

Reason to Continue

Everyone searches for hope. Everybody looks for a reason to continue. Everyone hooks their daily functioning to some kind of dream. Everyone wants to know that what they give themselves to will prove to be worth it. Human beings don't live by instinct. Made in God's likeness, we are rational beings. The things we do and say are rooted in deeply ingrained thoughts and desires. There is a way in which it is accurate to say that we are all on one big, lifelong, treasure hunt. Your treasure may not be my treasure, but we're both treasure hunters nonetheless. If you didn't think the things you are doing would pay off in some way, you'd probably quit doing them.

Tom was struggling and ready to pack it in. No, it wasn't that he had been dealt some disaster that had left him devastated and alone. In fact, from a distance, it seemed that Tom had a pretty good life. He had a bright, beautiful, and intelligent wife. He had three beautiful children under the age of seven. His job was never boring or mundane. Yet Tom toyed with the desire to quit his own life. It simply wasn't enjoyable anymore. He and Dara seemed to function with low-grade irritation toward one another all the time. Their schedule was ridiculously demanding, and their children seemed to be in need of endless attention. Tom felt that there was seldom a day in which he didn't upset Dara in some way. He was tired of working hard and having little to show for it, and he couldn't find much reason to continue.

Cindy lay in bed awake. She was looking at Mac. It was hard for her to grasp that the man she was lying next to was the same man who had

COMMITMENT 1: We will give ourselves to a regular lifestyle of confession and forgiveness.

COMMITMENT 2: We will make growth and change our daily agenda.

COMMITMENT 3: We will work together to build a sturdy bond of trust.

COMMITMENT 4: We will commit to building a relationship of love.

COMMITMENT 5: We will deal with our differences with appreciation and grace.

COMMITMENT 6: We will work to protect our marriage.

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swept her off her feet. As a tear coursed down her cheek, she remembered Mac's infectious smile and his sense of humor. She thought about how Mac had the ability to make the most mundane things enjoyable. She remembered getting excited at the sound of his voice; but no more. Somewhere along the way Mac had quit being Mac. He seemed perennially distracted and frustrated. He spent his time watching sports or on the computer. Going to bed was particularly hard for Cindy. She longed for a little bit of tenderness before they both caved into exhaustion and slept, but there was no tenderness. Mac would crumble into bed, sullen once again, mumble good night, give her a perfunctory kiss, and roll over into sleep. Night after night Cindy would lie awake searching for a reason to continue.

From the beginning, Erin knew that Will was very close to his family, but she never thought it would be like this. Erin feels like an outsider in her own life. She is tired of spending every holiday and vacation with Will's family. She is tired of all the intertwining of marriage, extended family, work, and church. How many holidays has she spent watching Will and his brothers having the time of their lives, quite oblivious to the fact that she isn't? She had long ago faced where Will's loyalty lies, and she knows that there will never be a decision that Will won't discuss with his family. She has thought a lot about what the Bible says about "leaving and cleaving," and in her heart of hearts she knows that Will has never left his family. Erin is tired of being the outsider and is finding it hard to continue.

Nathan stood there with the crumpled note in his hand. He had found it several weeks ago on the floor of their walk-in closet. Things have been hard since then. Anita had made no denials. She had become emotionally infatuated with a coworker. No, this relationship had not been physical in any way. In fact, they had never been together outside work, but the note was devastating nonetheless. Anyone reading it would've called it a love letter. Nathan doesn't know why he keeps it. He doesn't know why he digs it out day after day and reads it again and again. He just does. Anita seems remorseful and is doing everything she can to make amends. Nathan is thankful that she quit her job, but he can't get beyond the note. It stands in the middle of his life like an Everest that he knows he needs to climb

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but never will. It is as though the note has taken away every reason he has to continue.

Sandy looks at the uncooked egg that her three-year-old has just dropped on the floor, and she wants to scream. She feels more like a custodian than a wife. It seems to Sandy that day after day she gets up to clean and straighten things until she goes to bed, and then she gets up and does it all over again. She lives in sweats and sneakers; those days of feeling attractive have almost faded from memory. Fred has gained some weight and doesn't look too great himself. She passes by the full-length mirror in the upstairs hallway and thinks, "What happened to us?" The morning when the first-years-of-marriage photo album had fallen off the closet shelf and onto the floor, she had hit the wall. It seemed that the pictures were of a different couple from a different time and place. The comparisons were devastating. She is tired of a domestic's existence, and she is not finding much encouragement to continue.

Brandon is simply tired of the hard work. It is difficult not to wish for the early days once again. Being with Jessie had been so much fun. He had loved the spontaneous freedom of their relationship and schedule. He had loved the fact that Jess seemed ready for anything at any time. Back then he knew it wouldn't always be that way, but he never imagined that it would be like this. With his new job and the arrival of the twins, he and Jess do little but work hard. Busy and exhausting, life isn't very much fun, even in the rare moments when they have time to be together. When Brandon works late, Jess complains that he isn't home to help, and when he is home to help, she complains that he isn't making enough money. Brandon summarized it well to a coworker: "When you feel that you can't win, it's hard to continue trying."

Nora and Chris are both tired of arguing, but they don't know how to stop. They get up on different sides of the universe every morning and look at everything from opposing perspectives. They are both convinced they are right and are constantly frustrated that the other doesn't see things their way. It has gotten to the point where everything seems to matter. The crumpled towels in the bathroom or the dried-out cheese in the refrigerator have become much bigger issues than they ever should have been. They would both say that they love one another, and they apologize after the heat of another argument has waned, but they don't

stop arguing. It is an unhappy existence, and they both feel it. Quietly they both wonder what it will take for things to be different and what in the world they will do if nothing changes.

Not the Way It Was Meant to Be

It happens to everyone. It is the unavoidable reality of marriage. Somehow, somehow, every marriage becomes a struggle. Life after the honeymoon is radically different from the honeymoon that preceded it. The person you loved to play with, you are now living and working with. The person who was once your escape from responsibility has become your most significant responsibility. Spending time together is radically different from living together. Reasons for attraction now become sources of irritation. We are all confronted with the fact that in some way our marriage is not what it was meant to be. Why? Well, the reasons are found in what we looked at in the first chapter.

Somewhere along the way you realize that you, too, are a sinner, married to a sinner, and you are together living in a broken world. Sometimes this reality just makes mundane little moments more difficult than they should be, and sometimes it means facing devastating things you thought you would never face. But it happens to all. At some point you need something sturdier than romance. You need something deeper than shared interests and mutual attraction. You need something more than marital survival skills. You need something that gives you peace of heart and strength of resolve when you aren't feeling romantic and your problems are getting you down.

Everyone's marriage becomes something they didn't intend it to be. You are required to deal with things you didn't plan to face. In every marriage sin complicates what would otherwise be simple. In every marriage the brokenness of the world makes things more complicated and difficult. In every marriage either giddy romance wanes and is replaced with a sturdier and more mature love, or the selfishness of sin reduces the marriage to a state of relational détente.

So, what do you do when your marriage becomes what it was not intended to be? What do you do in those moments when you aren't so attracted to your spouse? Where do you look when you are irritated, hurt, or discouraged? Where do you reach? Where do you run?

Rooted in Worship

So, what does give you reason to continue when the little problems have gotten under your skin or the big problems have left you devastated? What does produce a marriage with sturdy love, unity, and understanding? I think the answer I am about to give will surprise many of you. Here it is: a marriage of love, unity, and understanding is not rooted in romance; it is rooted in worship. Now, you may be able to read all the words, but you still might not understand the depth of the insight of this principle.

What does it mean to say that a marriage is "rooted in worship?" The word *worship* is a tricky word. When the average person hears the word *worship* he thinks of a gathering, of hymns, an offering, and a sermon. But there is a biblical truth embedded in this word that is vital to understand if you are ever going to figure out why you struggle in your marriage and how those struggles will ever get solved. Worship is first your identity before it is ever your activity. You *are* a worshiper, so everything you think, desire, choose, do, or say is shaped by worship. There is simply no more profound insight into the reason people do the things they do than this, and once you get hold of it, it opens doors of understanding and change that were never before opened to you. Let me explain.

When the Bible teaches that we are worshipers (see Rom. 1:19-25), it is not first talking about a religious function that is separate from the other aspects of our more regular functioning. No, in naming us as worshipers, the Bible is providing for us a radical insight into fundamental human motivation. Because you are not an animal, which functions by ingrained instinct, the things you do and say are driven by some kind of purpose. In other words, whether or not your words and actions make sense on the surface, you have acted or spoken for a reason. The most general and fundamental reason for doing what you do is worship. Now, you are probably already sensing that this insight needs further explanation.

Think about this. Isn't it interesting that some of the things that upset you don't bother your spouse at all? Why is it that something that delights you is, at the very same time, a thing that your husband or wife could easily live without? Why are some things much more important

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to you than to others? And why is it that your list of what is important doesn't completely agree with your husband's? Why are there themes to your anger (certain times, places, situations, relationships, etc.) and certain themes to your discouragement? Well, all these things I have been describing are connected to worship.

When the Bible says that we are worshipers, it means that every human being lives for something. All of us are digging for treasure. All of us are in pursuit of some kind of dream. Behind everything we do is some kind of hope. Every one of us is in constant pursuit of life. Perhaps you're thinking, "Paul, I get all this, but I don't understand how it helps me understand my marriage." Let me take you further.

Being a worshiper means that you attach your identity, your meaning and purpose, and your inner sense of well-being to something. You either get these things vertically (from the Creator) or you look to get them horizontally (from the creation). This insight has everything to do with how a marriage becomes what it is. No marriage will be unaffected when the people in the marriage are seeking to get from the creation what they were only ever meant to get from the Creator.

Comfort had become Jeanie's functional god. No, she hadn't quit going to church. She loved Sunday worship services, and she loved her pastor's preaching, but comfort is what ruled her heart. Jeanie got her comfort from turning her home into a museum to her domestic dexterity. Jeanie owned a thousand decorating magazines. She was always redecorating or remodeling. She cleaned relentlessly and was obsessively neat. She would tell herself that she wanted to make her home a beautiful place for her family, but what drove her was not concern for her family. Jeanie had attached her identity, her inner sense of well-being, to the beauty of her home.

Jeanie was never really relaxed at home; neither were her husband and family. Jeanie didn't want her family to wear shoes in the house. She was upset at every hint of disorder and went after whoever she thought was the culprit. In a moment of anger, Jeanie's husband captured it very well: "Jean, we don't have a home to come home to anymore. This place is not our home; it's your museum, and we are feeling less and less welcome here!"

Tony had attached his identity to success. He had no idea that what

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he was supposed to be getting from the Creator, he was seeking to get from the creation, but that is exactly what was going on. The place where Tony looked for the success that made him want to get up in the morning was his job. Tony was good at what he did; the more he did it, the better he got, and the better he got, the more money and power he was given. It was all very exciting and intoxicating. It was as if he were living a dream. No, work wasn't perfect by any means, but it gave him a reason to get up in the morning.

But with every new promotion, the pressure got greater and the hours got longer. By the time Tony got home, long after his wife and children had eaten dinner, he had little energy left for his family. Yet something even deeper than this was going on. Because Tony got his value as a person from his job, when he drove away from his job and toward his house, he was driving away from what gave him value. His marriage actually existed outside his circle of value. So, while Tony would tell you that he loved his wife, he was not excited to arrive at home after work. He was easily irritated and often a non-participant in what was going on.

Abby hooked her meaning and purpose to Cameron. She didn't know it, but he had become her personal messiah. She would say that he was all she had ever wanted in a husband. You would think that would mean she was always happy and satisfied in her marriage, but the opposite was true. Abby was perennially dissatisfied. She got up every morning and rode the roller coaster of every action, reaction, or response that Cameron had toward her. She paid too much attention to his tone of voice, the look on his face, and his body posture. Even the littlest things had the potential to wreck her day. She was not only focused on how Cameron responded to her, but she also watched very closely how he responded to other women. For Cameron, it was marriage as a final exam, and he felt he was always being given a failing grade. It was all very exhausting and unappealing. Cameron needed a reason to continue.

I have become more and more persuaded that marriages are fixed vertically before they are ever fixed horizontally. We have to deal with what is driving us before we ever deal with how we are reacting to one another. Every relationship is victimized in some way when we seek to

get from the surrounding creation what we were designed to get from God. When God is in his rightful place, then we are on the way to putting people in their rightful place. But there is more. I am convinced that *it is only in the worship of God in our marriages that we find reason to continue.*

What Does a Marriage Rooted in the Worship of God Look Like?

Paul said something startling in Galatians 5:14: "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (NIV). Now, I've thought about this many times. If I had written those words, "The entire law is summed up in a single command," I think I would have followed with, "Love God above all else." But that is not what Paul wrote. How is it that love of neighbor summarizes all that God has called us to? The principle embedded in these words is incredibly practical and insightful once you see it. It is only when I love God above all else that I will ever love my neighbor as myself. At the foundational level, the difficulties in our marriages do not first come because we don't love one another enough. They happen because we don't love God enough; and because we don't love God enough we don't treat one another with the kind of love that makes marriages work.

Consider the Ten Commandments: it is only when we keep the first four commands (having to do with the worship of God) that we will keep the last six commands (having to do with love for our neighbor). *Sturdy horizontal love always begins vertically.* Lasting, persevering, other-centered living does not flow out of romantic attraction, personality coalescence, or lifestyle similarity. It is only when I live in a celebratory and restful worship of God that I am able not to take myself too seriously and I am free to serve and celebrate another.

I probably taxed your patience here, and you're thinking, "Come on, Paul, get to the point and help me understand what this looks like!" Worship that gives you sturdy marital love and a reason to continue will flow out of three ways that you must worship God.

① *A marriage of love, unity, and understanding will flow out of a daily worship of God as creator.* It is only when you look at your spouse and see the glory of God's creative artistry that you will treat her with

the dignity and respect that a healthy marriage requires. God created every aspect of your personhood. He administrated every choice of your hardwiring. He determined how tall you would be, whether you would tend to gain weight, the color of your eyes, the texture of your hair, the shape of your nose, the size of your hands, the tone of your voice, your innate personality, your natural gifts, the tone of your skin, your natural degree of physicality or athleticism, and whether you are mechanical, analytical, or relational. You didn't choose any of these things. You didn't wake up at six months and say, "I think I'll grow up and be a mechanical guy," or "I'm going to work on developing a long, thin nose because that will benefit the symmetry of my face."

All these choices were made by the Divine Artist who has infinite creativity. But there are moments in our selfishness, when that other person is in the way of what we want, that we all wish we could rise to the throne of the Creator and re-create our husband or wife into our own image, or at least into someone who would be easier for us to live with. The relational wife wants to turn her mechanical husband into her clone. The analytical husband wants to re-create his more emotionally wired wife into a dispassionate thinker like himself. The husband allows himself to be irritated by the screechiness of his wife's voice, or the wife is impatient with how slowly her husband does everything.

In subtle and not so subtle ways we all question the Creator, and in so doing we dishonor and disrespect our husband or wife. We end up criticizing the other for choices he or she didn't make. We all end up asking the other to change in areas where change simply is not possible. I cannot think myself taller. I cannot alter my natural Creator-initiated range of gifts.

When we celebrate the Creator, we look at one another with wonder and joy. When you look at your spouse and see the Creator's glory, then you feel blessed by the ways he is different. You are amazed and respectful of the experiences and perspectives that he has brought into your life, which you never would have had without him. And you look for ways to communicate your honor for him and what the fingers of the Creator formed him to be.

② *A marriage of love, unity, and understanding will flow out of a daily worship of God as sovereign.* You've probably noticed that your

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life hasn't worked according to your plan! Last week didn't work the way you had planned it to work. Each of our stories is being written by Another. Think about this: fifteen years ago you couldn't have written yourself into whatever situation you are in as you are reading this book. In the same way, your marriage is an unfolding drama written by the wise control of a loving and sovereign God.

I was confronted with this in the very first moments of my relationship to Luella. I stood behind her in the very first lunch line of a new college year. The line was on a campus in South Carolina. Luella was raised in Cuba, and I was raised in Toledo, Ohio. There is no possible way that we could have controlled all the things that would have to be controlled to guarantee that we would be in that line together, not only on the same day, but at the precise same moment during that day.

God ruled the whole process. He controlled all the cultural influences that shaped us. He controlled all the family values that helped shape us. He controlled all the situations, locations, and experiences that helped shape the particular ways that we think about and respond to life.

In marriage, we bring all those cultural, familial, experiential influences with us. So, we come into marriage with a list of givens that aren't the givens of our spouse. We come with cultural expectations that aren't the expectations of the other. We come in with schedule, aesthetic, and relational expectations that the other person doesn't have. One expects dinner to be a quick moment of food consumption, while the other expects dinner to be a time of relaxed eating and conversation. One person doesn't really care if the house is messy, while the other was trained to expect and maintain a neat environment. In one family, the roles of husband and wife were very defined and evident; in the other family they were there, but blurred. One family thought of money as something to be spent; the other thought of it as something to be saved. We could multiply example after example.

It doesn't take long in marriage before you realize that your spouse doesn't share your instincts. At that point, either you worship God as sovereign and celebrate the different way of looking at the world that your spouse has blessed you with, or you dishonor him by trying to rewrite his story. For example, the house you live in shouldn't be a reflection of one of you. It should be a beautiful mix of the sovereignly

produced sensibilities of both. Many husbands and wives carry with them the pain of dishonor and disrespect that results when their spouse has mocked or denigrated their way of doing things or rejected their family and their way of relating or doing things.

But when you begin to celebrate the sovereignty of God and how he formed you and brought you and your spouse together for his glory and your good, you quit being irritated by your differences and start celebrating how your life has been enhanced by them. As a result, you will not only give room to your spouse's sensibilities, but you will honor him or her in what you do and say in the moments when you are confronted with the differences in your approach to the very same things.

③ *A marriage of love, unity, and understanding will flow out of a daily worship of God as Savior.* There is no area that is more important than this. It doesn't take long to realize that you have married a sinner, and what you do when you make this discovery will determine the character and quality of your union. You will only respond in a way that is right, good, and helpful to your spouse's sin, weakness, and struggle when you are celebrating the transforming grace of an ever-present, always-faithful Redeemer.

You cannot let your responses to your spouse in these moments be driven by hurt or self-righteousness. They must be driven by worship. What does this mean? Well, first it means that when you celebrate God as Savior, you are confronted with the reality of how much you are in desperate need of his grace. This makes it impossible for you to look at your spouse as the only sinner in the room, or more of a sinner than you are. The fact is that no one gives grace better than someone who is convinced that he needs it, as well.

Worshiping God as Savior also means that you find joy in being part of the work of grace that God is unrelentingly committed to doing in your spouse's life. So, when your spouse blows it, you will not throw her sin in her face. You will not make her feel guilty for how hard her failure makes life for you. You will not use her sins against her. You will not keep a detailed history of her wrongs against you. Rather, you will look for ways of incarnating the transforming grace of the Savior. You will be ready to encourage her when she fails and restore her when she falls, and you will not treat her as less righteous than you.

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Where will you find the reasons to continue working on your marriage in those disappointing moments when those reasons are most needed? Well, you won't find them in your spouse. He or she shares your condition; your spouse is still a flawed person in need of God's transforming grace. You won't find them in the ease of your circumstances. You still live in a world that is groaning and broken. You won't find them in surface strategies and techniques; your struggles are deeper than that. You will only find your reasons to continue by looking up.

When your heart rests in the amazing wisdom of the choices of a powerful Creator, you have given yourself reason to continue. When your heart celebrates the myriad of careful choices that were made to bring your stories together, you have given yourself reason to continue. When your heart is filled with gratitude for the amazing grace that you both have been and are being given, you have given yourself reason to continue. You are not alone. Your creating, ruling, transforming Lord is still with you. He has brought your stories together and placed them smack-dab in the middle of his redemptive story. As long as he is Creator, as long as he is sovereign, and as long as he is the Savior, you have reason to get up in the morning and love one another, even though you aren't yet what he created you to be.

