

# **Sacred Marriage**

# Grow closer to your spouse to grow closer to God.

Hands up if you thought marriage was going to be just like the movies: endless love, cuddles, and deep connection. And now hands up if you're facing reality – that marriage is also daily struggles, challenges, and mundane routine. OK, so marriage doesn't guarantee pure bliss. But it was never meant to be easy. That's because marriage is, at its core, a pathway to greater holiness. A union between two people requires humility, compassion, and sacrifice – the same principles that Jesus lived by. These blinks show you how to gain spiritual insight from your relationship in the best and worst of times. In getting closer to your spouse, you'll get closer to God and be filled with a renewed sense of love and purpose. In these blinks, you'll learn

how loving your spouse pleases God; how embracing difficulty builds character; and how sex can nourish your spirituality.

## The ultimate purpose of marriage isn't happiness, but holiness.

Marriage is an adventure. In saying "I do," you're embarking on a journey with your spouse. Along the way, you'll experience thrilling highs. But, as any long-married couple knows, you're also likely to face periods of monotony and hardship. When things get tough, partners sometimes descend into hurtful warfare – and blame each other for the discontent. Others cut their losses and break up, hoping to find romance again with a new partner. But this kind of behavior is immature and shortsighted. After all, for the Christian, marriage is just a temporary reality in the vastness of eternity. The spiritual path in marriage isn't about achieving happiness. It's about embracing the opportunity contained in the intimacy of your union: to undergo a personal transformation that will bring you closer to God. Here's the key message: The ultimate purpose of marriage isn't happiness, but holiness. In 2 Corinthians 5:9, Paul declared that we should make it our goal to please God. That should be your guiding compass in all areas of life – and marriage is no exception. Instead of asking "What will make me happy?" commit to living by the mantra, "What will make God happy?" A big part of this is reconciliation, which is what Christ's work was ultimately all about. Christians reflect this in daily life by striving to replace hostility with peace and love. Of course, divorce is sometimes warranted: in cases of unfaithfulness, or when a child's safety is jeopardized, for instance. But when your marriage is grounded and guided by faith, it can withstand all sorts of other lightning strikes – be they lustful temptation or simple miscommunication. That doesn't mean adopting a spiritual outlook in your marriage makes things easy. But relationship strength is like the physical kind: it requires some stress to build muscle and test the heart. In the close confines of marriage, each partner's character flaws – selfishness, anger, a controlling nature – come to light. By confronting your weaknesses and viewing every conflict as an opportunity for transformation, you'll grow closer to God. Funnily enough, in growing closer to God, you'll grow even closer to your spouse. If your relationship with God is right, you'll be fulfilled spiritually. You won't feel the need to try and change your partner or volley demands and expectations. Instead, you'll be free to work on living in Christ's image and loving your fellow adventurer to the best

of your human ability.

## **Use your marriage to practice the Christian virtues of love and respect.**

There were once two wheat farmers who were brothers. One was married and had a big family; the other was single. Every day, the brothers worked in their fields together and milled the grain they'd harvested. Every evening, they'd divide their grain equally and take their portion home. And every night, worrying about the other's well-being, each of the brothers would secretly add some of their own grain to the other's stores. During one of these night missions, the brothers ran into each other - and embraced as realization hit. As the old rabbinical story goes, God saw the event unfold and proclaimed the site of their embrace a holy place - a place of love. This was where his temple should be built. Marriage, too, can be a holy place. By loving your spouse, you're effectively proclaiming your love for God. The key message here is: Use your marriage to practice the Christian virtues of love and respect. Loving your partner is one of the most spiritual things you can do. The Russian Orthodox priest Yelchaninov considered an intense experience of love to be much more powerful than the most valiant efforts against sin. Your marriage doesn't just present an opportunity to love; it gives you the chance to excel at it and reflect Christ's love - a love more profound than any human love - as best you can. When you see your relationship this way, it doesn't matter whether your love is reciprocated or your spouse is different from you. In fact, the differences are an integral part of your union. God designed marriage so you can transcend the ego, realize your incompleteness, and learn to love and find joy in the other. Marriage also gives you the opportunity to practice another important virtue: respect. As passionate love fizzles into predictable routine, and habits and quirks become as familiar as the back of your hand, respect can become harder to conjure. But remember, scripture says both female and male are made in God's image; treating God's creation with respect and honor is a Christian duty. Honor is active, not passive. It's cultivating gratitude and expressing it verbally. So instead of focusing on your spouse's faults, look for things to be thankful for. It's normal to be busy or get sidetracked, but doing little things, like giving compliments in public or affirming accomplishments, can go a long way. Gaining a deeper understanding of your spouse's life can boost empathy and make it easier to honor them. So here's a simple spiritual exercise: find out what your spouse's day is really like. Ask what the hardest or most boring part is. Ask about their fears, what makes them despair. By understanding your spouse's unique challenges, your appreciation will naturally grow.

## **Your marriage can expose sin - and teach forgiveness.**

Dating can sometimes feel like a game. In an effort to be liked - loved, even - you might present an idealized version of yourself. This can lead to big surprises down the line when you're married. All of a sudden, you're together night and day and can no longer hide your flaws. Your spouse is essentially a full-length mirror. Yes, marriage can be challenging. But often, it's not because you're uncovering uncomfortable things about your partner. It's because you're finally seeing your true self. Marriage un.masks your faults, your selfish attitudes, your weaknesses. It asks you to consider yourself honestly

- and to renounce your sin, be purified, and grow in godliness. This is the key message: Your marriage can expose sin - and teach forgiveness. Confronting your sin takes a lot of courage, but it leads you to humility. An eighteenth-century Christian mystic François Fénelon considered humility - or the willingness to acknowledge our faults, transcend them, and heed others' advice - to be the foundational virtue. Instead of hiding or running from your spouse and falling into a spiral of deception and denial, use the spotlight of marriage to grow in humility. Ask your spouse where they see unholiness in your life - and then work to change it. If you've jumped to ridicule in the past, for example, try to dole out praise next time. Of course, the person you marry isn't without sin either. They'll eventually hurt you, maybe even intentionally. This is where forgiveness comes in. Christian marriage asks you to embrace the saying, "Hate the sin and love the sinner." In a world where falls are inevitable, it asks you to fall forward - toward your spouse - when you hit a bump. Conflict presents an opportunity for spiritual growth because it requires you to be engaged and to empty yourself completely. When you're hurt and feel like complaining, for instance, try instead to empathize with your spouse's pain. Negotiating conflict involves learning how to compromise, which demonstrates that you care about your relationship more than "winning" an argument. And resolving conflict ends with acceptance: you let go of idealized expectations and simply love the person standing in front of you. Learning to overcome conflict will create an even stronger bond between spouses in the end - as makeup sex can attest! But the process directly influences your relationship with God too. Say you lose your job, your home, your child - and angrily wonder how God can stay silent. You don't need to pretend you're not upset. But in the same way as you overcome the pain of conflict in marriage, you can heal conflicts with God.

## **Marital challenges present the opportunity to build perseverance and character.**

Ever feel your marriage is neither good nor bad . . . it just is? The feeling of sameness is normal - and, due to medical advances and increasing life expectancy, there's a lot more potential for it than ever before. In 1911, marriage spanned an average of 28 years; by 1967, that had shot up to 42 years. Today, it's possible to be married for six, seven, even eight decades. Marriage is then, by definition, an act of perseverance. In 2 Thessalonians 5, Paul urges Christians to let the Lord direct their hearts into God's love as well as Christ's perseverance. By sticking with your spouse through the good, the bad, and the blah, you can mirror the character of Jesus. The key message here is: Marital challenges present the opportunity to build perseverance and character. Perseverance doesn't make sense without the promise of eternity. With heaven awaiting in the future, it's worth fighting to keep your marriage intact. Patience is key. Truly becoming one as a couple takes time - anywhere from 9 to 14 years, according to some experts. So don't give up before giving your relationship the opportunity to thrive! There are several ways to get through the tough times. You might try meditating on the afterlife, for example. This will put your hardships into perspective: you can endure now because you know things won't always be this way. Or, you could focus on the beauty of your union. Honor your marital story, and make it a part of your being by sharing it with your family, friends, and each other. And finally, acknowledge that your struggle is fostering spiritual growth. Struggle can build character and enhance your faith. The Bible is full of individuals who overcame challenges: the fiery furnace, crossing the Red

Sea, suffering on the cross. You're refined as you persevere through difficulty. So whenever you encounter trials in your marriage, thank God for the chance to spiritually mature. A good marriage isn't something you just happen upon - it's something you consciously work toward. And, ultimately, it doesn't matter if you married the "right" person. The person you married will become the right person when you focus on honing your love, patience, and understanding. The process is hard, but suffering is part and parcel of the Christian life, after all - exemplified by Jesus himself.

## **Emulate Jesus by embracing sacrifice and serving your spouse.**

Self-care is all the rage these days. We're bombarded with so many egocentric messages - "focus on yourself," "set boundaries," "you do you" - that the idea of submitting to anyone else seems almost radical. To many of us, the words "relationship" and "sacrifice" just don't belong in the same sentence. But in Philippians 2, Paul encourages us to value others more than ourselves and to focus on others' interests in addition to our own. It's time to stop viewing independence as a sign of strength and interdependence as a weakness. In the eyes of God, servanthood and sacrifice are the pinnacle of greatness. Here's the key message: Emulate Jesus by embracing sacrifice and serving your spouse. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul also instructs a husband to love his wife like Christ loved the church - that is, by giving up his life for her. Selflessness is a core virtue of Christianity, and marriage gives you the opportunity to pursue it 24-7. For instance, you could offer to change diapers in the middle of the night, or cheer up your partner if they're having a challenging day, even if you yourself feel like curling up into a ball. Sex can also be a powerful tool of giving - and the peak of asceticism. In other words, you can serve your spouse by putting your own wishes on the back burner and lovingly meeting their physical needs and desires. For some, sex may invite feelings of shame. But remember, it was designed by God; gratitude should permeate your experience. To banish feelings of guilt, practice thanking God for the beautiful aspects of physical intimacy, like feelings of deep connection and pleasure. The more passionate you become about sex, the more passionate you'll become about other aspects of life - say, the environment, children, and God. It follows that, within the context of marriage and service, no amount of passion is too much. In effect, scripture says sex should be exhilarating. Allow your spirit of servanthood to flow into all corners of your marriage. Approach things like daily conversation, time, and money with a desire to grow in your capacity for giving. Pray that God exposes your selfishness and guides you to a gentler, kinder, more gracious character. And try to perform your service freely and without resentment. Acting with a true heart will lead you to experience true joy.

## **Invite God's presence into your daily life through righteous communication.**

Christian spirituality isn't about embarking on a quest for new experiences, esoteric wisdom, or enlightenment. It's about passionately pursuing God - and living in constant awareness of God's presence. God is always present, waiting with words of affirmation, encouragement, and, inevitably, challenge. You just need to tune in. This pursuit of God's presence has led many individuals to convents and monasteries. A quiet, hermetic life, they believe, will enable them to be closest. So how can a married person use the



daily rush and family chaos as a reminder of God's presence? It's simple: communication. The key message here is: Invite God's presence into your daily life through righteous communication. Marriage summons the presence of God by nudging us to communicate. In Matthew 18, Jesus said that whenever people come together to pray for something in his name, it will be done. In the context of your marriage, communication can be viewed as a discipline of love. Getting married is essentially agreeing to grow together, into each other – experiencing a kind of interpenetration of being. It's sharing the truly precious gift: your inner self. And that can only be given through communication. That's not to say you don't need moments of meditation and silence. But when you reach out to your spouse, you mirror the way God reaches out to us. Communication can also be an ego-emptying exercise. It asks you to step into your spouse's shoes and demonstrates how, for example, the same word can mean two different things to two different people. The spiritual benefit is huge, both in terms of your married life and your prayer life. Finally, you and your spouse can use communication to help each other become more aware of God's presence. By gently encouraging each other toward spiritual growth, you might even become a holy unit – a “couple-saint” – who pursues God and God's work together. How you communicate is important. Bad, hurtful speech creates chaos; it can lead to despair or even death. Good, righteous speech, on the other hand, calms chaos and yields joy and life. In short, your words can draw God's presence closer or push it away. You won't always get it right. But marriage is a long, complex journey. It's OK to start out slow or get lost. By invoking holiness in your relationship, you're bound to have a meaningful, wonderful adventure.

## Final summary

You've just listened to our blinks to Sacred Marriage, by Gary L. Thomas. The key message in these blinks is that: Marriage goes far beyond the superficial romance depicted in rom-coms. It's not a vehicle designed to make you happier, but holier. Religious hermits use isolation to grow their character and strengthen their love of God – and marriage serves the same purpose. But by learning to please, respect, forgive, and serve your partner, as well as embrace challenges in your union, you won't just get closer to God, you'll also find yourself happier and more deeply in love with your spouse than ever before. And here's some more actionable advice: Use sexual expression to enrich your prayer life. Prayer is integral to Christian life. It encompasses devotion, awareness, submission, and expressions of adoration. These same characteristics also come into play in – you guessed it – the bedroom! It may sound bizarre, but what if you could strengthen your prayers and grow closer to God through sexual expression? Having sex with your spouse can lead to a stronger prayer life in many ways. For one, being sexually fulfilled will free your mind to focus wholeheartedly on prayer. It can also broaden your view of what prayer means. Consider how your verbal praises to God could be like a loving physical caress. And how could you offer yourself to God with an abandon equal to sexual passion?