

Ready or Knot?

12 Conversations Every Couple
Needs to Have before Marriage

SCOTT KEDERSHA



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Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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To Kristen

We dated.

We were “knot” ready.

We broke up and fell in love with Jesus.

We dated again, I put a ring on it, you said “Yes!”
(among other things), and we tied the knot.

I love you more.

Contents

- Foreword by Gary Thomas 11
- The Best \$20 You Will Spend on Your
Relationship 15
1. What Is the Point of Marriage Anyway? 23
Why “You Complete Me” Is a Big, Fat Lie
2. Are We Looking to Win or Seeking to
Understand? 37
*The Most Important Skill You Need in Your
Relationship*
3. How Much Does Our Faith Really Matter? 55
Building Your Marriage on the Right Foundation
4. What If You Say Tomato and I Say Tomahto? 71
*Learning to Live with Each Other in an
Understanding Way*
5. Will We Clip Coupons or Max Out Credit Cards? 85
A Biblical View of Money and Financial Stewardship

6. Who's in Charge, and What Are Our Biblical Roles? 99
The Part of Marriage TV Shows Never Get Right
 7. How Can We Pursue Emotional Intimacy? 113
How to Be Completely Naked while Fully Clothed
 8. What Do We Need to Know about Sex? 129
Finding Fulfillment between the Sheets
 9. Do I Have to Visit Your Parents? 147
How to Thrive in Your Relationships with Family and In-Laws
 10. Are We Roomies for Life or Best Friends? 161
Doing Life with Your Constant Companion
 11. None of Their Business or Better Together? 177
Pursuing Community as a Couple
 12. What about the Kids? 193
Figuring Out the Future of Your Family
- How Do We Break Up, Stop Having Sex, and Eight Other Frequently Asked Questions 207
- Final Word: Till Death Do Us Part 219
- Acknowledgments 223
- Notes 227
- About the Author 233

Foreword

As a Boy Scout, I never made it past Tenderfoot. The next rank up was underwhelmingly called Second Class. It just didn't seem worth the effort to work toward something as humble as Second Class, so I switched my focus to baseball.

One of the things that held me back was that I was so terrible with knots. I momentarily learned one or two in an attempt to get a merit badge, but I forgot how to retie them fifteen seconds later. Nobody in the entire troop trusted me to tie down the tent we'd be sleeping in. While I knew the names—the slip knot, the trucker's hitch, the bowline, the double fisherman's knot—all my fellow scouts would have chosen a Brownie over this Tenderfoot in order to secure our shelter.

God, on the other hand, excels at knots. He can take the two most diverse substances on this planet—man and woman—and tie them together in a ceremony so that the two become one: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will

become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh” (Matt. 19:5–6).

There’s something about such “knot tying” that delights the heart of God. Remember what Jesus did with James and John? A seemingly offhand comment packs a powerful punch when you reflect on what it means. After mentioning James and John, Mark tells us that Jesus “gave [them] the name Boanerges, which means ‘sons of thunder’” (Mark 3:17). Jesus gave two brothers, two different people, *one name*. They were something *together* that they weren’t individually.

Such unity is so undervalued in our individualistic times that pursuing true unity as a married couple can be a prophetic act of faith. Psalm 133:1 proclaims “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity,” which Jesus emphasized with his famous prayer: “I pray . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:20–21).

More than marriage is about sex and children, it’s about unity. Time-wise, sex takes up less than 1 percent of a married couple’s time, and nobody else witnesses it. Unity covers everything the couple does and says, even when they’re not together, and everyone can see it. And while you can have a marriage without children, you cannot have a marriage without unity. Christian marriage is a humble, ironclad, surrendered commitment to a God-inspired and God-tied unity.

Scott Kedersha has written the “marital scout’s guide” to what knots need to be tied, how to tie them, and, on occasion, when to know that these two strands of rope should actually *not* be tied together (or at least not yet) in order to achieve such unity. He’s even thrown in the occasional illustration to teach you how to tie the knots of conflict

resolution, communication, finances, friendship, extended family dynamics, sexual intimacy, and spiritual intimacy.

Don't skip a step. I know from past experience that skipping a step can make your knot look like a tangled phone cord by the time you're through. To get the most out of this manual, pray for God's enlightenment, surrender to His words, and pursue His agenda and design for marriage (which Scott so ably captures here) and you'll experience the true blessing and miracle of being tied into an indissoluble knot whose craftsman is none other than God Himself.

Few experiences on earth match the beauty, wonder, and fulfillment of an intimately connected marriage. *Ready or Knot?* will show you how such a knot is tied.

Gary Thomas,
author of *Sacred Marriage* and *Cherish*

The Best \$20 You Will Spend on Your Relationship

September 15, 2001, was one of the greatest days of my life. It was the day Kristen and I became husband and wife. Four days after the tragedy of 9/11, our wedding ceremony provided some good news in a week when we all needed something to smile about.

I still remember almost every detail about that day. The white pews in the chapel of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta were decorated with purple, red, and maroon flowers. The candles on the groom's side looked as if they were about to fall over. I felt goose bumps rising on my arms as our friend Todd played "You Are Awesome in This Place" on his guitar.

Then I straightened my tuxedo and nervously walked with my groomsmen to our designated spot at the front of the sanctuary. My best man, my brother Chris, stood by my side. Turning to face the pews, I was grateful to see our friends

and family who had gathered to celebrate our marriage and lavish us with love on our wedding day.

After what seemed like an eternity, the organ finally began to play the first few familiar notes of the wedding march—and the large wooden doors opened to reveal my stunning bride. I remember being awestruck by Kristen’s beauty as she walked down the aisle to marry me. I admired her splendor and poise and grace. I wasn’t able to restrain my tears of joy as the love of my life joined me to exchange our marriage vows.

Why This Book?

I love a good wedding. I still get a little choked up every time I see a father walking his daughter down the aisle to meet her adoring groom. She usually holds it together while the groom can’t restrain his tears. I enjoy the conversations, the food, the dancing—and of course, the wedding cake! I’ve been to morning weddings, evening weddings, indoor weddings, outdoor weddings in the 100-degree Texas heat, and even a wedding on the eighteenth hole of a prestigious golf course! One of my favorite parts of my job as a marriage pastor is getting to attend and officiate so many weddings.

But the best weddings are the ones when I’m excited and hopeful for the bride and groom. We’ve all been to weddings when we’re anxious about the couple’s future. I don’t want that to be your story. I want you to be ready to tie the knot! When you share your vows and say “Till death do us part,” I want you to know what and who you are committing to.

Lately, I’ve noticed many couples spend more time planning their wedding than preparing for their marriage. The

pressure to have an amazing wedding has increased significantly since Kristen and I said “I do.” Today, many engaged couples spend hours and hours looking through bridal magazines and websites, poring over details and pinning images that tend to pull the focus off the marriage and onto the wedding day. Because our society, and even our churches, put a lot of pressure on couples to have a beautiful wedding, far too many couples slide by important conversations and questions that beg to be asked.

Don’t misunderstand me: there is nothing wrong with having a great wedding—unless it’s at the expense of a great marriage.

In 2017, the average price of a wedding in America landed at a whopping \$25,764.¹ This average cost doesn’t even include some of the extraneous expenses such as the rehearsal dinner and honeymoon.

In contrast, the book you’re holding probably cost you, at most, twenty bucks. I wrote *Ready or Knot?* to help seriously dating and engaged couples take the best next step in your relationship. Whether you are considering marriage for the first time or thinking through the realities of remarriage, reading this book can be the best investment you will make in your relationship.

Let’s be honest: no one plans to end up divorced or stuck in a lifeless marriage. Every couple comes into marriage with the best of intentions. Yet we continually see couples, both inside and outside the church, whose marriages end in divorce or misery.

This book guides you through twelve essential conversations you need to have with your significant other before you tie the knot, including ones you’ve been avoiding and some

you probably didn't even know you should have. When you and your future spouse take the time to talk through each of these issues honestly and thoughtfully, you will be well prepared for a healthy, successful marriage.

Who Is Scott Kedersha, and Why Should I Care What He Says?

Since 2006, I have served as a marriage pastor at Watermark Community Church in Dallas, Texas. I love my job and am grateful that I get to help couples prepare for and start their marriages well.

During the past thirteen years, I've helped lead thousands of seriously dating and engaged couples, and I've officiated close to one hundred weddings. I've served alongside couples with successful marriages, and I've counseled struggling couples who wish they had never gotten married in the first place. Along the way, I have learned countless lessons about dating, relationships, and marriage that I want to pass on to you.

How Will This Book Help You?

Before I tell you how to prepare for marriage, we need to talk about traffic lights. Imagine driving your car and approaching a traffic light. Based on the color of the light, you either move forward (green), slow down (yellow), or stop (red). The light is designed for your safety and lets you know the best next step.

After reading *Ready or Knot?* you should know whether the status of your premarried relationship is green, yellow, or red.

- Most of you will come to a green light. You will realize you are ready to tie the knot as you move forward, confirmed in your decision to get married.
- Some of you will come to a yellow light. You might decide to tap the brakes on your relationship. You will know what questions need to be answered and what issues need to be resolved before the two of you move forward. You are not ready to break up, but you're also not ready to tie the knot until you make some changes.
- Others will come to a red light. After you and your significant other have the essential conversations described in this book, you will realize that the best decision you can make is to break up and go your separate ways.

What You'll Find in This Book

Each chapter of *Ready or Knot?* features the inspiring story of a real couple, combined with God's view of marriage from the Bible. These stories take an honest look at challenges faced by couples just like you, whose marriages have been transformed by applying the biblical truths you are about to discover.

As you read this book, you'll see what makes successful couples stick out from those whose marriages ultimately fail. You will find answers to many of your questions and learn things like how to deal with each other's differences, how to love difficult in-laws, and how to share the less glamorous parts of your past. Most importantly, you will learn about the gift of marriage and the One who created and designed this gift.

In every chapter, you will find a Knot-Tying Tip with practical ideas to help you strengthen your relationship. At the end of each chapter, look for the following three sections:

- **Am I Ready?** These questions are intended for individual reflection. They give you the opportunity to think through and personalize what you have learned so you can walk away with a better handle on the topic and your relationship.
- **Strengthening Our Knot.** These questions are designed to be discussed with your significant other. Share your individual responses to the Am I Ready? questions and then spend some time talking through the Strengthening Our Knot questions together.
- **Closing Prayer.** Each chapter includes a short prayer for you and your significant other to pray together as you finish the chapter and discussion.

James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” As followers of Christ, we need to humbly admit when we need help and then seek God’s wisdom. As a couple getting ready for engagement or marriage, you and your future spouse will need all the help, guidance, and wisdom you can get!

What’s the Best Way to Read This Book?

The information in this book is helpful on its own, but you would be wise to read it alongside someone who can help you prepare for marriage. I encourage you and your significant

other to read *Ready or Knot?* with a married mentor couple you love and respect.

I'm proud of you for taking the time to prepare for marriage. I have prayed, many times, for you as you read this book. I want you and your significant other to pursue each other in the best possible way as you prepare for engagement and marriage. If you are humble, open, and teachable, then it will go well for you.

Ready or knot, here we go!

Am I Ready?

- What do you hope to get out of reading *Ready or Knot?* Of all the relationship books out there, why did you choose to read this book?
- What are you most excited about in your relationship? What are some of your concerns about yourself, your significant other, or marriage in general?
- How would you define a successful marriage?
- Who do you know who has a successful marriage? What specific things do you admire about their relationship?

Strengthening Our Knot

- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about your excitement and/or your fears and concerns about your relationship.
- How do you think that you, as a couple, will get the most out of reading this book?

- Write down the names of some couples you might ask to help you talk through this book. Then make a plan to contact at least one couple this week and schedule a time to meet together.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we need Your help as we process next steps together as a couple. Please grant us the wisdom to discern how You are leading us as a couple. Help us to be honest, open, teachable, and pure as we prepare for whatever You have planned for us in our relationship. Thank You for the gift of marriage and for Your perfect design for relationships. We need You. In the name of Your Son, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

1

What Is the Point of Marriage Anyway?

Why “You Complete Me” Is a Big, Fat Lie



“Happily ever after” did not turn out the way they thought it would.

Dan and Tracy had been married for twenty-five years, and they hated each other. One night they started throwing things at each other—pillows, coasters, and whatever else they could get their hands on. She even took her favorite marriage book and tossed it into the fireplace. The pages of *Sacred Marriage* burned up in the fire along with all their dreams for the future.¹

Yet twenty-five years earlier, Dan and Tracy had been so in love. They couldn’t wait to tie the knot! What happened?

Dan: We met in 1983 at a Campus Crusade for Christ meeting, when one of my roommates brought Tracy to a campus event.

Tracy: He stuck his name tag on my back, and the flirting began. A few days later, dressed in all black, I doorbell-ditched his house and left him a plate of cookies.

Dan: She was beautiful, smart, and everything I had dreamed about in a wife. She laughed at my jokes and played the piano. She only knew one song, but she knew it well! When I heard her play, I dreamed of the days our future family would spend singing around the piano.

They started dating and got engaged. Tracy and Dan met one time with the pastor who would marry them, and he warned them that they, like all other couples, would argue about in-laws and money. They decided they did not need further counsel. After all, they loved each other.

Unfortunately, things didn't go like they imagined.

They never dreamed that someday their daughters would catch Tracy in the middle of an affair. Neither did they dream that Dan would confess to his own affair. They never imagined that their evenings would consist of yelling, arguing, and blaming, followed by lonely nights in separate bedrooms.

When they walked down the aisle, Dan and Tracy envisioned the American dream of marriage, 2.5 kids, a dog, and a home with a white picket fence. Neither of them thought much about their past hurts, habits, or families of origin.

Dan: I really didn't know the woman I was marrying, and Tracy didn't know me. I didn't know about her sexual abuse. She didn't know about the alcoholism in my family, my passive dad, or that I had no idea how

to be a husband. We dragged our messed-up past into marriage and had no clue how to deal with it.

Tracy: We also learned not to call 911 to stop a big fight when we were naked. It turned out the police were right around the corner. I had no idea they could arrive so quickly!

What went wrong? And how can you prevent a heart-breaking journey like theirs?

There's nothing wrong with wanting a few kids, a comfortable home, and a happy life together. What this well-meaning couple lacked—and what so many other couples miss before getting married—is a deeper understanding of marriage and the commitment necessary when a husband and wife say “I do.”

Dan and Tracy didn't have parents who modeled a godly marriage. They never saw their parents open up God's Word and live out the truths of the Bible. Dan's father had cheated on his mom, and Tracy followed the unhealthy patterns she saw modeled in her parents' home. They simply continued the cycle.

Why Start with Bad News?

This might seem like a depressing place for a premarried book to start, but before you can fully grasp the good news of marriage—and believe me, there is good news—you must understand the whole picture. Your view of marriage will affect how you walk through every part of married life.

Let's get back to Dan and Tracy.

Dan: We got pregnant five months into marriage, and for the next twenty years, we threw ourselves into parenting, careers, and playing pretend at church week after week. Even though everything looked good on the outside, our marriage was rotting from the inside out. Without authentic friendships, an abiding faith in Christ, or any spark in our relationship, I looked for satisfaction in the wrong places.

Tracy: After twenty-three years of marriage, I decided it was time to get what I thought I deserved. I was done with our boring life and started looking for satisfaction outside of Jesus and outside my marriage. I threw myself headfirst into working out and started caring a whole lot more about what I looked like than I cared for my husband. One day I made eye contact with another guy in the gym, and before long it turned into flirting, an emotional affair, and then a full-blown affair.

Dan: I knew our marriage lacked physical, spiritual, and emotional intimacy. I wasn't caring for Tracy and soon followed in the footsteps of my father by having an affair of my own. Things weren't great at home, and I thought I deserved to get what I wanted, so I pursued intimacy with someone who wasn't my wife.

After two decades of marriage, Dan and Tracy had become roommates. No more flirting. No more songs around the piano. Their kids were grown, and all they had was a shell of a marriage. They were isolated, bored, and looked elsewhere for their satisfaction.

They forgot what it meant to be married.

What Is Marriage?

There is a lot of confusion and misunderstanding in our world about marriage. For example, I've heard the following questions from couples thinking about marriage:

- Is marriage temporary?
- Is marriage the same as cohabitation?
- Most couples I know seem pretty miserable, so is this what I should expect?
- Can't marriage be like a contract you sign for a few years and then decide to either re-up or move on with someone different?²

We need to look at God's Word to answer these questions. From cover to cover, the Bible addresses relationships—God's relationship with humanity, family relationships, friendships, and much more. While the Bible doesn't address every facet of marriage, it does give us a firm foundation for the most important aspects of marriage.

Marriage Is Created by God

From the beginning, the Bible shows us that God created and designed marriage. After God brought Eve to Adam in the Garden of Eden, Scripture says, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Gen. 2:24–25). Ephesians 5:21–33 gives further explanation of God's purpose and design for marriage (more on that in chapter 6).

God is worthy of our trust, and He didn't make a mistake when He created the marriage relationship. God's Word provides the final word about marriage, but too often couples choose to follow their own design and purpose of marriage.

Marriage Is a One-Flesh Relationship

In Matthew 19:5–6, Jesus said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ . . . So they are no longer two, but one flesh.” What does it mean for marriage to be a one-flesh relationship?

Oneness is emotional. Adam and Eve were fully naked and felt no shame around each other (Gen. 2:25). There is a level of emotional intimacy exclusively intended for marriage (more on this in chapter 7).

Oneness is physical. The man and woman were naked in the Garden of Eden, and they enjoyed the benefits of nakedness. They didn't need a talk about the birds and bees. They didn't need pornography to show them what to do. The man woke up from a deep sleep and realized God had given him a great gift: a woman with no clothes. They became one flesh and enjoyed the fruits of sex and physical intimacy. This is huge! When you understand the physical nature of oneness, you realize that in the marriage relationship, sex is not dirty, wrong, or sinful. God created physical oneness for us to enjoy in marriage (more on this in chapter 8).

Marriage Is Permanent

God intends marriage to be a permanent, lifelong relationship. In Matthew 19:6, Jesus said, “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

We often have to fight against a common perception in culture and even in the church that the marriage relationship can be temporary. Yet the Bible clearly teaches that God intends marriage to be a permanent relationship, separated only by death.

Marriage Is Mysterious

Something significant, supernatural, and mysterious takes place when a man and woman become husband and wife. The apostle Paul said in Ephesians 5:31–32, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

A wedding is not just a ceremony and then cake and a honeymoon. In marriage, a man and a woman leave their families (more on this in chapter 9). And then, in some mysterious way, God makes their marriage a permanent relationship that reflects Christ’s relationship with the church.

Marriage Is Companionship

In Genesis 2:18, God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Marriage is designed to fill our human need for companionship.

Your spouse should be your closest and best friend. Friendship and companionship may be the most underdiscussed and undervalued aspect of marriage (more on this in chapter 10).

This companionship is enhanced when you and your spouse strengthen relationships with friends who can provide both of you with counsel and biblical community (more on this in chapter 11).

Marriage Is an Opportunity to Multiply and Fill the Earth

In Genesis 1:27–28, God blessed Adam and Eve and then commanded them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

Of course, you don’t have to be married to have children, and certainly not every married couple is required to have kids. But the Bible teaches that God’s ideal way to “be fruitful and increase in number” is by having and parenting children within a marriage relationship (more on this in chapter 12).

Marriage Is a Covenant Relationship

Some couples think marriage is a limited, conditional contract where either spouse can exit the marriage when these conditions aren’t met. Some denominations believe marriage is a sacrament where God mystically dispenses divine grace upon the husband and wife. In my faith tradition, marriage is viewed as an unbreakable, unconditional covenant relationship.³ A covenant view of marriage is built upon a foundation of trust and provides the greatest opportunity for safety and intimacy in marriage.

I believe the Bible teaches that the unconditional, unbreakable covenant relationship of marriage is similar in many ways to God’s covenant relationship with His children (Mal. 2:14; Ezek. 16:8; Gen. 2:18–25).

Knot-Tying Tip

Learn What Marriage Is Not

God did not create marriage to make you happy. In his excellent book *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas writes, “What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?”⁴ Anytime you look to marriage to make you happy or to satisfy you fully, you will be disappointed.

One of my favorite movies when I was in my twenties was *Jerry Maguire*, starring Tom Cruise as Maguire and Renee Zellweger as single mom Dorothy Boyd. In one of the more famous scenes from the movie, after talking about the complex and cynical nature of the world, Jerry expresses his true feelings for Dorothy. He looks across the room and says three dramatic words: “You complete me.”

That scene gets me every time. It makes for a powerful, albeit cheesy, dramatic moment. But the theology is terrible, and it sets up the viewer for false expectations. No human relationship will ever fulfill you, bring you ultimate happiness, or complete you.

Happiness might be the by-product of a godly marriage, but God never promised that marriage will make you happy. When the going gets tough, it’s easy to think you married the wrong person or that an affair will make things better. Some turn to alcohol, gambling, work, hobbies, or even their own children to find happiness. But only Jesus Christ will satisfy you.

So before you think your significant other will fulfill you or make you happy, think again. Find your ultimate satisfaction in a relationship with Jesus.

Marriage Provides a Picture of God’s Love for the Church

Your marriage communicates a message. In Ephesians 5:21–33, the apostle Paul describes how a healthy marriage relationship illustrates Christ’s relationship with the church (more on this in chapter 6).

Putting all the above aspects of marriage together leads to the following definition: *marriage is designed by God to be a lifelong, covenant relationship between one man and one woman that gives a picture of Christ's loving relationship with His bride, the church.*⁵

Why a Bible-Based Understanding of Marriage Is Important

Your understanding of marriage will determine how you respond when your spouse disappoints you. When you want to quit and move on, you have to deal with the fact that marriage is permanent. When you want to stop working on your marriage, you need to remember that your marriage is a picture of Christ's love for the church. Just as Jesus's love for you doesn't end, so your love for your spouse shouldn't end either.

If you don't have a biblical view of marriage, then you will seek a way out as soon as your spouse disappoints you. You *will* have unmet expectations—every couple does. Your spouse will let you down, and you will let your spouse down. When it happens, your foundational view of marriage will impact the actions you take and the way you respond.

Fortunately, God's love for us is not dependent on our actions. Your commitment to your spouse shouldn't be either.

The Rest of the Story

Despite all the pain in their relationship, Dan and Tracy didn't want a divorce. But they knew their marriage couldn't remain in its current state. They decided they needed help.

They started to do some hard work on their marriage and heart work in their own lives. They invited others into their mess and started the healing process of confession, grief, forgiveness, and reconciliation. They met with a professional Christian counselor, went to a marriage recovery ministry called re|engage, studied their Bibles, and read marriage books together.⁶

Dan: Even with our problems, from the beginning, we said divorce was never an option. I encourage all couples to make this decision before you say “I do.” If you’re not in alignment on this one, then you’re not ready to get married.

Tracy: Whenever we talk with premarried couples, we tell them to do all the hard work they can before marriage so they understand what they are getting into when they decide to tie the knot.

Today, Dan and Tracy have one of the most exciting, life-giving marriages I’ve ever seen. They have fun and serve the Lord together.

Not long ago, Tracy, Dan, and their daughters flew to Hawaii to celebrate their thirty-year anniversary, where Dan and Tracy renewed their marriage vows. Their daughters read from Ephesians 5:22–33 and Colossians 3:12–17 and celebrated with their parents. This time Dan and Tracy understood what they were getting into as they said “I do, again.”

Am I Ready?

- Do you tend to think of marriage as a temporary, conditional contract you can get out of if you become

unhappy or unsatisfied? Or do you see marriage as a permanent, unconditional covenant designed by God, intended to mirror His love for us? Why did you answer this way?

- What did you grow up believing about marriage? How did your parent(s) model for or teach you what marriage should or shouldn't look like?
- If you commit to marriage, what could your spouse do that would lead you to seek a divorce? Read Malachi 2:16. What does this verse say about God's attitude toward divorce?
- What did you learn in this chapter about what God's Word says about marriage?
- What encourages you the most about Dan and Tracy's story?

Strengthening Our Knot

- Discuss your answers to the Am I Ready? questions about the meaning of marriage.
- What would you do if you found yourself in a similar situation to Dan and Tracy? Would you agree to move forward together and heal your marriage, or would you look for a way out? Who would you call to help you process your next steps?
- Review the aspects of marriage listed in this chapter and discuss each one with your significant other. What excites you and what concerns you about marriage?

Closing Prayer

Lord, thank You for offering us a relationship with Yourself through Your Son, Jesus. We are grateful for the incredible gift of marriage and for our dating relationship. Please help us understand the nature of Your relationship with us and the meaning of marriage. Thank You for Your sacrificial, unconditional, selfless love, and help us model this same type of love for each other if we get married. Help us avoid any dangers that could lead to isolation or divorce. Thank You for Your endless love for us. In the name of Your Son, Jesus, we pray. Amen.