

*Complimentary
Introduction
&
Chapter
From
US – A User's Guide*

He came to those who knew the language, but they did not respond. Those who did became a new creation (his children), they read the signs and responded.

These children were born out of sharing in the creative activity of God. They heard the conversation still going on, here, now, and took part, discovering a new way of being people.

To be invited to share in a conversation about the nature of life, was for them, a glorious opportunity not to be missed.

John 1:11–14

Welcome to Us

I hope those words from John's gospel take hold of you. They're not the same ones you put to memory as a grade-schooler in Sunday school. This translation was brought to life by Professor Clive Scott, who wrote it based on what the Reformation-era scholar Erasmus had rendered back in the day. And, like everything else in this book, I hope it gets your attention and leads you to question your assumptions about you, your spouse, and especially your marriage.

Perhaps you find yourself like those among the first-century Jews who “knew the language,” but didn't know quite how to respond. Perhaps you never realized that God has truly, “invited you into a conversation,” thinking instead that He was simply looking for your tacit acknowledgment.

And beyond all this, I'm almost certain that you never imagined what any of this has to do with your marriage. This is not your typical marriage book in that it's not really designed to simply enhance your marriage and make it better. It's more like a fresh introduction to you, together. To *Us*. It's more like a, well ... *User's Guide*, daring you and your spouse to join in the “conversation still going on,” rather than banging your heads on the same old walls:

“We're not intimate anymore.”

“She always nags me.”

“He never talks to me.”

“We've drifted so far apart.”

Do any of these complaints sound familiar? Since you are reading this book, chances are that you can relate to at least one of these statements. It is no secret that happy, lasting marriages are an anomaly in today's culture, but it doesn't have to be that way. We don't have to be doomed by historical statistics about the rise in divorce and the decline of fulfilling unions. Marriage—your marriage—can be reborn if you are willing. Are you ready to learn how?

Us is a transformational approach to breaking through the barriers and getting out of the ruts in your marriage by paying attention to, talking about, listening to, and exploring conversations married partners rarely entertain because they represent possible conflict, chaos, and disruption. Instead of talking about these things, we tend to hide them, avoid them, or simply pretend they don't exist.

Just as Adam and Eve shrank away from the Master Gardener in shame, we impair what God wants to create in our marriage by carrying on in our belief that we know a better way than His. Meanwhile the fear and uncertainty created by these elephants in the room grow like fungus and ultimately sabotage our relationship. Not only that, but we begin to despair and remain confused about whether or not a rewarding marriage is even possible. In *that* moment, our marriage is wobbling on very shaky ground.

By talking about such deep and difficult issues, we can begin to open the door for intimacy with our spouse as well as develop a greater dependency on God. If we take the step toward loving out loud and continue to walk in the light of truth, God will reconcile our pains, hurts, and fears. He can take our damaging

conversational wars and turn them into new and unprecedented possibilities for romance, passion, intimacy, and love. He will transform chaos into order and bring beauty to our messes.

The problem often is that we are drawn too deep into our own selves to even care about what a beyond-our-imagination marriage can look like. Marriage, much like our consumer culture, has become a me-me-me game that we play to win. Our inner nature tells us that we must strive to be comfortable, be in control, be right, or look and feel good. This pull is so strong and so seductive that we use whatever strategy we can, and at whatever cost, to maintain these “needs.” But the cost can be great. Often it comes in the form of signing divorce papers.

Us exposes the tendency we have to be swayed by the consumer culture that only leads to an unfulfilled and broken marriage. Living marriage according to His kingdom is the antidote for our culture’s deadly whispers to live life selfishly and impulsively for immediate and temporary satisfaction.

As you read these pages please notice what is stirred in you. If you find yourself angry, agitated, sad, lonely, excited, elated, or numb, take some time to pray and meditate about what is happening to you. Ask yourself the question, “What has so powerfully provoked me?” Be willing to reconsider your long-held assumptions about your spouse and about marriage itself as you read this *User’s Guide*.

You will want to write in a separate journal so you can keep a record of your inner experiences as you learn reading this book. Take the time to explore

what you are going through. I can assure you it will aid the transformation of your marriage and can change you and your spouse's lives.

The disciplines of praying, fasting, and meditating are powerful ways to catch hold of desires that often undermine your ability to love your spouse the way you would want them to love you. Practicing these disciplines as you read this book and working through some of the assignments will prove to be valuable as you aim to walk into the broken places of your marriage.

Us isn't a systematic approach to marriage. It is a very clear invitation for a couple to develop a relationship with God, life, and themselves by practicing the art and science of conversing. While so many marriage books focus on fixing your relationship in three or thirty steps, my commitment is to provide more than a system of steps and principles. In this book you will find a way of relating that can open the possibility of entering into a future worth having with your spouse, regardless of the trying circumstances you may (and probably will) face.

Be open to a new future in your marriage. Be open to transformation. Be open to God bringing the new into your relationship.

Now close your eyes and imagine yourselves meeting each other for the very first time, just as Adam and Eve did. Begin to think of your spouse as a whole new person to explore, to walk with, to enjoy! Think of your spouse as a unique and perfect gift given to you by the Creator with no strings attached.

My friend, get ready to let go of the old and experience the new.

Chapter One

The Consumer vs. the Kingdom

“The level of thinking that created the problem is not sufficient to solve it.”

Albert Einstein

This book is about challenging the marriage assumptions that have prevented you from seeing new possibilities in the uncharted waters of *Us*. The first assumption that simply must go is that you or your spouse needs to change in order for your marriage to improve.

As difficult as it may seem, I want you to consider the possibility that nothing about you or your spouse needs to change.

Nothing at all.

Beyond this, I ask you to consider the reason that you began thinking that one of you needed to change. Could it be that you have unwittingly embraced the consumerism of our culture and applied it to your precious wife? Your precious husband? Such that you began to think of that person as a commodity? That's exactly where Mark and Rene were at when they came to see me.

Mark and Rene, a forty-something couple with fifteen years of marriage under their belts, spewed venom back and forth at each other during our marriage coaching session. The verbal onslaught was tough to listen to, even though I've worked with hundreds of couples and heard it all.

Mark furrowed his brows, glared at his wife, and then looked at me. “You know Dan, I can’t stand being married to Rene any longer! If I had known this marriage was going to be like this I never would have gotten married. Now we have four children and I feel like I’m trapped!” Mark’s rage bubbled over. It was obvious he was purposely trying to hurt his wife with his words.

Rene looked disgusted. “Married? Really? You really believe we’re married? If that’s true, you don’t act like it at all!” She spoke with contempt in her voice. “For starters, you have a girlfriend in New Mexico. If you think you can continue to carry on with that woman, I want a divorce.”

Mark escalated the attack. “Well, you drove me to her. She pays attention to me when I’m around and actually cares about what I do. All you do is gripe at me for not being enough. Besides, you kicked me out so what am I supposed to do? Just wait around until you feel like inviting me back home?”

I was silent and let them duke it out with their words for a bit. I knew exactly where this conversation was going.

In a soft voice, as tears dripped down her cheeks, Rene turned to me. “Dan, I just got tired of waiting for him to do the things he said he would do.” Then she whipped her head around and faced her husband. “When you were home with us, you would get up early in the morning and go to the office, where you worked all day with women. Then, while I was stuck at home with the kids, you would go out to dinner with them. I got tired of feeling abandoned and so I decided since you were never home and always out with other women, we might as well make it official. That’s why I kicked you out. I hoped that you would soon

realize what you had lost and begin to court me again. That never happened. You seemed glad to have left. Anyway, even while you were here, there wasn't an ounce of romance left in our marriage! How do you think that makes me feel? I want a man who will put me first in his life. Honestly Mark, when we first met twenty years ago, I believed you were that man, but now I don't even know you."

Mark bristled and took a deep breath, doing his best to maintain some semblance of composure. "Dan, I'm in the fashion business. Most of the people I work with are either gay men or women. I can't help that! Why can't Rene support me? After all, I'm the one who provides a great home and pays for the kids' private school, the medical care, food, clothing—geez, nobody has had to go without anything. I wasn't seeing anybody until I realized that I just couldn't go on like that any longer. I was beginning to feel like a hermit. All Rene was doing was getting back at me for what she felt I owed her. When she kicked me out I got an apartment and, sure, a girlfriend on the side. But I needed a companion, somebody who made me feel like I mattered. I just couldn't take the nagging and complaining anymore!"

Rene turned away so that Mark couldn't see her cry. Then she said something I'm sure many of you either say yourself or hear from your spouse.

"But what about me, Mark? What about my needs?"

It was the classic "I-need-I-need-I-need" complaint. Yet nobody was really listening to anybody's need except themselves.

The frustrating part for me was that Mark and Rene had the tools they needed to turn their marriage around. It wasn't like they didn't know what they

needed to do. Though I had worked with them for about two years, they were not getting anywhere. If there was any chance of this marriage not ending in divorce, one thing needed to happen.

They needed to renew their thinking.

Specifically, Mark and Renee had to come to a transformation of how they viewed their marriage. It had nothing to do with changing their behavior or actions towards themselves and each other. Change in that sense is superficial and many times it is temporary. God has called us to rely on Him, not for changing even what we consider “wrong” with us or bad, but in how we relate to God, ourselves, and each other, as well as what we cannot not change. We don’t need to change, fix, or better the bad stuff about us, we need the kind of change we call transformation—changing how we view ourselves, our spouse, and our marriage. In other words, the way you view your spouse or a particular situation you are in—whether you are fighting again about the same thing you fought about yesterday, or your kids are rebelling in the worst way, or there has been betrayal—is what determines the quality of your life together.

This is what Mark and Renee needed to do. They had to look at their union in a completely new way. If this didn’t happen, all the tools and applications and skills they had learned to save their marriage would be useless. Why? Because they had begun to view one another as products—something they thought needed to be different or better. Therefore, they would use those tools, applications and skills to try and “fix” what they thought needed to change, like a defective product, radically distracting them from what could be new without

having to fix anything. In fact, if you pay close attention to the language they use, it is not much different than the language we might use when researching a purchase. It was time for them to stop tallying their expenses and start counting the cost.

Luke writes how Jesus was once followed by a large crowd. Jesus tells these folks something very powerful about what it really means to follow Christ and His Kingdom.

“Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one’s own self!—can’t be my disciple. Anyone who won’t shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can’t be my disciple. Is there anyone here who, planning to build a new house, doesn’t first sit down and figure the cost so you’ll know if you can complete it? If you only get the foundation laid and then run out of money, you’re going to look pretty foolish. Everyone passing by will poke fun at you: ‘He started something he couldn’t finish.’” (Luke 14:25–30 MSG)

Jesus was saying that before we even consider getting into relationship with Him, we need to count the cost. He clarified His statement by specifying that the potential cost could be loss of familial affections and those close to us, as well as the death of the traditions and habits that are a part of these relationships. Jesus pulled no punches. The cost is great.

Marriage is one of God’s tools for building His kingdom, and if we are to pioneer the possibility of a kingdom life together we must prepare to make life-

defining sacrifices. We must prepare to change the way we view life or change our purpose for living together.

This call doesn't make any sense when it comes to our culture. Why? Because we live in a "consumer"-oriented culture. It is a part of who we are because it is what we were born into. Our relationships, in particular, are immersed in consumerism.

A consumer views marriage as if it exists for individual fulfillment. If a spouse isn't being fulfilled, then that "consumer" looks for another relationship to fulfill their particular needs—whether to look good, feel good, be right, or be in control. Mark and Rene's marriage is a prime example of a consumer marriage. Remember some of their complaints?

Mark talked about his reason for dating a woman in New Mexico. He said, "I needed a companion, somebody who made me feel like I mattered. I just couldn't take the nagging, whining, and complaining!" Mark wanted to feel good by being appreciated and not be asked to live up to what he had promised. He also wanted to be right and in control, so he used his interpretation of Rene's asking him to move out as a way to justify his going out with the other woman.

Rene remarked, "I got tired of feeling abandoned and so I decided since you were never home and always out with other women, we might as well make it official. That's why I kicked you out. I hoped that you would soon realize what you had lost and begin to court me again." She also wanted to feel good and be in control. She longed to be romanced, and her way to control that outcome was to kick her husband out.

Notice the price Mark and Rene were willing to pay to manipulate the other to get what they wanted—the looming dissolve of their marriage. Many Christian couples approach marriage this same way, as a consumer, because they don't know or understand what God intended marriage to be.

And Now for Something Completely Different

Mark and Rene had entered the death spiral of the consumer marriage. For all their talk about their “needs,” they were missing their real need: A new way of understanding what marriage is all about for them as citizens of the kingdom of Jesus.

Jesus steps on the scene and says, “Where's My kingdom in all of this? What are you about beyond My kingdom? Your personal fulfillment and satisfaction are the means to the end. There's nothing temporary about your marriage, and it is not disposable. You stick with each other and work diligently to develop your oneness, even if it is deeply dissatisfying and unfulfilling for long periods of time. Abandon your consumer marriage mindset and come and follow me. I will train you in how to stick with something and not be stuck with it!”

I don't have a program to prescribe, or a list of marriage pointers to post on the fridge. I want you to enter something completely new, together. Set the past aside. Don't even look back there, not even as a frame of reference. What I'm offering is total transformation, something truly, completely new. Something unprecedented, unparalleled.

Surrendering Certitude

The question before us is, Will we take Jesus up on His offer or will we allow our precious marriages—our families for generations to come—to go down with the ship of the consumer mindset? Let's focus in and look at the difference between the two types of marriages in greater detail.

The consumer marriage says: "I will be who I ought to be as long as, and to the degree, that you are who you ought to be." The kingdom marriage says, "I will be who I ought to be whether you are or not."

If you are anything like me, you're probably asking, "Why would I be who I ought to be if the other person is taking (or may take) advantage of me?" or "Why should I change if my spouse doesn't (or may not) want to change?" or "Why should I do all the work if my spouse doesn't (or may not) want to work just as hard as I am?" These questions are all grounded in the fear of the unknown, which is a huge part of consumer thinking.

Here is what I mean: The one thing we as consumers want from products is predictability. We want to know exactly what we will get, how they will work, who will be delivering them, when they will arrive, and how much they will cost. In short we want to have as much control as we can possibly get, with the most efficiency and convenience possible. Anything outside of that is unknown, uncertain, and definitely uncomfortable. Therefore, we strive to maintain control at all costs and eliminate any risks of encountering or dealing with the unknown.

Surely it is no accident that because of our innate need for this type of certitude, God calls those of us who desire to be united with another to be married. This union, in His eyes, depends on submission instead of control. In

marriage, when we submit to the unknown we become open to the rewarding depths of its mysteries. One of my favorite passages about this concept is found in Ephesians and is a pictorial example of a kingdom marriage that counters the consumer lifestyle.

Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.

Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands.

Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They're really doing themselves a favor—since they're already “one” in marriage.

No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it. That's how Christ treats us, the church, since we are part of his body. And this is why a man leaves father and mother

and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become “one flesh.”

(Eph. 5:21–31 MSG)

What strikes me most when I read this Scripture is the way Christ treats the church—through loving, honoring, respecting, and giving. This illustrates for us the manner that each husband is to treat his wife and how each wife is to honor her husband. Paul’s commission to us powerfully aligns with Jesus’ words in Luke about counting the cost. In both passages we are called to submission. If we want to be Jesus’ disciples, we must submit to Him and follow His example. If our marriage is to be a blessing to us and our community, we must submit to each other.

While our culture has taught us that the highest reward is to be served and be the master of our own destiny, we are told something contrary in the Bible. God reminds us that the greatest value in life is to submit and give ourselves over to God and one another. Becoming a servant will bring forth a greater blessing than this consumer world could ever give us. As it relates to marriage, submission is an opposing force to certitude, our need to be in control, and our beliefs that we know everything. The bottom line is that being a know-it-all is an obstacle to embracing mystery in marriage.

Think about this. Do we know everything about God? Of course not. Actually, the one thing we can be certain about is how inexhaustible the mystery of God is, as Job declared.

Do you think you can explain the mystery of God? Do you think you can diagram God Almighty? God is far higher than you can imagine, far deeper than you can comprehend, stretching farther than earth's horizons, far wider than the endless ocean. If he happens along, throws you in jail then hauls you into court, can you do anything about it? He sees through vain pretensions, spots evil a long way off—no one pulls the wool over his eyes! Hollow men, hollow women, will wise up about the same time mules learn to talk.

(Job 11:7 MSG)

The foundation of life is God, and He has revealed Himself as mystery. This characteristic and the way He has invited us to discover and experience who He is reflects the very nature of mystery inherent in marriage. When we abandon our certitude and instead submit to God and then to one another, we open the door to the possibility of continual renewal. We stop pigeonholing ourselves, our spouse, and our marriage into what we think we know about them. And it is only by embracing mystery that we can begin to experience a transformational kingdom marriage.

Possibilities?

One night, Mark showed up at my house with steam pouring out of his ears. It was obvious he was desperate. “Dan, I need to talk to you. I can’t take Rene’s nagging any longer. All she wants to do is try and control me. She is so insecure that I can’t stand being with her! I can’t do this anymore. It’s over.”

Frankly, I was taken back by his certitude about where Rene was coming from, so I asked him how he knew she was insecure. For the next hour, Mark and I talked about that supposed surety. Mark also remarked that there was more bad than good in the marriage.

I reminded him about the “for better or for worse part” he uttered in their marriage vows and asked, “Isn’t that what you promised her? That you would stick around for better or for worse?”

Mark thought for a moment and said, “Sure, but she just won’t submit to me!” (Ah, spoken like a true consumer. I have heard this same thing from so many people of faith.)

After talking with him a bit, I learned that many of Mark’s Christian friends thought Rene was rebellious. I asked him to consider another point of view. I brought up the passage in Ephesians about submission and asked him what level of submission men are called to.

Mark replied confidently, “We are to be the head of the family!”

“Actually,” I pointed out, “it says we are to love our wives as Jesus loves the church and gave Himself as a sacrifice for her. My question to you is, if we are to love our wives as Jesus loves the church, who actually gave themselves first, Jesus or the church?”

“Jesus did.” Mark said in low tones.

“And who was crucified for the church to see her resurrected?”

“Jesus was.”

“The Bible says Jesus’ love was ‘marked by giving not getting,’ yet when we talk about your relationship with Rene,” I said. “You dwell on what you are not getting. I wonder how anybody would tend to feel if they were constantly reminded of their insufficiencies?”

“I get your point,” Mark retorted. “But the bottom line still is that all she does is gripe.”

I probed further, “Are you certain that is all she does?”

“Okay, not all the time. I know it isn’t healthy to use the words “always” and “never,” but she does it most of the time!”

I asked Mark if he was certain what Rene was doing was complaining. Could she, in fact, be doing something else that he was not able to see because he was so blinded by what he was so sure he knew?

Mark thought about what I said for a moment and then looked at me. “I am so tired of this relationship and how hard it is to just connect on anything. I think I just want to be done with it.”

I paused for a minute, weighing my response. “Mark, I do get you are being honest about how it feels for you, but do you think your certainty that the relationship is what you have described has anything to do with your despair? I mean, if Rene is who you are certain she is, and there is no possibility that she could be any other way, then I understand your despair. But what if things were NOT exactly the way you have them set in your head? Would it matter? If there was another possibility, would you like to know about it?”

“Yes, I would want to know if I am missing something.” Mark let out a frustrated sigh. “But it just doesn’t seem worth the time!”

“According to who? You? Rene? Your kids?” I asked with an edge in my voice.

“You’re right. I guess there can’t be much possibility if I am so certain about who she is, how she will respond, what she says, and what she wants.”

(Bingo!)

“Mark, what if the loss of your romance for Rene had little to nothing to do with her?” I inquired.

A sense of surprise came over his face and he inquired, “What do you mean?”

“If you think you know who she is, what she will say and think, as well as how she will react, then there are no new possibilities available. There is no mystery in the relationship and therefore no sense of anticipation for what God may be doing between you. No mystery equals no romance!”

“Perhaps that has something to do with the despair I’m feeling,” Mark mused.

I wondered out loud and asked, “Do you think seeing Jennifer contributes to that sense of despair?”

“Why would you say that?”

“It seems obvious to me that the more you see her, the more you will need to be right about these judgments you have about Rene so you can justify seeing Jennifer. That way you don’t have to be open to who you and Rene can be

together. But sooner or later, Mark, you will have to explain this to your children. The prices are huge for the few fleeting moments of self-satisfaction you are gaining with Jennifer. Now that is a real formula for despair.”

Mark sat still for a few moments and then came back strong. “All this wondering about my certitude about Rene seems like a waste of time. I have been with her for fifteen years. I really do feel like I know how she will react.”

“Mark, I am asking you to consider and explore what you are making up about her reaction. When she complains about things, do you investigate her complaint? Have you stopped and wondered what she is trying to communicate by her complaining?”

His answer was immediate. “Yes. She is trying to control me because she is insecure.”

“Are you certain she is insecure? Perhaps part of submitting to another is being open to who your spouse is outside of your prejudice of them. I know you have your historical evidence to validate your judgment of why Rene reacts the way she does, but how much time have you spent questioning that certainty?”

Mark still wasn't fazed. “Dan you don't understand what it is like to live with her and her nagging. She doesn't care and I don't see any good what could come out of this. This is just too much suffering to have to go through.”

I made one last attempt. “Mark, you know the suffering Aileen and I have gone through in our marriage, right?”

He nodded his head in acknowledgment while I reminded him of my story. “My wife and I were discussing divorce and were separated in our own house for

a year. We saw no possibility that we would ever care enough for each other to ever be intimate again. But we decided that our son deserved the chance of us trying. We needed to at least try and trust God. We needed to at least try to devote some time to exploring our own judgments of each other. We needed to at least try and understand where the other was coming from outside of the record of wrongs we had built up to bolster our judgments of each other.

“Our hope and prayer was that God would somehow draw us into some new possibilities for each other. We realized we had loved one another once before. We experienced great passion for one another, much like you and Rene have shared in the past. We kept believing that God would open possibility in the suffering if we were willing to love each other as we wanted the other to love us. We were determined to get out of the consumer mindset that had done nothing except ruin our marriage.”

Something hit home. Mark promised to think about it and we ended the conversation.

Mark needed to abandon the what's-in-it-for-me mentality and discard his certitude about Rene's feelings, thoughts, and actions. He needed to embrace the possibility that could emerge from exploring the mystery of who she is and who they could be together.

I know this because this is what saved my marriage. I gave mystery a chance. The second I was able to allow mystery to seep into my thought process about my wife ... the second I was able to admit that perhaps I didn't know what she was thinking or the reasons for how she would react to particular things ...

the second I was able to allow God to intervene and transform my heart to give without expecting ... was the second that the possibility opened for transforming our relationship.

Letting Go of Yesterdays

Experiencing this renewal and other possibilities that emerge from embracing the unknown is impossible until we let the past die. We need to let go of yesterday. The record of the past is the foundation upon which we built up a structure of false assumptions. The more we attempt to recapture the past, the more we miss the “new” God is doing now.

In the Bible God tells us, “For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun” (Isa. 43:19 NLT). Part of counting the cost and picking up our cross is trusting God in letting the old die so He can begin a “new.” This is what it means to embrace the kind of mystery Jesus talked about of losing your life in order to gain it (see Matt. 16:25).

Embracing mystery and letting go of the old is never a comfortable process. It is ambiguous and uncertain. But this is what prompts us to cling to our faith in God. And this is what demands His intervention.

You may be thinking *I don't know if I can let go of feeling neglected or I'm not sure how to stop thinking about my wife's infidelity or Can my husband and I really find peace in the middle of this tumultuous marriage with all we've been through?*

The beauty of a kingdom marriage is that the designer is God Himself. He is the one who is able to renew our marriages by eclipsing the past with new

possibilities. Even in the midst of the suffering, pain, and brokenness of a failing marriage, if we submit to God instead of submitting to our selfish, consumer-oriented desires—wanting to be in control, be right, look good, and feel good—He can renew our inner being and, ultimately, our marriage. This only happens, however, if we reinvent our relationship to the past, which will transform the power it has over us and give Him permission to bring about transformation.

When we allow God to get into the middle of our marriages and submit to His will, He not only transforms our character, but He transforms the value of the very things that caused us harm or were unhealthy in the past. God's intervention in these things creates an opportunity for healing and renewal. Even our failures as spouses can be turned into learning lessons that can bless our marriage and even others.

Sure we have to designify our past—the hurts we've been caused, the hurts we've caused—but there is more to transformation than just that. God has the power to take the bad things, even what we consider our character flaws, our lapses in judgment, our bad decisions, and turn them into blessings in disguise. God transforms us by taking those things we judge as bad or evil that we have thought, said, or done and turning them into strengths or gifts, if we are willing to live in the light. This is what spiritual transformation is all about.

A year or so after counseling Mark and Renee, my wife and I had dinner with them and they shared with us how God transformed a particular aspect of their marriage that relates exactly to what I'm talking about.

Mark admitted that he finally realized how selfish his need for Renee's attention had been, especially when it came to their sex life. He said they had a breakthrough in this regard because not only had their sex life increased in quality and quantity, but their intimacy in conversation had been dramatically heightened during this time.

Rene nodded her head in agreement. "When Mark turned that sensitivity from himself on me," she explained, "I was completely overwhelmed by his love and appreciation. He recognized things about me I didn't know anybody could see or appreciate. It transformed the way I view him and I began to experience respect where I formerly experienced contempt."

Mark chimed in. "In the beginning, I couldn't take Rene's sharp edge and eye for detail. To me she seemed critical. But as I began to understand her perspective and she made room to investigate her own assumptions, her griping transformed! The 'edge' that I viewed as a threat was really a powerful commitment to integrity and congruity. Instead of hearing her as if her intentions were solely to criticize and knock me down, I started considering what she was seeing. This transformation opened up my eyes to other areas that we had been lacking in, like finances and our relationship with our kids. Though our willingness to be so open initially made us uncomfortable and even hurt in some ways, I realized how powerful it is to have a friend who cares for our future more than just living in the status quo. We are truly becoming a family because we can see specific situations we can pray into and discuss that make a real difference in our way of being together!"

Mark and Renee both agreed that this kind of transformation came through their willingness to suffer through being misunderstood, making mistakes, and feeling alone—all the emotions and feelings that are endured when we let go of past and allow God to step into our suffering and bring light to our darkness. Standing in the middle of challenges like these pays spiritual dividends far beyond what we know is possible.

What's my point? Suffering as it concerns a hurting marriage can bring possibility. It can transform your union and yield the passion to bring you closer to your spouse. It can lead us to love as God has ordained it. Here, in the mere shadows of this world, faith hangs on to the possibility that what looks temporarily harsh and horrible can be transformed into something that is eternally passionate and life-changing. Faith is the antithesis of the consumer mindset, which says that anything unpleasant should simply be discarded and replaced.

A New Beginning

Mark and Renee got to the devastating point in their marriage where I was mediating their divorce. Two years of hardcore counseling seemed to be worth nothing as I did my best to wisely help divvy up their assets. It was a gut-wrenching process to orchestrate.

When the subject of the custody of their children came up, the mood transformed from bitterness to sadness. Mark and Renee burst out, almost simultaneously, that they didn't want to go through with the divorce. It was a surreal moment. It was as if all the things we discussed came alive in one moment for the two of them. They wanted to give their marriage another chance.

They wanted to really listen to each other. They wanted to let go of what they thought they knew about the other person. They wanted to allow God to intervene with His love.

Mark and Rene have now been married for twenty-four years. They are very much in love and are enjoying their renewed, God-designed kingdom marriage. As a matter of fact, they recently shared with me that their romance continues to increase as they maintain their trust in God and embrace mystery while working with the other tools we originally practiced in our sessions. They say no to the temptation of being a consumer spouse. They resist asking, “What’s in this for me?” and continue to let go of their addiction to be right and in control. In doing all of these things, they are influencing the kingdom of God in a powerful way.

When will that surreal moment of surrender come for you in your marriage? What will it take for you to realize that God has called you to a mystery not a purchase agreement? That He has invited you into a conversation, not stump speech to promote your personal agenda? Be encouraged that no matter how bad you think your marriage is right now, there is hope. All is not lost.

HIGHLIGHTS

✓ A consumer-oriented marriage teaches us that we are the focal point of our marriage. It's about our needs getting met. It's about us.

✓ God commissions us to live a kingdom marriage where the relationship is the highest good. We are called to be who we ought to be, even though our spouse may not be who they ought to be.

✓ The first step to experiencing a renewed and transformational marriage is to look at it and start living it from a kingdom perspective. Otherwise whatever tools you apply will be used to accomplish the purposes of a consumer, not a servant in the kingdom of God.

✓ Being in a kingdom marriage means submitting to God and your spouse. We are called to give of ourselves in a sacrificial way.

✓ When we submit in this fashion, we embrace mystery. God is part mystery and so we, created in His image, are part mystery. When we understand that we don't know everything about ourselves, our spouse, or our marriage, we open the possibility to experience our marriage and our spouse in new ways.

✓ Letting the past go is critical to moving forward into a kingdom marriage, where God is the focal point. He is the one who can bring transformation, even out of our pains and suffering. He is the one who can turn what we thought were curses into blessings.