling, and I am just making my life miserable at work because of how I react to her”? Or “My husband is great in so many ways but terrible at getting anywhere on time, and instead of allowing God to refine me through it, I am just mad at him”? Or “This marriage will be the death of me, and it is mostly my fault!”

We cannot hope to have good marriages without adopting this change in perspective. This is the thirty-thousand-foot view. Without this proper viewpoint of God’s design and purpose, marriage can and will ultimately disappoint rather than engage us. We can only understand God’s purposes for our life and our relationships when we see them through the proper lens.

VISION TEST

So let’s make this personal: What relationship lenses *do* I have on? How have I viewed my spouse, my children, coworkers, and friends? Do I see them as “mine,” meaning that I expect them to consistently make me feel good? Do I view them as instruments to give me purpose and value in life? We need to assess what lenses we have on if we are to be mature in our pursuit of a real, soul-committed marriage.

If I have a red lens on, everything I see will be red. No matter what you say, I will argue that everything is red. Imagine if I am wearing a lens of distrust. I will only be able to see the ways others have disappointed me and shown themselves untrustworthy, and

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I will miss all the ways people in my life *are* trustworthy. If I only see someone as an irritant, my goodness, will they be irritating! Everything about them will irritate me: the way they chew, the way they drive, the way they talk. I will not see the behaviors that are kind, gentle, or faithful. If you have trouble believing your personal lens has power, think about the friend with the eating disorder who swears she is overweight, while the rest of us are concerned about the distorted way she sees herself. We don a variety of lenses in our lives for people and circumstances that determine what we see when we look at others.

The ultimate relationship lens is viewing people through the eyes of Christ. Wisdom is knowing which prescription you are viewing through at a particular time. In trying to determine what lenses you wear, it is good to ask yourself:

- Do I see relationships primarily as a means for my pleasure?
- Do I see my sister-in-law as a burden or as a blessing?
- Do I see my coworker as my teammate or as my inferior?
- Do I see my neighbor as a precious, beloved child of God, created in his image, or as a pain in my side as I am trying to be a good Christian?
- Do I see my wayward child as a wonderful person captured and ensnared by evil forces in this world or as a stupid, foolish individual?
- Do I see my spouse as a flawed human in whom God is working every day to make more Christlike or as a disappointment who bait-and-switched me?

We must have our condition diagnosed before we can get a new prescription. We have to be convinced that our perception is a large part of the difficulty in our relationships. Jesus was clear about the power of perception: “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is

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that darkness!” (Matthew 6:22–23). Do you see the impact? If we see correctly, we will see purely.

When Jesus was standing among his disciples in the midst of a crowd, he exhorted them about their purpose and calling: “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35). Their eyes saw the people around them, but Jesus was urging the disciples to see them differently. He was asking them to look beyond the visible and see deeper. Do you generally view people as threats to protect yourself against or as tools to be used? Jesus presses us to see others as his people whom he is calling back to himself. Mark 4:12 says those who do not have Christ are “ever seeing but never perceiving.” With great conviction, I say that we often see but do not perceive.

Some of us have wondered for years why we have struggled in our relationships. No relationship ever makes us truly happy. Marriage and friendship just have not done what we hoped they would (and think they should). It is because we have had a wrong prescription! Changed marriages occur with changed lenses. It is as stark as taking off a set of red-lensed glasses and putting on clear ones.

**CHANGED MARRIAGES OCCUR
WITH CHANGED LENSES.**

VISION CORRECTION

To me, the absolute most convicting passage in Scripture about the general stance we are to have toward others is not in any of the classic marital exhortations; it is in Philippians 2. Please read the first four verses:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and

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of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2:1–4)

Note the *nothings*. Do *nothing* out of selfishness. Christ, who is equal with God, made himself *nothing*! What a contrast with the present “you-do-you” culture, which shouts, “You deserve to be happy.” “If it feels good, do it!” “You’ve got to look out for yourself.” This mindset is all about getting what *you* want. If you embrace these attitudes, the significant people in your life will inevitably suffer deep and lasting effects from your self-centeredness.

In Philippians 2:3, we find our prescription for vision correction: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.”

What does it mean to consider others above ourselves? Let’s substitute synonyms for “consider”: *count*, *value*, *believe*, or *deem* that another is more important than yourself. Do I believe that others are better than me? Adopting this perspective is a huge part of vision correction. This adjustment in perspective will change our relationships. If I see you as better than me, I will defer to you, learn from you, see your strengths, and admire them.

We can tell this passage is about having a certain perspective, or lens, and it is underscored in verse 4: “not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” It is saying: *See* his needs. *Acknowledge* her desires. *Watch* for what blesses her. *Observe* what brings him life. *Perceive* what is happening with him and be more concerned with that than yourself. *Notice* what is going on with her and act on her behalf instead of your own. Here is the bottom line: Do not do anything that is predominantly in your best interests; instead, identify and meet another’s needs.

Seeing every relationship through a Philippians 2 lens is a wonderful challenge. It is especially transformative as it relates to our marriages. In verses 5–8, we see a God-given recipe for Christlikeness:

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In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5–8)

Christ did not pursue equality with God. Instead, his role was one of *humble service and self-sacrifice*. Applying this to our personal relationships is intense! How different would I be if I tried to live with Mike with this in mind:

Tammy, you are not God of Mike's life, your relationship, or yourself. (This also means you are not his Holy Spirit, meaning it is not your job to influence, direct, convict, or control him. That is God's job.)

You are here to serve . . . period.

Choose humility . . . all the time.

Sacrifice . . . until it kills you.

Wowzers. There are plenty of possible reactions to that list: “You’ll be a doormat!” “What about boundaries?” “You’ll be abused!” “You are a child of God, too, and should be treated with love and respect.”

I get it. And those responses are valid in certain contexts. I actually teach them and help people with them. But right now, I am assuming you, dear reader, are looking for true, lasting, honest change in your marriage. God is bigger than our self-protective tendencies, and he promises—*promises*—that if we do things his way, we will be renewed, quieted, and joyful in a whole host of surprising, outside-the-box, only-God ways (Isaiah 1:18–19; 40:31; Colossians 3:9–10). God’s ways have never been confined to a box and never will be; this includes the ways he makes our marriages beautiful.

A GOOD HARD LOOK

So how do we practically put on these Philippians 2 glasses? I love looking to other Scriptures for help, as these additional biblical truths can assist us in the day-to-day outworking of how to have the attitude of Christ. First, we examine a truth that is both straightforwardly simple and profoundly complex.

LOOK AT THE LORD

In Ephesians 5:22–27, Paul gave direct instructions to the church at Ephesus pertaining to husbands and wives.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Many people read this passage and lock on specific behaviors: “Aha, she is supposed to submit to me, and that will make the difference!” or “Mm-hmm, he is not praying for me or even close to loving me like Jesus loved the church and that’s why we are having such problems!” But I see the same thrust here as in Philippians 2. It is about perspective again. It is how we literally *view each other*.

Wives, yes, the word “submit” is in there, but so is the phrase “as you do to the Lord.” It is saying to see *God!* See him in your home, in your life, present as Immanuel—God with you. See him on his throne. See Jesus on the cross. See him interceding for you in this moment at the right hand of the Father, and while you are doing that, allow your husband to provide leadership when appropriate.

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Imagine you are looking at your husband but actually *seeing* the Lord. Let the phrases “as you do to the Lord” and “as the church submits to Christ” ring in your mind. “I see you and this is for you, God.” “I see you, Jesus, and I’m going to let my husband make the final decision for us.” “I see you, Lord, and I know I can trust you for my protection even when I am not sure my husband will choose me above work, golf, or friends.” “I will submit to my husband and let him lead me and our family because I know you are indeed God, and you are working in all things for your glory and my good. My ultimate trust is in you, not in him. I will submit to *him* because I love *you*.” This intentional vantage point can be what takes us places we never thought possible.

Haley was a woman who loved God and whose husband had multiple affairs. He was repentant and seeking true change under the guidance of godly counsel. She chose forgiveness and reconciliation, but it was extremely difficult, understandably so, as her trust had been obliterated. After a lengthy time of healing, when it was appropriate and good to be physically intimate again, she was stuck. She had no idea how to be so vulnerable. Victory only came when Haley was able to take the risk of trusting again because she remembered her deepest trust was in the Lord, not her husband. Only then was she able to respond “as unto the Lord” (KJV).

A deeper reading shows that this passage gives husbands the same message. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church.” It is the same idea: “Husbands, see Christ!” You are looking at her but *seeing* Christ’s love for you, his ultimate sacrifice for all whom he loved. Man of God, see Christ gently, passionately, and tenderly, loving his church, sacrificing himself for her. See his Spirit now working in believers with such patience and longsuffering, never giving up on us. See Christ, and love your wife like that. In your mind, perceive and envision that your wife is completely righteous in Christ, though soiled by the world’s garbage.

So, husband, can you listen to her a little longer without scrolling on your phone, knowing it settles her spirit to feel understood by you? Can you pray with her, even when you feel awkward

about it, knowing how much it makes her feel loved? Can you be tender when she is angry with you? Can you choose to take time attentively loving her instead of fulfilling ebbing lust? Yes, you can do these things when you seek to love her like Christ loves the church. You can have the sensitivity, compassion, and strength that it takes to really care for your wife when you see beyond the moment to a broader vision and purpose. You can do it when you *see Christ*.

LOOK AT THE HEART

In 1 Samuel 16:7, we find a second practical way to put on the Philippians 2 lens. In this passage, God is talking to Samuel about choosing David to be the king of Israel. It says, “The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” To apply this concept would be a massive step forward in our marriages. The person we married is an adult. We have married competent, intelligent, and complex mates. Yet, at the same time, we have married other beings who are much less visible.

This is not a reference to schizophrenia, of course, but the different “people” your spouse is beyond his or her *visible* personality. Inside each of us lives the younger, little-kid version of us. We all have a part of us that is the repository of all things from our childhood. That childish part can be joyful, giving, open, and sacrificial, or it can be petulant, demanding, needy, and self-centered. That “person” can bring great richness to our marriages, or in contrast, great woundedness. Whichever it is, the reality that there are layers to our spouses cannot be argued.

The power of looking beyond your spouse’s outward appearance and focusing intently on his or her heart is astonishing. In counseling with couples, it is common for them to spend time thinking about how they actually see each other and how their perception changes when looking at the heart. The following are actual people, just like you and me:

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Shawn came to understand he had been seeing Toni as an angry person. He gained a different lens when he realized that her past abuse made her like a hurt animal that bares its teeth and growls. More than anything, though, she was cowering, needing someone bigger and stronger to reach in (even at the risk of being bitten) to pull her out and offer healing help. Just like animals, frightened, hurt humans need and desire safety and security.

Tom just couldn't shake his wife's critical tone. One day I asked him to really envision how he thought God wanted him to see her. After great effort, he described a blown glass piece, which he was to hold in his hands and do everything possible not to drop or break it. With this lens, I knew he would be used by God to bring healing to his wife's heart, which was broken from being abandoned by her dad.

Alysha always struggled with feeling devalued around her athletic, confident husband, Chris. He seemed so much more invested in others. But when we spent time praying for her to see his heart, she actually saw him as a little boy, insecure and feeling the need for lots of attention. It all made sense in light of growing up in a large family with a sickly mom. Seeing the young Chris enabled her to be more patient and understanding with him. She now carries a picture of him at the age he was when his mom was sickest to help keep this perspective.

These marriages have all been changed by looking beyond outward appearances—such as facial expressions, tone of voice, or assumptions about someone's character—and into the heart. Incidentally, this is powerful in the rest of life. I have found that seeing with eyes of love means considering that each and every person I interact with is internally battling some degree of insecurity, loneliness (even when in a crowd), or other issues. Recognizing this and seeing people from such a posture sets us up for more authentic and meaningful interactions and relationships with others.

LOOK FOR WHAT IS UNSEEN

Another practical way to live out Philippians 2 is found in 2 Corinthians 4:18: “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” This passage is about not losing heart in our troubles. I think it is also a fantastically clear directive for mature believers to live a Godward life. Basically, it is the same message as 1 Samuel 16:7. To boil it down: *Don’t focus on what you can see; focus on what you can’t.* Now, we must ask, “What is unseen?”

In relationships, most everything is unseen! We cannot see someone’s history. We do not know her childhood, her experiences, or the words spoken to her and by her. We do not know his deepest desires, and we cannot see what the Holy Spirit is doing in her heart. We also cannot see someone’s internal struggles. And everyone, I repeat, *everyone*, has something bigger going on right now than what you can see on the surface. Why we think other people do not struggle the way that we do is one of the biggest mysteries in life. Even if I cannot see your issues on the surface, it does not mean you do not have any. We are all fundamentally the same.

What is unseen in your spouse’s life and in the marriage you share with them? All the things mentioned above. In addition, what is unseen is the end of his or her journey on this earth. Psalm 139:16b says, “[A]ll the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” We do not know the number of days another person has. In this way, it is actually very mature to hold mortality close. Some of the most poignant times in marital sessions have come when I have had couples complete this sentence: “If I lost you this afternoon, I _____.” Having this perspective helps us to do something that truly helps us experience more peace and joy in our marriages. Holding death closely helps us to focus on being grateful in this moment instead of discontent. Talk about a marriage changer!

Do you see your wife as someone needing your encouragement, love, and grace? Do you realize that although he does not look like it, your husband needs a lot of reassurance from you? Are you

grateful for the job you do have, or are you frustrated with your lack of finances? Are you thankful for your obstinate two-year-old who your infertile friends would give anything for, or do you wish you had the Anderson's docile daughter? Are you content with the spouse you do have, or do you constantly compare and envy? This is all really a matter of focus—where we train the eyes of our hearts. Lift the veil and see through thankful, contented eyes.

LOOK WITH THANKFULNESS

We have discussed acknowledging what is unseen, but sometimes we need a reminder to focus on the positives we do see. There is something positive to be seen about every person. The truth is, if I ranked Mike on a scale of 1 to 10 for “what husbands should be and do,” he would easily be an 8.5 or 9. That is awesome. However, if I am honest, there are plenty of days Mike just does not do it for me. On those days, I think he is not responding correctly, or I am just irritated, disappointed, or in some other such state of malcontent. On those days, where is my focus? Clearly, I am fixated on the 1.5 he is not rather than the 8.5 he is. This is disastrous for any relationship, but it is especially so for a marriage.

Sure, your spouse may not be your emotional soulmate, but is he a faithful man, great with the kids, working hard to provide for the family, and trying to do right by you? Or perhaps he is the converse: your emotional, empathic, tender, caring counterpart, but you get furious because of his inability to fix anything in your house. Your wife may not be a sexual dynamo in the bedroom, but is she respectful toward you and excellent with money? Or perhaps she struggles desperately to keep the house clean, but has she not done an incredible job of putting up with your highly dysfunctional family?

Whatever your scenario, there is an instructive reality for us here: What we focus on, we empower. That means it gets larger, in a sense—it becomes clearer and more “obvious” as we look at it. So if we are camped out on his obsession with fantasy football or her emotionality, depression, or lack of libido, it will become what we

see the most clearly. When we focus on what is *lacking* in someone, it is as if we put on a pair of glasses that allow us to see only the evidence supporting our conclusion that “he just does not care” or “she will never change.”

When we can maturely keep our eyes on the eight and a half (or six or five or nine) that our spouse is, our marriages become much different. Does she faithfully keep your life organized? Does he try to do things for special occasions, like birthdays? Does he go to church with you? Does she value healthy food and exercise? Does he ask about your day? Does she pray for you? Did she go to counseling with you for your issues? Does he confess his sin? Does she apologize? Taking inventory of the ways your spouse is a good wife or husband and focusing on those qualities can completely transform your marriage from one of frustration and discontent to one of gratitude and joy. I have personally seen this practice alone save marriages.

**WHAT WE FOCUS ON,
WE EMPOWER.**

LOOK TO GIVE

Another helpful Scripture to accompany the Philippians 2 glasses is Luke 9:24. It says, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” Jesus is addressing his disciples about their calling to follow him, and for modern-day disciples who are serious about wanting a marriage that glorifies God, this is a profound truth. Essentially, this says: Do not try to *get* from relationships, but *give*.

When you make it your ambition to be a vessel of God’s grace, mercy, love, forgiveness, and kindness, you will always receive from God. If you are looking to get from rather than give to the people around you, it is as though you are seeking to “save” your life through the affirmation, approval, and security of others. That is not where God desires us to find our significance. Yes, we will receive wonderful things in good relationships, but that should not be our primary reason to be in them.

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In every era, Jesus has challenged his disciples to rise above their fleshly tendencies. Whoever thinks Christianity is for weak people has not listened to Christ's message: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, lend expecting nothing in return (Luke 6:27–28, 35). These are stern words for Christ followers. Yet his promise is stronger: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38).

As you die to yourself and look to give in your relationships, there is a reward and return for you: As God pours into you what you give others on his behalf, "rivers of living water will flow from within [you]" (John 7:38). It is his way! He gives a fresh supply of comfort, wisdom, strength, endurance, patience—whatever you need (Philippians 4:19). We only need to come to him for it, not some substitute or counterfeit. These are broken cisterns that hold no water and can never assuage our thirst (Jeremiah 2:13).

Very practically, putting on the Philippians 2 lens (I am here to serve humbly and sacrificially) and taking on the call to lose our lives for Christ means we will follow this pattern:

If you want a hug, give one.

If you want an encouraging word, give one.

If you want to be included, have a party and invite everyone.

If you want to pray with your spouse, take the initiative.

If you want a sweet marriage, be sweet.

When I focus on how I can bless and encourage Mike rather than how he can do a better job of loving me, our relationship is drastically different. Why is this so? Is it just that my perspective has shifted? Is it the Spirit of the living God imbuing me with hope and encouragement? The answer is yes. Be encouraged that any time you are willing to move your perspective from criticism and judgment to gratitude and appreciation, you will reap the rewards of a more fulfilling and meaningful relationship and

connection. You will also be a living vessel of the Lord Jesus's sacrificial love, and I pray that in doing so, you sense his pleasure over you.

REFOCUSING

Are you worn out yet with all this *looking*? This is a good place to pause and listen to God's voice for a while. What specific thought is he, the author of your faith and designer of your marriage, placing in your mind? Is he convicting you of playing the Holy Spirit to your spouse? How is he encouraging you to demonstrate his nature as a humble, sacrificial servant? Accept the invitation to learn from him: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28–29). This is an opportunity to ask for God's help in glorifying him through your marriage.

I will be honest: Shifting to these perspectives is very hard. We are longing for love, hungry for affirmation, needy for understanding, and just plain weak creatures. We really are. So it is incredible if you are willing to say to the Lord: "Yes, Lord, I so want to have your perspective. I want to look beyond my spouse to you. I want to die to my selfishness and learn to give from the abundance you have given me in yourself. I want to die to my old negative views and express thankfulness for the way my spouse complements me. Help me to be mature and complete in you so I can love unconditionally and protect my spouse's heart."

We must be sober-minded about the difficulty of taking our eyes off ourselves in our relationship. It seems we are constantly baited to be disappointed or hurt by our spouse. As frustrating as that is to admit, we have to recognize maturity does not come easily or naturally. But I say, take heart! You can do this. You really can. How, you ask? How can I have this lens of maturity? The answer is found in the beginning of the Philippians 2 passage.

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Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. (Philippians 2:1–2)

We can do this because of the following:

1. **We are united with Christ** (*“if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ . . .”*). We can be encouraged in these efforts because we are united with Christ! He is Immanuel, God with us, who has come to live in us by his Spirit. He actually inhabits us, so in all reality we have the capacity to live a life of sacrificial, unconditional love. You can put on the glasses of Christ in Philippians 2 and see others as better than yourself, even worth dying for, because you and Jesus are united! He has consumed you with himself, and therefore you have the same power that conquered death in every form within your reach (Romans 5:5; 8:9–17; Ephesians 1:17–20)!
2. **His love is an everlasting comfort** (*“if any comfort from his love . . .”*). We are able to do the painful work of crucifying our selfish desires and replacing them with godly ones because we know that when it gets tough, he is our comfort. His love is forever: “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3). God will never feel “done” with you and leave you to yourself. There is also nothing—not your most awful sin, your worst outburst, nor your secret addiction—that will cause God’s love for you to be less. Nothing is more powerful than his love. Romans 8:38–39 is a great picture of this incredible truth:

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

I could actually fill the rest of this book with the power of God's love for us, his children. Our power to humbly sacrifice for others comes because we have all the comfort our souls will ever need in the love of God our Father.

3. **The Spirit intimately offers us encouragement and lives within us** (*“if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion . . .”*). We can be tender and compassionate toward others because that is God's posture toward us through Christ. Jesus demonstrates the heart of a shepherd, even describing himself as a mother hen longing to gather her chicks (Matthew 23:37). God says he longs to be gracious to you, and he rises to show you compassion (Isaiah 30:18). Did you catch that he *longs*—really wants, can't wait, and is anxiously awaiting an opportunity—to give grace to you? God is eager to give you forgiveness, acceptance, and unconditional love.

These are the incredible realities of our lives as God's children, and these realities empower us to do what Philippians 2 says. We can sacrifice because of his inconceivable, limitless love for us. We can be humble because of the tender and compassionate understanding that he has for us. We can serve rather than be served because we are united with Christ. Even if no human ever sees our sacrifice and sorrow, he does. And he is enough.

That is how we can turn our marriages upside down—with this kind of perspective and faith! When we are willing to look at our spouses through Christ's eyes, we “make [his] joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2). This brings us full circle to where we began. We are to be like-minded with Christ. Pray for your mind to be like his. Ditch your old glasses and take his—it is better than 20/20!

THE EYES OF CHRIST

The power of our intentional perspective can never ever be underestimated. It alone can be the difference-maker in our

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relationships. The reason a marriage can start in mighty flames and end in ashes is often nothing but a shifted vantage point. If we want real, God-blessed marriages, we will “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). We will make Philippians 2 our aim.

What glasses do you think Jesus would have you wear? Should you focus on the flaws of the mate he gave you? Is it best for you to be in charge of your spouse’s sanctification process, giving the Holy Spirit needed consultation when necessary? Or would Jesus have you see your wife as a precious child of God, someone to be fiercely protected? Would he have you see your husband as a wounded animal, with a big bark but no bite? Is Christ moving in you to see her as a precious treasure or to view him as a gift from God? The choice is yours. If you are operating from your own value system, your lens will be cloudy at best. We are self-interested people, and therefore we have blurred vision.

But when we operate from the larger vantage point of God’s eternal purpose of redemption, we can see our marriages as they were intended to be seen. We can have the eyes of Christ for one another, seeing him or her as a precious child of God, completely forgiven by Jesus, and entirely righteous in him (Psalm 103:11–13; Isaiah 43:4; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21). From that, we can have the perspective that because God is sovereign, we are perfect together. We can have the humility of Christ in proclaiming, “I cannot believe I have the privilege of being married to him or her—I married up!” Our viewpoint determines practically everything.

If all else fails to sway you, honestly consider how difficult you are to be married to. Put on that pair of glasses for a moment. It is likely not a cakewalk to be your spouse. You are not flawless. If you are really motivated, make a list of ways it must be hard to be married to you. Think, *In what ways is being married to me challenging? What do I bring to this relationship that requires patience, grace, and forgiveness?* Suddenly, your neatness habit, forgetfulness, pervasive anxiety, or temper begin to make your spouse’s flaws fade and your gratitude increase.

When Marriage Meets Reality

I recently played in a tennis doubles match for which we had a scouting report. The word was that one of our opponents was in a major slump, so we decided to isolate her by playing balls to her instead of her partner. We were shocked as time after time she came up with great shots. She was on fire! We kept thinking her luck would run out and she would go back to her normal play. After we lost the first set, it was time to put on a new pair of lenses. It was time to see her differently. We undoubtedly would have lost the match if we had not adjusted our perspective.

Is this true of your marriage? It is exciting for me to think about how you could be enjoying what feels like a new relationship almost immediately upon changing your lenses. It really is like removing red ones and putting on clear ones, or going from fuzzy vision to a new prescription. The change can be that drastic as we see and treat our spouse in a whole new way—the way God sees and loves your spouse.



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