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# *Commitment to the Covenant:* LDS Marriage and Divorce

THE Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has long stressed the eternal value and nature of marriage while warning against the tragic and ill effects of divorce. Prophets, past and present, have counseled Church members to make their marriage a top priority in their lives and to avoid attitudes and behaviors that contribute to divorce. This prophetic counsel has more recently been confirmed by social science research showing that entering into and keeping the marriage covenant produces a happier and healthier life.

In spite of religious and scientific evidence, marriage is on the decline in America. There appears to be an even more alarming concern—that divorce has become the “default” solution to marriages that struggle even at rather modest levels. Rather than seeking resolutions to marital challenges within the marriage covenant itself, many couples are disregarding their vows and divorcing as an attempt to avoid even modest levels of marital discomfort. Although we recognize there are a number of social forces driving this trend, we believe one factor in particular has had a significant role: society has adopted a more casual regard for promises, vows, and contracts in general. This diminished commitment toward keeping promises has eroded the institute of

marriage; driving significant numbers to postpone marriage, enticing many to abandon marriage for cohabitation, and for those who are married, weakening their will to endure modest challenges and tempting them to see their marriage as a temporary obligation rather than a long-term one.

Unfortunately, members of The Church of Jesus of Christ of Latter-day Saints have also been influenced by this cultural trend. We will further explore this issue and discuss ways that Latter-day Saints can inoculate themselves against adopting such attitudes toward their marital vows and realign themselves with the words of the prophets, scripture, and sound scientific research.

## The Problem: The Loss of Commitment and the Divorce Culture

Social change commonly occurs in slow and steady doses. Trends that produce new ideas and beliefs eventually establish new values and norms. Because it takes time, shifts in values usually come in subtle transitions of which society may be largely unaware. Although some of these values may be good for society, many are harmful. In these cases, unless a person becomes conscientious of and alerted to their dangers, he or she can easily slip into believing that such values and behaviors are acceptable in God's eyes. As a protection against this, the Lord has warned Latter-day Saints to "beware concerning [them]selves" (D&C 84:43). He has also cautioned that even the "humble followers of Christ" in the latter days will be "led, that in many instances they do err because they are taught by the precepts of men" (2 Nephi 28:14). This counsel provides a striking reminder that we must be vigilant when encountering social change.

One of the subtle, yet harmful, value shifts that has occurred over that past several decades has been a drift toward casualness in our commitments, agreements, and promises. Such a trend can be found in business, law, and politics, where making promises and contracts is a natural aspect of the operation of business. Unfortunately, today parties to agreements no longer

have high expectations that their contracts will be honored. Perhaps, however, no other aspect of society has been affected as significantly by this trend than has the institution of marriage. What was once a promise “until death do you part” has now shifted to “until debt do you part.” The holy binding of husband and wife is no longer seen as a firm promise “through sickness and in health” but has largely been reduced to the level of a flimsy high school promise of “going steady,” where the relationship is easily dissolved for any number of insignificant reasons.

Historically, marriage was largely viewed by both individuals and society at large with a deep level of commitment and satisfaction. From a social science perspective, this level of commitment is not misplaced. In their widely acclaimed book *The Case for Marriage*, Waite and Gallagher (2000) reported that married individuals have, on average, significantly higher levels of happiness, physical and emotional health, and financial well-being when compared to singles, cohabiters, or divorcees. In addition they found that the large majority (86%) of unhappily married people who stayed married had happier marriages five years later. In other words, “permanent marital unhappiness is surprisingly rare among the couples who stick it out” (pp. 148–149). Further analysis by Waite and colleagues (2002) found that unhappily married adults who divorced or separated were no happier, on average, than unhappily married adults who stayed married. They also reported that even unhappy spouses who had divorced and *remarried* were no happier, on average, than unhappy spouses who stayed married. Thus, if people choose divorce because they think it will bring them a sense of greater happiness that has eluded them within the marriage, existing research shows little if any evidence that their assumption is true (p. 4).

In spite of these compelling findings, the past several decades of American culture have weakened public support for the marriage vow. Marriage rates are down, and divorce is now often advocated as a solution to marital difficulties culturally, politically, and legally. According to Waite and Gallagher (2000), much of this shift in attitude can be attributed to the “privatization of marriage” in which marriage is regarded as

a private and individual decision (p. 176). When struggling with marital difficulty and considering whether to divorce, the central question often asked by individuals today is, “What would make me happy?” This question is often promoted by lawyers, educators, counselors, and even clergy, reinforcing “the idea that emotional gratification is the main purpose and benefit of marriage” (p. 176). Elder Dallin H. Oaks (2012) recently quoted a Harvard law professor in his description of the current law and attitude toward marriage and divorce: “The [current] American story about marriage, as told in the law and in much popular literature, goes something like this: marriage is a relationship that exists primarily for the fulfillment of the individual spouses. If it ceases to perform this function, no one is to blame and either spouse may terminate it at will” (p. 44). This self-focused perspective is contributing to our culture’s anti-commitment attitudes. It underlies what is driving an unprecedented increase in marital postponement and cohabitation in the United States, and is eroding the barrier that once protected society against a casual acceptance of divorce.

In the late 1960s through the lobbying efforts of lawyers, no-fault divorce came on the American scene to make divorce a faster and less judgmental legal process. It has created a legal culture regarding marriage and divorce that has spilled over into societal attitudes toward marriage in general. Being married has little distinction from that of cohabitation. “Thanks to no-fault, the marriage contract is no longer enforceable. It takes two to marry but only one to divorce at any time, for any reason, as fast as the courts can sort out property and custody issues” (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, p. 178).

How have these social and legal trends affected marriage and divorce among Latter-day Saints? McClendon and Chadwick (2005) found that most marriages in the Church continue to be strong and vibrant. When compared to the national percentages, Latter-day Saints are significantly different than their national peers showing lower age at first marriage, lower numbers of single-parent families, and larger family size. Like the national average, Latter-day Saints also rank extremely high in marital happiness. Many

scholars believe that the current lifetime divorce rate in the United States is between 40% and 50%. In their examination of the divorce rate within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, using both civil and temple marriages combined, McClendon and Chadwick (2005) estimated that the current lifetime divorce rate for returned-missionary men to be approximately 12% and for returned-missionary women around 16%. They estimated that the lifetime rate for non-returned missionary men to be approximately 38% and about 22% for non-returned-missionary women (p. 39). These data show that although divorce rates among Latter-day Saints are lower than they are in the general American public, divorce has definitively found its way into mainstream Latter-day Saint culture. Church leaders are mindful of this trend and of the ever-present attacks that Satan places on the family in general. Elder L. Tom Perry (2012) recently warned, “As we know, [Satan] is attempting to erode and destroy the very foundation of our society—the family. In clever and carefully camouflaged ways, he is attacking commitment to family life throughout the world and undermining the culture and covenants of faithful Latter-day Saints” (p. 27).

In a bold statement to members of the Church about marriage and divorce, President Gordon B. Hinckley (1991) declared:

Of course, all in marriage is not bliss. . . . The remedy for most marriage stress is not in divorce. It is in repentance. It is not in separation. It is in simple integrity that leads a man to square up his shoulders and meet his obligations. It is found in the Golden Rule. . . .

There must be a willingness to overlook small faults, to forgive, and then to forget.

There must be a holding of one’s tongue. Temper is a vicious and corrosive thing that destroys affection and casts out love. . . .

There may be now and again a legitimate cause for divorce. I am not one to say that it is never justified. But I say without hesitation that this plague among us, which seems to be growing everywhere,



*President Hinckley taught: "The remedy for most marriage stress is not in divorce. It is in repentance. It is not in separation. It is in simple integrity that leads a man to square up his shoulders and meet his obligations. It is found in the Golden Rule." © Auremar.*

is not of God, but rather is the work of the adversary of righteousness and peace and truth. (pp. 72–74)

This prophetic warning voice helps us as Latter-day Saints to recognize that a thorough and complete commitment to the marriage vow and to God is at the center of a successful marriage. Our purpose now is to discuss more specifically this counsel and to find ways to apply it. Before we do so however, we want to note that we are discussing ideas and solutions that can aid us in attaining the *ideal*. We are well aware that in mortality attaining the ideal is not always possible, but seeking after it is. As the authors, we ourselves would be defined by the current societal standard as a “blended family.” We have personal understanding of the heartache of divorce, the trauma of chronic problems that seem to have no solution no matter how hard one tries to have faith and behave well, and the sensitivity that is required to raise children whose lives are splintered between two households. This personal perspective has

supported and even strengthened our religious and scientific convictions about commitment in marriage and has contributed to our strong position about the responsibility each of us has to hold tenaciously to the ideal. Certainly, the manner in which the ideal is implemented in families will vary based on individual circumstances (see *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, 1995), but some core principles can help guide and sustain us as we make decisions regarding that implementation.

## The Solution: Fierce Loyalty to the Covenant of Marriage and to God

In light of the current societal and cultural trends regarding marriage, what can be done to stem the tide of casual marital commitments? We discuss three solutions that will revitalize marriage and reenthroned commitment at the forefront of marriage. The first is to “mean what you say” in regards to entering into and keeping the marital promise. Fierce loyalty to one’s vow will produce greater trust between spouses which in turn builds greater loyalty and investment in the marriage. Second is to “do” marriage. A marital commitment is more than just saying “yes” or “I do” during the marriage ceremony. It requires daily actions of love and service to fully honor the promise. Finally, “look to God” as a partner in the marriage covenant. His influence will provide assurances and peace for spouses that will give them greater courage and determination to work together through marital differences and challenges.

### Mean What You Say

Fierce loyalty to one’s word is the foundation of trust in all relationships, especially marriage. It has been said that

commitment is what transforms a promise into a reality. It is the words that speak boldly of your intentions, and the actions that

speak louder than words. It is making time when there is none; coming through time after time after time, year after year after year. Commitment is the stuff character is made of—the power to change the face of things. It is the daily triumph of integrity over skepticism. (Commonly attributed to Abraham Lincoln or Shearson Lehman Brothers)

When we truly mean what we say and are willing to defend our word at all costs and in all situations, we create a special bond of trust that elevates the marital relationship and protects it during tests and challenges. If we truly love our spouse, we will clearly express to them our deep loyalty to our marital commitment. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (2012) recently said that “the crowning characteristic of love is always loyalty.”

Waite and Gallagher (2000) found an interesting correlation between marital loyalty and marital investment: “The more uncertain people are that any partnership will last, the more they act as individuals and the less they act as permanent partners. But the more spouses act as separate individuals, the less they get from the marriage partnership, and the more likely the marriage will fail” (p. 180). Of course, this type of self-fulfilling prophecy also works conversely. When spouses clearly communicate to each other that they are fully committed to honoring their marital vows and that divorce is not an option, they will invest in their marriage with greater confidence, which in turn naturally promotes greater loyalty and commitment.

The Book of Mormon’s strong emphasis on covenant-making can teach us how to “mean what we say” when it comes to keeping our covenants, especially in marriage. The Nephite/Lamanite culture, like the Hebrew culture, viewed the making of an oath or covenant as a final vow, never to be broken. When problems arose or were anticipated, they either didn’t enter into the covenant in the first place or they worked within the covenant to resolve problems. They never considered that they would break the covenant. The story of Nephi and Zoram illustrates this principle. After Zoram discovered that Nephi was not Laban, as he had presumed, Nephi made an





*As spouses act like and treat their partnership as a permanent relationship, they will act more like permanent partners and less like individuals. David Stoker, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.*

oath wherein he promised Zoram that he would spare his life and make him a free man if he went with him and his brothers into the wilderness. We are told that “Zoram did take courage” upon hearing Nephi’s oath and reassurances that he need not fear for his life. To this, Zoram then responded with his own oath that he would “tarry with [them] from that time forth” (1 Nephi 4:35). Nephi then stated, “When Zoram had made an oath unto us, our fears did cease concerning him” (v. 37).

Surprisingly, this commitment to keeping one’s promise was also the belief and practice among the more wicked Nephites and Lamanites. Although they allowed themselves to commit serious sins, they were strongly socialized against violating a promise. For example, in Alma 44, Captain Moroni commanded the Lamanite army to make a covenant of peace or they would be

destroyed. Zerahemnah, the captain of the Lamanites, rejected the offer by saying, “We will not suffer ourselves to take an oath unto you, which we know that we shall break” (v. 8). Although his private goal was to deceive and murder in order to gain power, because of the cultural norms of the day, Zerahemnah was not willing to make an oath that he knew he would likely break. Later, when Zerahemnah and his army were at the brink of being destroyed, he did choose to make an oath of peace and—to the modern-day reader’s surprise—he kept it. There is no record that Zerahemnah himself ever returned.

The Book of Mormon also illustrates for us the power that keeping oaths and covenants has in unifying and building trust and loyalty. When Amalickiah conspires to be king, Captain Moroni rallies the people to defend their lands, liberty, and religion. Moroni does this by establishing a covenant and raising the title of liberty, explaining:

Whosoever will maintain this title upon the land, let them come forth in the strength of the Lord, and enter into a covenant that they will maintain their rights, and their religion, that the Lord God may bless them.

And it came to pass that when Moroni had proclaimed these words, behold, the people came running together with their armor girded about their loins, rending their garments in token, or as a covenant, that they would not forsake the Lord their God; or, in other words, if they should transgress the commandments of God, or fall into transgression, and be ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ, the Lord should rend them even as they had rent their garments. (Alma 46:20–21)

Those who entered into a covenant of liberty centered their commitment in Christ and were true to the promises they made, even at the peril of their lives. This level of commitment allowed the Nephites to synergize their trust in each other and to build the type of loyal community necessary for Moroni to lead and eventually win the war against the Lamanites.

Another Book of Mormon example that illustrates the unifying, strengthening power of keeping covenants is that of the two thousand stripling warriors. Their special preservation through several battles can be traced back to the covenant that both they and their parents made with the Lord. Their parents made an oath with God that they would never again take up their swords to battle, but rather, if necessary, give their lives as a token of their commitment. Later, so their parents could continue to honor their covenant, their sons covenanted to give their lives if necessary for the defense of their freedom, family, and country. Although they fought and many were injured, their lives were preserved through their faith in God and their belief that as they kept their commitment to him, he would deliver them (see Alma 57:26–27).

Keeping our commitments, then, is one of the most important values we can embrace. A discussion about values is not limited to a religious discussion or a recitation by the young women during our Sunday block of church meetings. Values are at the core of our daily living. We espouse values in many realms, such as spiritual/religious, health/fitness, educational/professional, family/child-rearing, civic/political, relationships with others, etc. Psychological models have begun to understand the mental health benefits of living our lives in a manner consistent with our values. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a therapy model in which helping clients pursue a life consistent with their values plays a prominent role in the therapeutic process. When values are sacrificed in the service of fears, doubts, frustrations, anxieties, disappointments, and the like, life is put into a state of paralysis. The belief that one “can only be happy when . . .” becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as the “when” often doesn’t come in the manner or in the timing that might be preferred. Instead, ACT maintains that people can experience difficulties, even chronic problems, and still move forward in their lives in pursuit of their deeply held values. “Willingness to experience difficult thoughts, feelings, and experiences is put in the service of our values. This is what makes willingness different from wallowing” (Luoma, Hayes, & Walser, 2007, p. 41). Thus, when values are sustained and pursued,

mental health and life satisfaction improves, even when external circumstances do not necessarily improve. Lorde (1997) has said: “When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less important whether or not I am unafraid” (p. 13). Thus, if we mean what we say when we commit to our marital covenants, we demonstrate to our spouse, our God, and others in our personal life a deep sense of integrity regarding one of our most important values.

### “Do” Marriage

A second solution to strengthen commitment to the covenant is to “do” marriage in God’s way. We learn in Doctrine and Covenants 19:11 that “eternal” is another name for God. Within Latter-day Saint circles, the term “eternal marriage” is sometimes used casually, spoken with an apparent assumption that once a man and woman are sealed in the temple they have an eternal marriage. However, the phrase “eternal marriage” represents God’s marriage, or in other words, the quality of marriage that God enjoys. A temple sealing ceremony is only the beginning step necessary to achieve this type of marriage. The marriage, as an entity of its own, requires daily work from both partners if it is to attain the same quality as is enjoyed in the heavenly realms.

Elder Oaks (2007) has said, “The kind of marriage required for exaltation—eternal in duration and godlike in quality—does not contemplate divorce” (p. 70). Along this vein, however, some people claim commitment to the covenant as a reason for staying in a difficult marriage, yet treat their spouse with disrespect and even contempt, or suffer passively with resignation to an unhappy lot. Allow us to be bold and assert that physically staying in the marriage is only one of many steps that are required in order to fully honor the marital covenant—one must remain emotionally and spiritually present and do all that is possible to create the type of relationship worthy of the title “eternal marriage.” Elder Oaks further said: “Under the law of the Lord, a marriage, like a human life, is a precious, living thing. If our bodies are sick, we seek to heal them. We do not give up. While there is any



*A temple sealing ceremony is only the beginning of an eternal marriage. Marriage requires daily work from both partners to attain the quality of God's marriage. Rezolution Films, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.*

prospect of life, we seek healing again and again. The same should be true of our marriages, and if we seek Him, the Lord will help us and heal us” (pp. 71–73).

We are, therefore, advocating a higher law which encourages prioritizing the building and strengthening of the marriage relationship until it can grow and flourish into one that is God-like in quality. “In the strongest marriages, husband and wife share a deep sense of meaning. They don’t just ‘get along’—they also support each other’s hopes and aspirations and build a sense of purpose into their lives together” (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 23). The following story, told by Elder Spencer J. Condie (1993) illustrates how a couple can elevate their relationship by working within the covenant:

A few years ago my wife, Dorothea, and I were walking across the grounds of a temple in a foreign land when we met a very radiant, cheerful, silver-haired sister. Her cheerful, Christlike countenance

seemed to set her apart from those around her, and I felt inclined to ask her to explain why she looked so happy and content with life.

Well, . . . several years ago I was in a hurry to get married, and quite frankly, after a few months I realized I had married the wrong man. . . . He had no interest in the Church as he had initially led me to believe, and he began to treat me very unkindly for several years. One day I reached the point where I felt I could go on no longer in this situation, and so in desperation I knelt down to pray, to ask Heavenly Father if He would approve of my divorcing my husband.

I had a very remarkable experience. . . . After I prayed fervently, the Spirit revealed a number of insights to me of which I had been previously unaware. For the first time in my life, I realized that, just like my husband, I am not perfect either. I began to work on my intolerance and my impatience with his lack of spirituality.

I began to strive to become more compassionate and loving and understanding. And do you know what happened? As I started to change, my husband started to change. Instead of my nagging him about going to church, he gradually decided to come with me on his own initiative.

Recently we were sealed in the temple, and now we spend one day each week in the temple together. Oh, he's still not perfect, but I am so happy that the Lord loves us enough to help us resolve our problems. (p. 15)

In addition to religious and scriptural insights, there are many interventions for “doing” marriage advocated within the field of psychology. A commonly cited finding in the field of Positive Psychology indicates that people tend to flourish when their ratio for positive and negative affect is 3:1 or higher (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). In this context, to flourish means “to live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience” (p. 678). Three instances of positive

emotion for each instance of negative emotion promotes flourishing, whereas ratios that fall below this level represent a state of languishing in which people describe their lives as empty and hollow. In the context of marriage, however, the standards to achieve a sense of flourishing or thriving are higher than the ratios needed to thrive as individuals. Gottman (1994), a leading marital/relationship researcher, has found that, for those couples who would rate themselves as happily married, the positivity to negativity ratio is 5:1. Although this standard of five instances of positivity for each instance of negativity may appear daunting, there is good news here—couples are not expected to be perfect in their relationships in order to feel happy, satisfied, or fulfilled with each other. In fact, there is evidence that some conflict engagement is healthy. Mistakes can and will be made, disagreements will occur, and frustrations will sometimes rise. The key to building a flourishing marriage is to increase the overall positivity in the relationship. A kind word, an expression of gratitude, or a gentle touch may be small things, but they work together to offset difficulties and can be very powerful. We read in Alma 37:7, “And the Lord God doth work by means to bring about his great and eternal purposes; and by *very small means* the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls” (emphasis added).

In addition to increasing positivity in our relationships by generating new behaviors we can also increase positivity by becoming more aware of efforts toward positivity that are already present. In one study in which couples were observed in their own homes, those in happy marriages noticed almost all of the positive things their partners did for them, while those in unhappy marriages failed to recognize 50% of the positive acts their spouses performed (Gottman & Silver, 1999, pp. 83–84).

Overhauling some of our more dysfunctional relationship patterns may also be necessary in order to build an eternal marriage that will be resistant to divorce. Gottman and Silver (1999) report certain types of negativity so “lethal” to marriage that they categorized them as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (p. 27). Those caught in such destructive patterns within the marital relationship need





*If dysfunctional patterns continue to be manifest in spite of consistent efforts to overcome, working with a trusted mental health professional may be useful. © Wavebreak Media Ltd.*

to focus on elevating their own contributions to the partnership, rather than focusing on what they believe their spouse should be doing, but isn't (p. 83).

If dysfunctional patterns continue to be manifest in spite of consistent efforts to overcome, working with a trusted mental health professional may be useful. In recent years, Church leaders have discussed the importance of utilizing mental health professionals. Elder Alexander B. Morrison (2005) has discussed the differing roles of priesthood leaders and mental health professionals to help Church members understand how each may be of service to them:

No mental health professional, regardless of his or her skill, can ever replace the role of a faithful bishop as he is guided by the Holy Ghost in assisting Church members to work through the pain, remorse, and depression associated with sin. . . . We must understand, however . . . that ecclesiastical leaders are spiritual leaders and not mental health professionals. Most of them lack the professional



skills and training to deal effectively with deep-seated mental illnesses. . . . Remember that God has given us wondrous knowledge and technology that can help us overcome grievous problems such as mental illness. (pp. 31–35)

As we examine our relationships, we can come to understand the best way to implement the idea of “doing” marriage in God’s way. Whether it be by strengthening our resolve to make our relationship more Godlike, investing emotionally and spiritually in the process, or by addressing problematic or dysfunctional behavior patterns with or without the assistance of a bishop or mental health professional, a purposeful approach to marriage will undoubtedly produce a greater commitment to the covenant.

### Look to God

Look to God within the covenant for solutions when faced with challenges or obstacles, rather than looking for a solution outside of the covenant. By remaining together and prayerfully working the problem with the Lord’s help, couples will not only save the marriage but the process will provide newfound strength, trust, and love that will provide a foundation for even greater loyalty for one another.

The Book of Mormon provides a powerful example of how looking to God can help overcome challenges in marriage. In Alma 58, Helaman explains that he and his army of stripling warriors were in dire circumstances, receiving very little assistance from the government in order to maintain the lands for which they had fought so valiantly. This created a tremendous fear in their hearts. In writing to Captain Moroni about this problem, Helaman explains:

We were grieved and also filled with fear, lest by any means the judgments of God should come upon our land, to our overthrow and utter destruction.

Therefore we did pour out our souls in prayer to God, that he would strengthen us and deliver us out of the hands of our enemies, yea, and also give us strength that we might retain our cities, and our lands, and our possessions, for the support of our people.

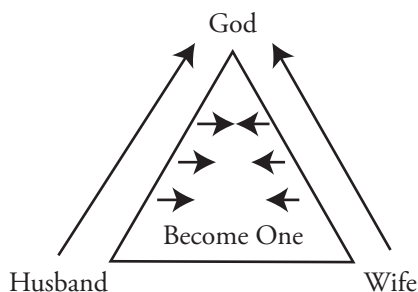
Yea, and it came to pass that the Lord our God did visit us with assurances that he would deliver us; yea, insomuch that he did speak peace to our souls, and did grant unto us great faith, and did cause us that we should hope for our deliverance in him.

And we did take courage with our small force which we had received, and were fixed with a determination to conquer our enemies, and to maintain our lands, and our possessions, and our wives, and our children, and the cause of our liberty.

And thus we did go forth with all our might against the Lamanites. (Alma 58:9–13)

When Helaman and his army felt fear and grief, they first looked to God for help by seeking him in mighty prayer. Although the Lord didn't immediately remove or remedy the problem, he did send them "assurances" that he "would" deliver them. This set off a chain reaction of feelings and events that changed their course. With assurances from God, Helaman and his young army felt peace and great faith, which in turn increased their courage and gave them a "fixed determination" to "go forth" with all their might in conquering their enemy and to "hope for a deliverance in [God]." This they did and were successful.

There is much to be learned from this story about how to work through marital conflicts and challenges. Feelings such as fear, grief, anger, doubt, and heartache surround everyone involved in marital conflict. However, like Helaman and his army, the first step a couple must take is to look to God in fervent, mighty prayer; they must "pour out [their] souls" (Alma 58:10) to God that he will strengthen and deliver them from the enemy of pride, hurt feelings, anger, misunderstandings, and the like. As couples sincerely petition Heavenly Father's help in their marriage, there may be special times



*When we look to God, he draws us toward him, and in so doing, we become partners with him in our quest for an eternal-quality marriage.*

when he helps eliminate a problem immediately and in a miraculous way; however, most likely, as in Helaman's situation, God will first send assurances which can lead to peace and great faith. Greater courage and determination will then be born in order to work together in resolving disagreements and misunderstanding and in finding a way to forgive each other.

This "look to God" principle can provide direction in psychological treatment as well. Psychologists have noted that religious convictions provide valuable tools that can be used therapeutically (Propst, 1988). One such religious concept used as an intervention in treating religious marital couples puts God at the head of a triangle with the wife and husband residing at the other two points. In this simple chart, a powerful religious and interpersonal concept is taught. When spouses are far from God, they are far from each other. The converse is also true: when they are far from each other, they are typically far from God. However, if both wife and husband as individuals and as a couple are looking to God and seeking to develop their relationship with him and grow closer to him, then as they move toward him narrowing the distance between them and making the triangle smaller, the distance between the spouses also narrows (that is, wife and husband grow closer together). Thus, when we look to God, he draws us toward him, and in so doing, we become partners with him in our quest for an eternal-quality marriage.

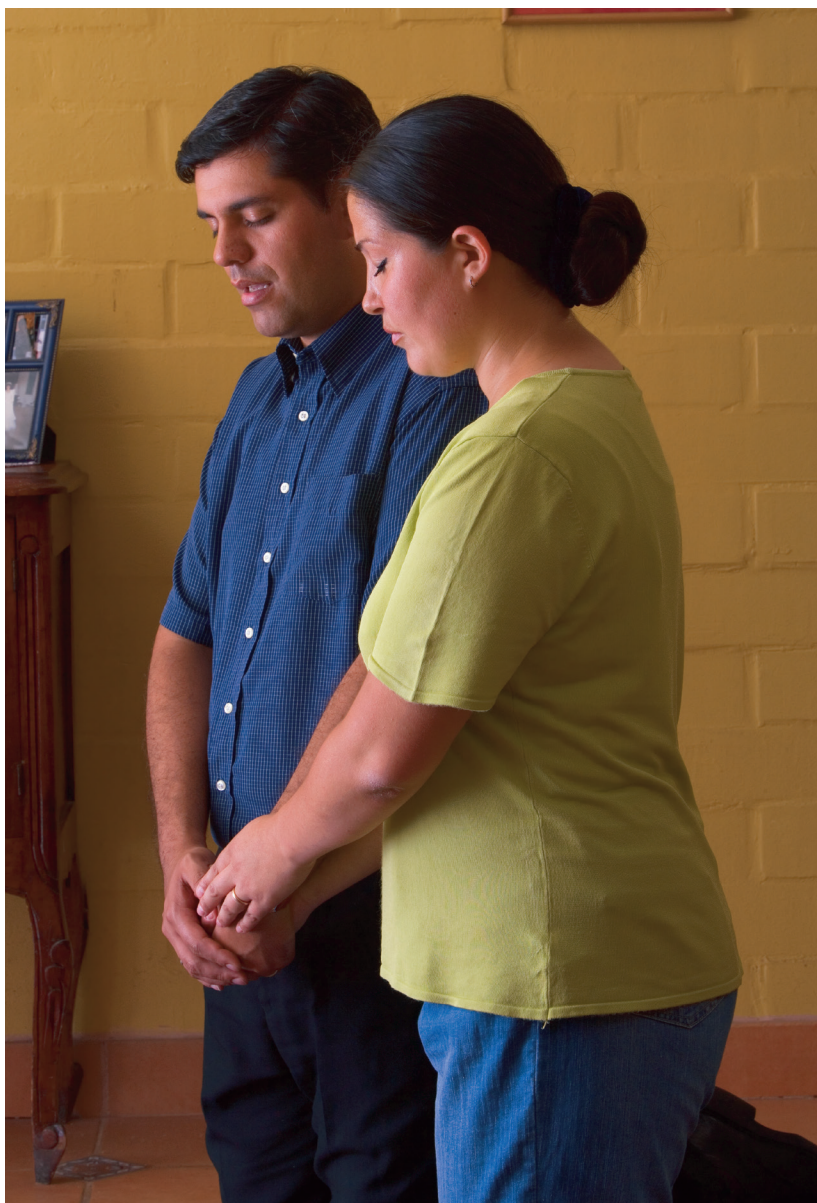
## Additional Considerations for Marriages with Ongoing Difficulties

Elder Oaks (2007) has said, “For most marriage problems, the remedy is not divorce but repentance. . . . The first step is not separation but reformation” (p. 71). There are those who humbly seek to follow this counsel and are committed to their marriage and committed to building within it a relationship of eternal quality, yet continually find themselves struggling with ongoing marital difficulties and disappointments. To these couples President Brigham Young (1862) offered this comforting insight:

I think it has been taught by some . . . that if a wife does not love her husband in this state she cannot love him in the next. This is not so. Those who attain to the blessing of the first resurrection will be pure and holy, and perfect in body. Every man and woman that reaches to this unspeakable attainment will be as beautiful as the angels that surround the throne of God. If you can, by faithfulness in this life, obtain the right to come up in the morning of the resurrection, you need entertain no fears that the wife will be dissatisfied with her husband, or the husband with the wife; for those of the first resurrection will be free from sin and from the consequences and power of sin. (p. 24)

There is hope in this declaration.

With this being said, however, we do acknowledge that there may be circumstances when it could be appropriate to “stop trying” to find a marital solution within the context of the covenant. In such circumstances the utmost care, spiritual sensitivity, and consideration must be given through fasting, humble prayer, and counsel with priesthood leaders. Elder James E. Faust (1993) provided some guidance in this area:



*Many problems within the covenant of marriage can be worked out together in prayer.  
Craig Dimond, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.*

What, then, might be “just cause” for breaking the covenants of marriage? . . . In my opinion, “just cause” should be nothing less serious than a prolonged and apparently irredeemable relationship which is destructive of a person’s dignity as a human being.

At the same time, I have strong feelings about what is not provocation for breaking the sacred covenants of marriage. Surely it is not simply “mental distress,” nor “personality differences,” nor having “grown apart,” nor having “fallen out of love.” This is especially so where there are children. (p. 35)

## Conclusion

A marriage ceremony is a brief event that starts a couple onto the very lengthy journey of marriage—two imperfect people working toward building a relationship of eternal quality. The marriage requires work and constant effort to build and maintain. It requires the commitment to remain together while the imperfections of each partner are being purged. Elder Oaks (2007) observed that “a good marriage does not require a perfect man or a perfect woman. It only requires a man and a woman committed to strive together toward perfection” (p. 73).

Current American societal standards regarding commitment to the marital covenant are low. Latter-day Saints would be well-advised to avoid following the trends toward postponing marriage or favoring divorce over tolerating imperfections in the marital relationship. The solution for Latter-day Saints is to establish and maintain fierce loyalty to the covenant of marriage and to God. When we “mean what we say” in honoring our covenants and promises, “do” marriage mindfully and purposefully, and “look to God” as a partner in our marriage, we can preserve and strengthen our relationships. President Spencer W. Kimball (1976) said: “Real, lasting happiness is possible, and marriage can be more an exultant ecstasy than the human mind can conceive. This is within the reach of every couple, every person. . . . It is

certain that almost any good man and any good woman can have happiness and a successful marriage if both are willing to pay the price.”

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