

## SESSION 1

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# SERVICE

## Marriage Isn't about You

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# HOME STUDY

*The Introduction is best read individually, as a part of your Home Study, in preparation for your Group Time. Also read chapters 1–2, “The Secret of Marriage” and “The Power for Marriage,” in The Meaning of Marriage if you haven’t already.*

## INTRODUCTION

“I do.” The most romantic, hope-filled climax of any wedding ceremony is when the bride and groom utter that two-word phrase, “I do,” that launches their life together. The whole ceremony builds to those vows of commitment, and the festivities to follow celebrate them. Such a rich, intimate relationship as marriage deserves the pomp and circumstance it often receives on the wedding day. Yet for all the attention the wedding gets, most married couples agree that in addition to their coordinated wedding attire they were also unknowingly wearing blinders. These invisible blinders shielded them from a full understanding of what was to come in the marriage relationship.

Most people come into marriage with a set of expectations. Sometimes verbalized but most often not, these expectations create a grid you and your spouse will use to evaluate the happiness and overall quality of your marriage. Your culture and experiences help to create, and to reinforce, these expectations. When these hopes are met, the facade of a happy life holds up. But inevitably the day will come when married life will not live up to your expectations. Maybe it will be over something small—like who should pay the bills and manage the household finances; or maybe it will be something weightier—like a job loss, a pornography addiction, unexpected medical expenses, or a child on the wrong track. In some form, reality will eventually disappoint your expectations for marriage. Because the future is unknown and the possibilities are endless, no quick fix (a date night, a budget, etc.) will ever be thorough or specific enough to help you through every circumstance. Marriages will need a constant reorientation to the meaning of marriage.

What if your marriage had a foundation that allowed it to flourish even, and maybe especially in, the disappointing spaces of life? The goal of this session is to sharpen your vision for such a life-giving foundation for your marriage.

WELCOMING QUESTIONS

It's hard to picture a foundation that would allow a marriage to flourish even, and maybe especially in, the disappointing spaces of life. The goal of this session is to sharpen your vision for such a life-giving foundation for your marriage.

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# GROUP TIME

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## WELCOME/OPENING QUESTIONS

*To begin this first session, take a moment to get to know one another. As you introduce yourselves, share what you hope to gain from this study. Then spend a few minutes exploring the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers, so relax! And not everyone need feel obligated to answer.*

What were some expectations you had (or have, if you are single) about what marriage should be like?

How have those expectations helped or hurt your understanding of marriage?



## DISCUSSION

*The following questions are designed to help the group process the ideas from the video, the Bible, and chapters 1 and 2 of the book The Meaning of Marriage. The goal is to begin applying these ideas to your life.*

1. What from the video discussion resonated with you as key principles for marriage?
2. In the discussion Jeff asked the group, “Why is service so important to marriage?” Though counterintuitive, the Christian worldview says the key to building a happy and fulfilling marriage is through mutual sacrifice. How does the idea that it is “not about you” actually help you build a healthy marriage? How has selfishness worked against this idea in your marriage?



6. Toward the end of the discussion, Sam said he found the Christian approach to marriage to be “enviable.” How does the gospel offer an attractive foundation for marriage?

This is the secret—that the gospel of Jesus and marriage explain one another. That when God invented marriage, he already had the saving work of Jesus in mind.

*The Meaning of Marriage*, p. 43

7. In the concluding remarks, Kathy summed up the Christian approach to marriage as “gospel reenactment.” That is, the interactions between the husband and wife are to serve as a dynamic retelling of the story of Christ’s love and sacrifice for the church.

In your own words, explain what the gospel is. (Use Ephesians 2:1–10, printed below, to guide you if necessary.)

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,<sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.<sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.<sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,<sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by

grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:1–10

How would you explain the phrase “gospel reenactment”?

The Christian teaching does not offer a choice between fulfillment and sacrifice but mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice.

*The Meaning of Marriage*, p. 43

8. Give an example of what gospel reenactment could look like in the regular weekly rhythms of your marriage. If you are not married, what could gospel reenactment look like in the key relationships in your life?

### CLOSING PRAYER

Close your discussion by praying together as a group, asking with grace and humility for God's help in applying what you've learned in this session.

# HOME STUDY

*The Home Study provides you an opportunity to reconnect with the ideas from the most recent session and to prepare for the next one. Your experience in Group Time will be greatly enhanced when each person completes the Home Study between sessions.*

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

*The Personal Reflection is designed to help you process what you are encountering during your reading and discussions. Read the following excerpt from *The Meaning of Marriage* and then answer the questions provided.*

There, then, is the message of this book—that through marriage, “the mystery of the gospel is unveiled.” Marriage is a major vehicle for the gospel’s remaking of your heart from the inside out and your life from the ground up.

The reason that marriage is so painful and yet wonderful is because it is a reflection of the gospel, which is painful and wonderful at once. The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope...

The gospel can fill our hearts with God’s love so that you can handle it when your spouse fails to love you as he or she should. That frees us to see our spouse’s sins and flaws to the bottom—and speak of them—and yet still love and accept our spouse fully. And when, by the power of the gospel, our spouse experiences that same kind of truthful yet committed love, it enables our spouses to show us that same kind of transforming love when the time comes for it.

This is the great secret! Through the gospel, we get both the power and the pattern for the journey of marriage.

*The Meaning of Marriage*, pp. 44–45

1. Where do you stand in relation to the Christian faith commitment? At this point do you fully believe the gospel message, as described in this session? Are there any questions you have about the gospel or its implications?

2. In the video, Tim said Christianity is an identity and that “if I believe in the Christian gospel, I realize I am living by the commitment of someone who sacrificed for me. So how dare I live on that and accept that and not give it to anybody else?” In light of this session, do you sense anything you need to adjust about the way you are approaching your spouse and others in your life?

### READ FOR NEXT TIME

Read chapter 3, “The Essence of Marriage,” and chapter 5, “Loving the Stranger,” in *The Meaning of Marriage* along with the letter to the Ephesians found in the New Testament. Also read the Introduction to the next session, “Covenant: Created to Make Promises.”

# MARRIAGE PLAN

*To be completed as a couple between group sessions.*

This entire study is designed to be a tool to help strengthen marriages. When you complete *The Meaning of Marriage* curriculum, you will have the beginnings of a marriage plan you can begin to pursue as a couple. These conversations are best to have while out on a date so you can avoid many of your normal distractions. Here is your exercise for this week:

## HOW CAN I SERVE YOU?

Our (Spence's) church recently went through a focused season on marriage, during which we were confronted with the selfless love of Christ as the model for how spouses are to love one another. Christ not only submitted himself to God the Father when he came to earth, but he also seemed to place himself in a posture of always serving the disciples. The most poignant example—when Jesus washed the disciples' feet—is a major reinforcement of the simple truth he proclaimed that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). So, as a church, we crafted the simplest of exercises that has greatly benefited my marriage and many others. Here it is:

Step 1: Ask your spouse, “What can I do to serve you?”

Step 2: If within reason, do what your spouse requests.

Step 3: Repeat often.

This simple question “What can I do to serve you?” will feel a little forced and silly at first. But if you play along, eventually it can be one of those small steps God uses to unlock the power of the gospel in your marriage. So, while out on the date, discuss the following three questions:

## The Meaning of Marriage Study Guide

### 1. What can I do to serve you this week?

### 2. What can I do to help you love God and be refueled in his love this week?

### 3. Are there any big-picture areas in our lives where I can serve you and our family?