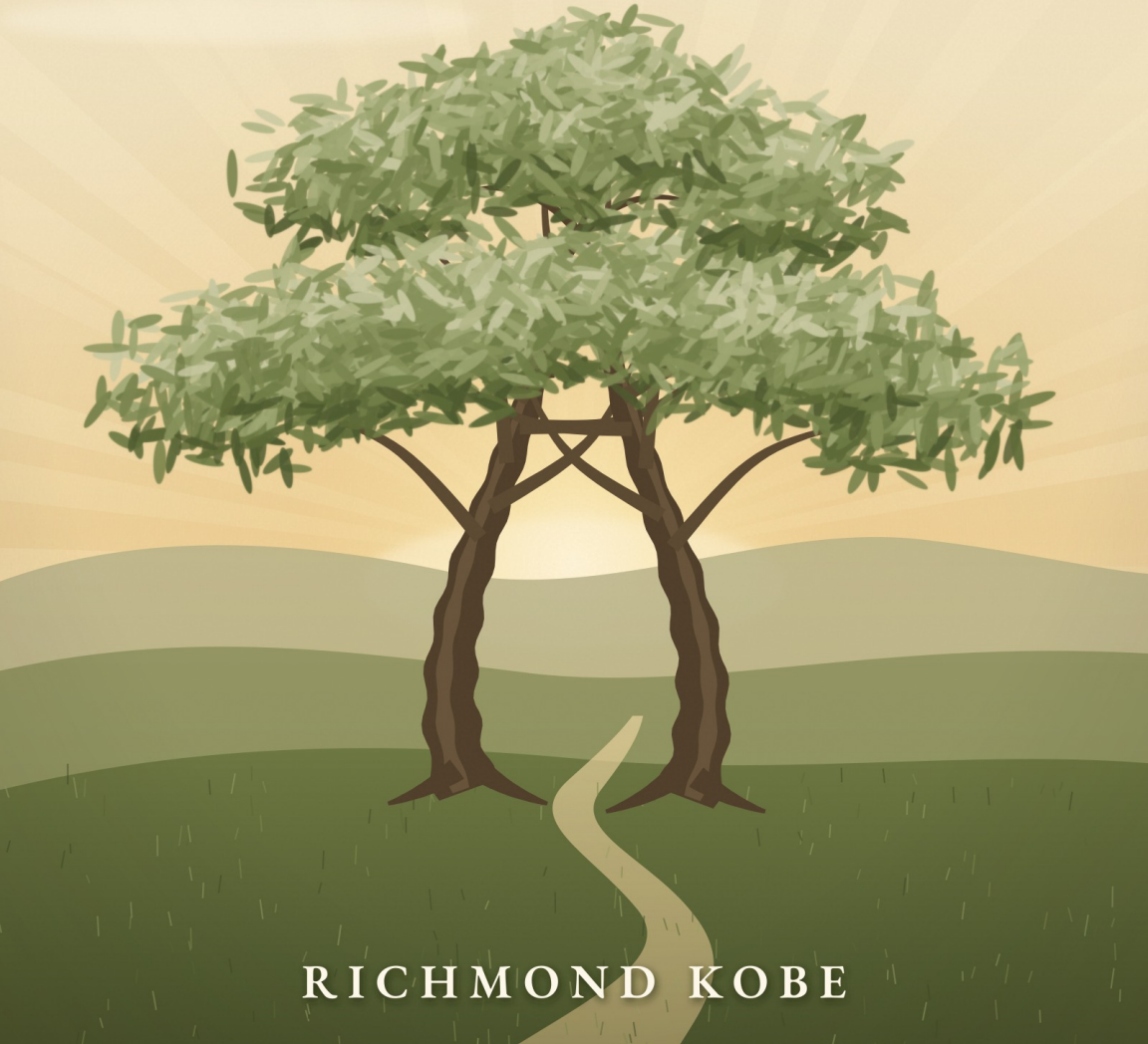
# Growing Together in Marriage

*Biblical Teaching for Every Season of Married Life*



RICHMOND KOBE

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Richmond Kobe

Faithful Path Community

*Growing Together in Marriage: Biblical Teaching for Every Season of Married Life*

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**The stories in this book.** The couples described in these pages are illustrations created for teaching. They are not real people. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

**The purpose of this book.** This book offers Christian pastoral teaching. It is not a substitute for medical, legal, financial or psychological advice, and readers should seek qualified help where they need it. Anyone who is not safe at home should seek independent support and protection from someone trustworthy, and professional or emergency help where necessary.

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# Introduction

Many books about marriage are written for people who are about to marry. This one is for people who already have.

Perhaps you married last year and are finding that the person you live with is more complicated than the person you courted. Perhaps you have been married for twenty years and realise you have been running a household together without really talking. Perhaps your marriage is good and you would like to keep it so. Perhaps it is in serious trouble and you are not sure where to turn. Perhaps you are in your later years, looking back with gratitude and wondering what the years ahead are for.

This book was written with all of you in mind.

Over many years of pastoral ministry and conversations with married couples, I have seen that strong marriages are not built by people who never struggle, but by people who keep learning to love with faithfulness, humility and grace.

## What this book is

*Growing Together in Marriage* is a book of Christian teaching for husbands and wives. It rests on the conviction that marriage is God's gift, that Scripture has a great deal to say about how to live in it, and that what Scripture says can be put into practice on an ordinary weekday by ordinary people.

It is not a manual of techniques, although it contains many practical suggestions. It is not a work of psychology, although it tries to be honest about how people actually behave. It is pastoral teaching, of the kind a couple might receive from a minister who has time to sit with them and open the Bible.

The title says what I hope for you. A marriage is not finished on the wedding day. Two people go on changing for as long as they live, and they can change towards each other or away. Growing together does not happen by itself. It takes attention, honesty, repentance and a great deal of grace, and it is possible at every age.

## What this book is not

It does not promise that if you do the right things your marriage will be happy. No book can honestly promise that, and Scripture does not. A marriage involves two people, and each is responsible for their own choices. Whatever circumstances you face, honesty, wisdom and faithfulness to Christ remain important, even when the right response is to establish boundaries or seek protection. And God gives help to those who ask him. Nor does it describe a perfect couple for you to imitate. There is no such couple. A faithful Christian marriage is one in which two imperfect people keep learning to love.

## How the book is arranged

There are forty-two chapters in eight parts.

- **Part One, Understanding God's Design for Marriage,** lays the foundation: what marriage is, what a covenant is, and what it means to follow Christ as a husband or wife.
- **Part Two, Building Friendship and Emotional Connection,** is about knowing each other, communicating, listening and staying close.
- **Part Three, Handling Conflict and Differences,** deals with disagreement, anger, forgiveness and the rebuilding of trust.
- **Part Four, Intimacy, Sexuality, and Faithfulness,** considers the physical side of marriage and how to guard it.
- **Part Five, Building a Life Together,** turns to money, work, the household, wider family, culture, children and decisions.

- **Part Six, Faith, Spiritual Growth, and Purpose,** looks at a couple's life with God and their service to others.
- **Part Seven, Marriage Through Difficult Seasons,** addresses exhaustion, childlessness and loss, illness, betrayal, and the hardest questions about separation and divorce.
- **Part Eight, Growing Together for a Lifetime,** follows marriage through midlife and old age and asks what a couple leaves behind.

## How each chapter works

The chapters follow a similar pattern, so that you always know where you are.

Each chapter opens with a story about a couple and explores relevant passages of Scripture in their original setting. It then draws out biblical truths, addresses common misunderstandings and offers practical guidance for married life. Most chapters return to the opening story and conclude with personal reflection, questions for couples, a weekly practice, prayer and further Scripture reading.

You do not have to do everything. If a chapter gives you one thing to think about and one thing to try, it has served you.

## About the stories

The couples in this book are illustrations. They are not real people, and their names, places and circumstances were chosen to show how the teaching might look in an ordinary life. They come from many countries because marriage does, and because readers in different places face different pressures.

You will notice that the stories rarely end neatly. That is deliberate. Real marriages are seldom resolved in a week, and I did not want to suggest otherwise.

## How Scripture is used

Each chapter tries to say first what a passage meant to those who first received it, and only then how it may apply to marriage. Many of the passages used here were not written about marriage at all. They were written to churches, or to Israel, or as prayers and proverbs. Where I apply such a passage to husbands and wives, I say that I am doing so, so that you can tell what the Bible teaches from what I am drawing out of it.

Direct quotations are from the English Standard Version. Elsewhere I have summarised a passage in my own words and given the reference, and I encourage you to look it up and read it for yourself.

## Where Christians differ

Christians who love Scripture do not agree about everything it says on marriage. They differ, for example, over how to understand headship and submission, and over when divorce and remarriage are permitted. Readers who wish to explore the Greek words behind Ephesians 5:21–33 and the different Christian interpretations will find a short appendix at the back of the book.

On questions like these I have tried to teach clearly where Scripture is clear, and to explain the main views fairly where faithful Christians read it differently, without pressing one view on you. If your church teaches a particular position, talk with your pastor. This book is meant to be useful across traditions, and it is no substitute for the church to which you belong.

## About the exercises

The questions and practices are invitations. They are not tests of your marriage or of your faith. Start small, adapt them to your circumstances, and leave aside any that do not fit. If your spouse is not reading with you, most of the reflection can still be done alone. Most of this book assumes two people who are safe with each other and willing to try. If that is not

your situation, the conversations for couples are not for you at present. If you are afraid of your husband or wife, seek independent support and protection from someone trustworthy, and professional or emergency help where necessary. Chapters 36 and 37 were written with you in mind.

## Ways to read

You can read from beginning to end, a chapter a week, which will take most of a year. You can read as a couple, taking turns to read aloud. You can read with a small group in your church. Or you can go straight to the chapter that speaks to what you are facing now. The guide that follows will help you find it.

May God use these pages to help you love each other well, and to draw you both nearer to him.

*Richmond Kobe*

# Where to Begin

If you have come to this book with a particular need, you do not have to start at Chapter 1. Find the line below that is closest to your situation. The chapters in Part One are the foundation for everything else, so return to them when you can.

| **If this describes you** | **Begin with** |
|---|---|
| We want to understand what marriage is for | Chapters 1 to 5 |
| We are newly married and still getting to know each other | Chapters 6, 7 and 8 |
| We talk, but we do not feel heard | Chapters 8 and 9 |
| We have drifted and live like housemates | Chapters 10, 11 and 39 |
| We argue often, or the same argument keeps returning | Chapters 12, 13 and 14 |
| One of us has hurt the other and we do not know how to mend it | Chapters 15 and 16 |
| Our physical relationship is difficult or has faded | Chapters 17 to 19 and 21 |
| Screens, pornography or an outside attachment are harming us | Chapter 20 |
| We disagree about money | Chapter 22 |
| One of us carries too much of the work at home | Chapter 23 |
| Parents, in-laws or relatives are a strain | Chapter 24 |
| We come from different cultures or backgrounds | Chapter 25 |
| The children have taken over our marriage | Chapter 26 |

| If this describes you | Begin with |
|---|---|
| We cannot agree on a large decision | Chapter 27 |
| We want to grow in faith together | Chapters 28 and 29 |
| One of us does not share the other's faith | Chapter 30 |
| Church or ministry is crowding out our marriage | Chapter 31 |
| We want our marriage to bless other people | Chapter 32 |
| We are exhausted and distant | Chapter 33 |
| We are facing infertility, loss or life without children | Chapter 34 |
| One of us is ill, disabled or caring for the other | Chapter 35 |
| There has been a betrayal or a serious crisis | Chapter 36 |
| I am not safe, or we are facing separation or divorce | Chapter 37 |
| We are in midlife and everything is shifting | Chapter 38 |
| The children have left, or we are growing old together | Chapters 39 and 40 |
| We keep making resolutions and not keeping them | Chapter 41 |
| We wonder what we will leave behind | Chapter 42 |

PART ONE

# Understanding God's Design for Marriage

*Chapters 1 to 5*

Before a couple can ask how to improve their marriage, it helps to ask what marriage is. The answers people bring with them come from their parents, their culture and the stories they have absorbed, and those answers are often unexamined.

These five chapters go back to Scripture. They look at marriage in creation, at what it means to call marriage a covenant, at Paul's teaching about Christ and the church, at the love and honour that husband and wife owe each other, and at marriage as a setting in which two people learn to follow Christ.

Some of this ground is disputed among Christians, and Chapter 3 sets out the main views fairly. Much of what follows in the book builds on what is laid here, so it is worth reading slowly.

CHAPTER 1

# Marriage in God's Creation

*Part One: Understanding God's Design for Marriage*
*Study Scripture: Genesis 1:26–28 and Genesis 2:18–25*

## What are we for?

Marcus and Elena had been married for nine years when Elena asked the question.

Nothing was wrong. That was the strange part. They both worked. The rent was paid. They rarely argued, and when they did it was over within the hour. On Sundays they sat together in church, and on most evenings they sat together on the sofa, each with a phone, each a little tired.

One Thursday night Elena put her phone down and said, "Can I ask you something? What are we actually for?"

Marcus laughed, because he thought she was joking. She was not. "I don't mean, do you love me," she said. "I know you do. I mean, what is this? We run a household well. We are good at the calendar. But is that what marriage is?"

Marcus did not have an answer, and he was honest enough to say so.

I begin this book with their question because I think it is the right one. Most of us learned how to get married. Few of us were ever taught what marriage is. We bring to it what we saw in our parents' home, what our culture expects, what films and friends have told us, and a handful of Bible verses we heard at weddings. Then ordinary life begins, and we manage it as well as we can.

Before this book says anything about communication, conflict, money or intimacy, we need to go back further than our own wedding day. We need to go back to the beginning, because that is where Jesus went. When he was asked a hard question about marriage, he did not start with the customs of his day. He asked, "Have you not read?" and took his hearers to the first two chapters of Genesis (Matthew 19:4–6).

So that is where we start.

## The passage in its setting

Genesis 1 gives the wide view of creation, presenting God's work across six days and the creation of humanity in his image. Genesis 2 moves in close, describing the formation of the man and woman and the beginning of their relationship. The two accounts are meant to be read together, and both contribute to our understanding of marriage.

**Genesis 1:26–28: made together, blessed together, sent together.** In the wide view, God makes humanity in his own image, and the text says plainly that this humanity is male and female:

> So God created man in his own image,
> in the image of God he created him;
> male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

Then God blesses them and speaks to them. The pronoun matters: the blessing and the commission are given to both. Together they are to be fruitful, to fill the earth, and to rule over it with care on God's behalf.

Two things stand out. First, the image of God is not given to the man more than the woman, or to the married more than the single. It belongs to every human being. Second, the first task given to human beings is a shared one. Before Scripture describes a husband or a wife, it describes two people standing side by side before God with the same dignity and a common calling.

**Genesis 2:18–25: from alone to one flesh.** In the close view, the man is formed first and placed in the garden. Then, for the first time in the creation account, God says that something is not good: "It is not good

that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18). Everything else has been called good. The first thing that is not good is a human being without a companion.

The animals are brought and named, and none of them is that companion. So God makes the woman from the man's own side and brings her to him. The man's response is the first recorded human speech in the Bible, and it is a kind of poem: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23). He recognises her at once. She is not another creature to be named and managed. She is like him.

Then the narrator steps forward and draws the conclusion for every later generation: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). The scene closes with a short, striking line: "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25).

**How the rest of the Bible uses these chapters.** Jesus quotes Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24 together and adds that what God has joined, people must not separate (Matthew 19:4–6). Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 when he writes about husbands and wives, and says the one-flesh union points beyond itself to Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31–32). For both, these chapters are not background. They are the foundation.

One caution before we go on. Genesis 1 and 2 describe marriage before sin entered the world. Genesis 3 follows, and with it come blame, hiding and strain between the man and the woman. So these chapters show us God's design and the direction in which Christ is restoring us. They do not describe how any marriage feels every day, and they are not a standard for measuring how far yours has fallen short.

## Five truths about marriage from the beginning

### 1. Marriage is God's gift before it is our achievement

In Genesis 2 the man does not go looking for a wife, and he does not design the relationship. God sees the need, God makes the woman, and God brings her to him. Marriage begins as something received.

This changes how we hold it. If marriage is only an arrangement we invented, then we may reshape it whenever it stops suiting us, and its meaning depends on how we feel this year. If it is a gift from God, then it has a meaning that does not rise and fall with our moods. On the days when a marriage feels like hard work, it still is what God says it is.

**2. Husband and wife stand before God as equals in worth, with a shared calling**

Both bear God's image. Both receive the blessing. Both are given the work. Nothing in Genesis 1 ranks them.

This has practical weight in a modern home. A spouse's worth is not set by who earns more, who is better educated, whose family has more standing, or who is more confident in public. Nor is it set by whether the couple has children. Each of you is married to someone made in the image of God, and that is the first fact about the person across the table.

**3. Marriage is one of God's good gifts of companionship**

Scripture honours singleness as well as marriage (1 Corinthians 7:7–8, 32–35), and people know real companionship in friendship, family and the church. Genesis 2 shows the particular companionship of husband and wife. The word translated "helper" in Genesis 2:18 is often misunderstood. The Hebrew phrase is ʿēzer kenegdô (עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ), which means a helper corresponding to him, a suitable counterpart. Elsewhere in the Old Testament the same word for helper is used of the help God himself gives to his people, so it carries no suggestion of lesser worth. The text is describing a partner who is his match.

So companionship is not an extra that a marriage may add once the practical matters are in order. In Genesis 2 it is the reason the woman is made. A couple can run a home efficiently and still be missing the thing marriage was given for.

**4. Marriage creates a new first loyalty**

A man leaves his father and mother and holds fast to his wife. Leaving, in this verse, establishes a new marital loyalty. It does not necessarily require

moving away. It is about which human bond now comes first. The command to honour father and mother remains (Exodus 20:12). But a new household has been formed, and its two members now owe each other a loyalty that no parent, sibling, friend or employer should outrank.

The verb translated "hold fast" is a strong one. Elsewhere in the Old Testament it is used for clinging to the Lord. It describes a chosen, continuing attachment, something a person keeps doing.

### 5. Marriage is a one-flesh union of two whole lives

"One flesh" certainly includes the physical union of husband and wife. It also reaches further. Two people with separate histories, families, habits and hopes become a single unit that the rest of the world must now deal with as one.

The last verse of the chapter describes the man and the woman as naked and unashamed before sin entered the world. It also invites us to consider the openness, trust and freedom from shame that should characterise marriage. That second step is an application and not the whole meaning of the verse, but I believe it is a fair one. Much of this book is about how a husband and wife move back towards that kind of openness after sin, hurt and habit have taught them to cover up.

## Four common misunderstandings

### "Helper means the junior partner"

The word does not carry that meaning. It is used of God, and no one concludes that God is junior to those he helps. At the same time, the word should not be asked to prove more than it says. Christians hold different views on how husbands and wives share leadership and decisions, and Chapter 3 looks at those views carefully. Genesis 2:18 on its own settles one thing: the woman is the man's true counterpart, and she is not less than he is.

**"My spouse is supposed to complete me"**

Genesis 2 says it is not good to be alone, and marriage is a real answer to that. But a husband or wife cannot carry the weight of being another person's whole meaning, peace or identity. Only God can bear that. Jesus never married, and no one was more complete. When we ask a spouse to be what only God can be, we set them up to fail and ourselves up for resentment. A marriage is healthiest when two people who are held by God then hold each other.

**"Leaving means cutting off your family"**

It does not. Parents are still to be honoured, cared for and loved, and in many families that includes living close by, sharing a home, or giving financial support. Leaving means that when loyalties pull in different directions, husband and wife stand together and decide together. A couple can live under the same roof as their parents and have left in this sense. A couple can live in another country and not have left at all.

**"A marriage without children is an unfinished marriage"**

Genesis 1 speaks of fruitfulness as a blessing given to humanity. Genesis 2 explains why the woman was made and what marriage is, and it does so without mentioning children. A husband and wife are one flesh on their wedding day. Children are a gift where God gives them. They are not what makes a marriage a marriage. Chapter 34 returns to this with the care it deserves.

## Living it today

These truths are old, but they speak directly to how married people live now.

**If you are newly married,** the leaving is your present work. You are learning to make decisions as two, sometimes against the expectations of people you love. Decide early that you will speak to each other first and to your families second.

**If you are in the busy middle years,** the danger is the one Marcus and Elena found. Work, bills, children and church duties can fill a marriage so completely that the companionship it exists for gets whatever is left over. The household is running, and the two people in it have become colleagues. If that is where you are, you have not failed. You have drifted, and drift can be corrected.

**If you come from different cultures or family backgrounds,** you may have two different pictures of what a husband, a wife, and an extended family are supposed to be. Neither picture is the standard. Genesis gives you a third thing that belongs to neither culture: a new household, formed by God, with its own first loyalty. You build it together, and you will keep what is good from both sides.

**If you have been married a long time,** "hold fast" is still in the present tense. The attachment that began decades ago is something you continue to choose. Long marriages are not kept by momentum.

**If your spouse does not share your interest in any of this,** you can still live these truths from your side. Even when your husband or wife is not ready to make changes, you can choose to act with honesty, kindness and wisdom. You cannot carry the responsibility for the whole marriage alone, and you are not asked to. But you can remain faithful in the responsibilities that belong to you.

A word about phones, since they were in the room with Marcus and Elena. Genesis says nothing about screens, so this is my application and not the text's. But in our day, holding fast to a spouse usually includes deciding what we will not hold instead. Attention is one of the plainest ways we show who comes first.

## Marriage in real life: when career and family expectations collide

Consider a situation many couples face. A husband is offered a job in another city. The salary is better and the work is what he has hoped for. His wife has a settled career where they live now, and she is good at it. Both sets of parents have firm opinions, and they are not the same opinions.

Genesis does not tell this couple which city to live in. It does tell them how to stand while they decide.

They are one household, so this is one decision, made by two people. His ambition does not automatically outweigh her concerns, and her stability does not automatically outweigh his opportunity. Each of them is an image-bearer whose work and calling matter. Their parents deserve to be heard with respect, because honouring them has not ended. But the decision belongs to the husband and wife, because their loyalty to each other now comes first.

So they lay it all on the table together: the opportunity, what each would give up, the money, the effect on their shared life, and what each is afraid of. They pray. They may ask advice from people they trust. If they still cannot agree, waiting is usually wiser than one of them forcing the outcome.

A question to ask yourselves: when an important decision arises, do we approach it as two individuals protecting separate interests, or as husband and wife seeking what is best for the life we share?

## Back to the question

What are we for?

Genesis gives Marcus and Elena more of an answer than they expected. They are for each other, as companions and counterparts, because God said it was not good to be alone. They are for God, as two people made in his image who carry a shared calling into the world. And they are one, a single household with a loyalty that comes before every other human claim.

Running the home well is part of that. It was never meant to be the whole of it.

None of this fixes a marriage in an evening. It does something that has to come first: it tells you what you are building. The rest of this book is about how.

## Reflection

Take these on your own before you talk together. Write your answers down if that helps you. No one needs to see them.

1. When I think about what marriage is, where did my picture mostly come from: my parents' marriage, my culture, my church, or somewhere else?
2. Which of the five truths in this chapter do I find easiest to believe about our marriage? Which is hardest?
3. Is there anything, or anyone, that I have been asking my spouse to be for me that only God can be?
4. Where does my first loyalty show most clearly in an ordinary week? Where might my spouse say it does not show?

## Couple conversation

Choose a time when neither of you is rushed. Take turns. While one speaks, the other listens without correcting or defending. You are not trying to solve anything in this conversation. You are trying to hear each other.

1. What did each of us believe marriage was for on the day we married? Has that changed?
2. When do you feel most like my companion? When do you feel more like my colleague?
3. Is there a loyalty in either of our lives, such as family, work, friends, ministry or a screen, that sometimes comes ahead of us? How could we talk about it without blame?
4. What is one thing about our life together that you are thankful for today?

If a question opens something painful, it is wise to stop, thank each other for being honest, and come back to it another day. Later chapters will give you more help with hard conversations.

## One practice for this week

On three evenings this week, give each other ten minutes with phones in another room. Nothing needs to be accomplished in those ten minutes. Sit together, walk together, or drink tea together. On the last of the three evenings, each of you finish this sentence aloud: "I think our marriage is for..."

You do not have to agree on the answer yet. Saying it to each other is the practice.

## Prayer

Father, you made us in your image and you gave us to each other. Thank you that our marriage was your idea before it was ours.

Forgive us where we have treated it as only an arrangement to manage. Where we have drifted, draw us back to you and to each other. Where we have asked one another to carry what only you can carry, teach us to rest our weight on you.

Help us to honour your image in each other, to keep our loyalty clear, and to become, a little more each year, two people who are known and not ashamed.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Further Scripture

Matthew 19:3–6. Jesus takes a question about marriage back to creation.

Ephesians 5:31–32. Paul shows that the one-flesh union points to Christ and the church.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12. A wisdom saying on the strength of two together. It is about companionship in general and applies well to marriage.

Proverbs 18:22. Finding a wife is called a good thing and a sign of the Lord's favour.

Malachi 2:14. Marriage is called a covenant, with God as witness. This leads into Chapter 2.