

CHAPTER 2

THE POWER OF COMMITMENT

Prioritizing Our Marriage Covenant

RICHARD: *Debra and I struggled getting along during our first couple of years together. Although the content of our arguments varied, it was generally sparked by some self-righteous criticism I made of Debra. I am embarrassed to admit that and am sorry I was so hurtful, but my poor actions added to her defensiveness against it. Her energy was fueled by an underlying fear of rejection, a fear that I would possibly leave her. Such a fear was understandable, given her previous divorce as well as the fact that I had broken up with her twice before our marriage. In addition, there were times when I would leave the house after an argument. She felt very vulnerable, and this insecurity added fuel to the fire when disagreements arose.*

I was raised to minimize, if not to completely avoid, any kind of negative emotion. Being around any kind of conflict would create a lot of anxiety in me, and I am sure it played into why it took me so long to get married in the first place. When I started dating Debra, these anxious feelings grew strong when differences arose, causing me to break up with her on two occasions. But the Spirit restrained me and I returned; I knew Debra was a very special person whom I loved and cared for, so I determined to push through my anxiety and learn how to be better and work with my emotions.

COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

Unfortunately, I didn't learn very quickly in those early years. Instead of empathizing and really listening to Debra when she had a concern or worry, I would often minimize it by dismissively giving her a quick answer to her problem. My emotional laziness, lack of warmth, and cluelessness about her processing style often led us into a cycle of distrust and anger. This didn't make me a very nice husband, and it made our marriage harder than it had to be. The arguments continued, and the intensity was high, which fueled my anxiety. These dynamics led me to want to rethink my decision about our marriage, which, of course, made Debra feel panicked and vulnerable.

As I pondered all of this, I realized that our marriage was not an all-or-nothing relationship that required me to rethink its merit after each particular argument, as I had while dating. I had made my commitment over a sacred altar in the temple of God; I knew I was committed and would not look back. But now I realized Debra needed reassurance of my commitment to the marriage. The Spirit whispered to me, "Richard, you need to tell Debra you are committed no matter what!" So that is what I did.

I don't remember the exact circumstances or place, but I sat down with Debra and said to her in the most determined and heartfelt manner, "Debra, I'm not going anywhere!" I explained that I was wholly committed to the marriage and that regardless of arguments or any other challenges in the marriage, I would be true to her and God.

This experience had a profound healing effect on our relationship. Both of us began to change. I stopped leaving the house after arguments, and, more importantly, I took on a more accepting attitude toward Debra. In the meantime, her fears started to slowly melt away. She began to trust me and trust that I wanted to be with her. As she trusted me, I felt and expressed a greater love and loyalty for her. The frequency of our arguments decreased significantly. Over the years since then, this cycle of loyalty and trust has continued to provide ever-increasing positive sentiment in our relationship; it has improved our relationship in both stability and happiness—much to our delight!

As seen here, commitment in marriage takes a tremendous amount of conscious work, sacrifice, and devotion over long periods of time. During the engagement, there is excitement over the process of creating a new life together; there is laughter, joy,

and even silly giggles. Yet once the marriage ceremony and receptions are over, the spouses are left with the reality of now living the day-to-day life they have created; this is when the real work begins. We are taught in Doctrine and Covenants 90:24 that “all things shall work together for [our] good, if [we] walk uprightly and remember the covenant wherewith [we] have covenanted one with another” (emphasis added). As we remember our marital covenant and approach our marriages with strong levels of commitment, this scripture promises that we will be able to build strong and satisfying relationships.

In this chapter, we first examine the general concept of commitment. Second, we review some cultural difficulties regarding commitment to marriage and discuss how LDS culture and doctrine impact commitment. Then we look at how commitment increases loyalty and trust in our marriage. We also discuss how our internal commitment to our marriage needs to be shown to our spouses through our outward behaviors. Lastly, we examine the principle of commitment relative to three specific types of marriages: new marriages, chronically difficult marriages, and abusive marriages.

The Principle of Commitment

Commitment is the glue of life. It’s an essential ingredient in building and holding things together. Most successful endeavors or accomplishments require high levels of commitment. It has been said about

Reflections

“I’m not going anywhere.” The reassurance that whatever else happens you will both be together, married, really does make a difference. I found the same to be true in my own marriage. When I quit entertaining any thoughts of divorce, resolving problems got much easier, and feelings of discontent left. Now I’m left wondering how many people never really commit to their marriage and suffer needlessly, simply because they keep staring at an “exit door.”

COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

commitment: “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; it is going 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.”² Thus, commitment to a worthy pursuit requires a deep level of energy, dedication, and patience, as well as a priority status.

It is important to keep in mind that commitment is not just about an approach to life in which we grit our teeth and hold on for dear life, hoping that if we hold on tightly enough, white-knuckling it, as is commonly said, we will prevail. Certainly, holding on and persistently working over the long term are frequently required in life, especially in marital relationships. However, if enduring becomes the end-all of our commitment, it doesn’t allow space for building a positive quality of life, exercising hope, calling down the powers of heaven with faith, and finding pure joy. The type of commitment we advocate invites our Father in Heaven to join with us in partnership to accomplish worthy goals (see part 3). In so doing, we bring His power and His goodness and His abilities in to bless our marital relationships and the myriad of other worthy goals and values we seek to live. The commitment we advocate is to include God in the process and to have faith in the miracles His influence will inevitably bring. It has been said: “The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would otherwise never have occurred . . . which no man could have dreamed would have come his way.”³

Commitment and Culture

As we’ve illustrated in chapter 1, in the general culture of our day we have a serious “lack of commitment to commitment.”⁴ Instead

of fixing things that are broken, as did our grandparents and their parents before them, we throw them away and buy the newest, the latest, and the greatest. And, frankly, sometimes we buy the newest, the latest, and the greatest even when the ones we have are *not* broken. Unfortunately, this has carried over into how we as a culture treat the marital relationship: marriages themselves have become “disposable.”⁵ Speaking of this trend, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf noted:

In so many societies around the world, everything seems to be disposable. As soon as something starts to break down or wear out—or even when we simply grow tired of it—we throw it out and replace it with an upgrade, something newer or shinier.

We do this with cell phones, clothes, cars—and, tragically, even with relationships.

While there may be value in decluttering our lives of material things we no longer need, when it comes to things of eternal importance—our marriages, our families, and our values—a mindset of replacing the original in favor of the modern can bring profound remorse.⁶

Indeed, in our culture today, divorce frequently becomes the solution of choice when the costs of marriage begin to rise.

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 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.”⁷ As Latter-day Saints we must not allow Satan to undermine the commitment we have to gospel living and to our sacred covenants; we must be careful to not let him hijack our attitudes about marital commitment through the subtle and overt attitudes and policies of the culture at large.

So how do we as Latter-day Saints protect ourselves against accepting a casual attitude toward commitments, in general, and

toward our marital covenants, in particular? One way is to look to the scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon, in which we find several stories of commitment. The Nephite culture had a strong emphasis on covenant making, and verbal oaths were considered final vows, never to be broken. The story of Nephi and Zoram (see 1 Nephi 4:32–37) illustrates the interpersonal benefit of this type of strong adherence to our commitments. After Zoram discovered that the man he had accompanied outside the walls of the city was not his master, Laban, as he had presumed, the newly discovered Nephi made an oath promising Zoram safety and freedom if he went with them into the wilderness. “Zoram did take courage” at Nephi’s oath (1 Nephi 4:35). To this Zoram 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” (1 Nephi 4:37). To us today this level of trust in a simple verbal promise seems shocking and perhaps even foolish and naive. Indeed, our society would have strongly counseled Nephi and Zoram to get the agreement down in writing! Yet we can learn much from Nephi and Zoram about commitment and integrity. Does our spouse feel safe in the promises we have made to them? Do we say or do things that create doubt in our marital promise? Let us follow the examples of the Nephites and commit ourselves to be committed. Let us decide to focus our energy on following through wholeheartedly with covenants and obligations that we accept in our lives and in our marriages.

Commitment and LDS Doctrine

We must never forget that as Latter-day Saints, commitment to marriage must be viewed with more seriousness than it is in broader world culture. The seriousness with which we view marriage is not just about common sense but is doctrinally based. Marriage is an eternal principle, not just a contractual arrangement between two

parties to be terminated at will. President Spencer W. Kimball taught: “Marriage is ordained of God. It is not merely a social custom. Without proper and successful marriage, one will never be exalted.”⁸ Likewise, President Russell M. Nelson explained: “Marriage between a man and a woman is fundamental to the Lord’s doctrine and crucial to God’s eternal plan. Marriage between a man and a woman is God’s pattern for a fullness of life on earth and in heaven.”⁹

The doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints offer us the possibility of exaltation *with* our spouse—one of the greatest promises our Savior offers to us! When the Apostle Parley P. Pratt heard of the doctrine of eternal marriage, he expressed his joy this way:

From [Joseph Smith] . . . I learned that the wife of my bosom might be secured to me for time and all eternity; and that the refined sympathies and affections which endeared us to each other emanated from the fountain of divine eternal love. . . . I had loved before, but I knew not why. But now I loved—with a pureness—an intensity of elevated, exalted feeling, which would lift my soul from the transitory things of this groveling sphere and expand it as the ocean. . . . In short, I could now love with the spirit and with the understanding also.¹⁰

The blessing of eternal marriage provided by the sealing covenant is a doctrine no other church offers its patrons. Christ has bestowed keys and authority upon his latter-day prophets to bind us in loving ties for eternity. The doctrine of the sealing was set forth by our Savior, Jesus Christ, as given to the Apostle Peter (see Matthew 16:19). In this dispensation, in 1829, Peter, James, and John conferred the Melchizedek Priesthood upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery (see D&C 128:20), and the keys to exercise sealing authority were given to Joseph Smith when the prophet Elijah brought the keys of the sealing power in 1836 (see D&C 110). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints recognizes that its current prophet is the only person on earth with the authority to exercise all of these keys. Once we understand

COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

this doctrine, then we as members of the Church who are sealed to our spouses through sacred temple ordinances and authorized priesthood keys should be more committed to our marriages than any other couple on earth.

The sealing ordinance constitutes a sacred covenant. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught: “A covenant is a binding spiritual contract, a solemn promise to God our Father that we will live and act in a certain way—the way of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In return, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost promise us the full splendor of eternal life.”¹¹ As we bind ourselves to each other and to Christ by way of covenant, abide in His way, and adopt His Christianity for our own, we are granted His power. As we yoke ourselves with the Savior, we must actively do our part to honor the marital covenant He has lovingly provided us. We do this by making a serious commitment to the covenant. This means that in times of relative tranquility, we focus on building, supporting, and loving our spouse; meeting their needs is important to us, and we strive to do so as best we can. It means that in times of trial, we buoy each other up or rely on our spouse for the support and love that we need, looking to them as a source of friendship, love, and strength when we feel depleted. It means that in times of marital difficulty or conflict, we actively work *within* the covenant of marriage for resolution rather than looking *outside* the covenant for a solution.

Commitment and Trust

Commitment to our marital covenant and to our spouse is highly correlated with trust: the more commitment, the more trust, and vice versa. There is a great sense of stability and peace—a feeling of safety—that comes when we know we can rely on our spouse. Elder Bednar described: “Feeling the security and constancy of love from a spouse . . . is a rich blessing. Such love nurtures and sustains faith in God. Such love is a source of strength and

casts out fear (see I John 4:18). Such love is the desire of every human soul.”¹² That trust promotes loyalty to the marriage and to the shared relationship.

Waite and Gallagher show how the correlation between trust and loyalty in marriage creates a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: the more commitment, the more trust and loyalty; the more trust and loyalty, the more commitment. In other words, when spouses clearly communicate to each other that they are fully committed to honoring their marital vows, they will then invest in their marriage with greater confidence, which likewise promotes greater loyalty and trust. This cycle repeats itself again and again, elevating the marital relationship and leading to stronger bonds and capital which will protect the marriage during tests and trials.¹⁴

Commitment and Behavior

When we are fully committed to our marriages, our behavior will back it up. Commitment in marriage is not only about whether we are committed to *stay* married. It is also about a commitment to prioritize our spouse and our marriage—to *be* married in an active and living manner (a verb, not a status marker). Perhaps we have been married for thirty years, and we feel our marriage relationship has grown a bit cold or stale. Commitment to our marriage would mean shifting the current status quo and reinvesting our energy and time into

Reflections

“My marriage thrives when Kim and I remember our covenant to each other. It’s incredibly affirming to have a wife who makes me feel that I’m first in her life, who hangs up the phone when I walk in, and who understands that I like to have time alone with her each day.”¹³

Reflections

When our children were little and there was a Church activity for my wife one weeknight, I told her to go and that I would babysit the kids. She rightfully reminded me that I was not the babysitter but the children's father. I have always remembered that. My wife reminded me of my very important responsibility of being not only her husband but also the father to my children. I know that often I am oblivious to the many responsibilities around the house that my wife knows need to be done, but I have learned that when I go and do something that needs to be done (or I look for things that need to be done and then do them), my wife really appreciates my efforts.

building anew our marriage relationship. Marriage clinician and researcher William J. Doherty commented: "Even if we have an unbending commitment to our mates, most of us are blind to how we lose our marriages by slow erosion if we do not keep replenishing the soil. . . . Commitment without intentionality leads to stable but stale marriages."¹⁵

Our level of commitment to our marriage and to our spouse is very clearly revealed in the mundane moments of our daily lives. An "accretion of mundane acts"¹⁶ demonstrates to our spouse, our God, and others where our priorities lie.

DEBRA: *The small and simple, even mundane, acts reveal our greatest priorities when done consistently over time. Richard and I have adopted a small and simple tradition to show our marital commitment to each other: sitting next to each other in sacrament meeting. I have always remembered a particular couple from a family ward I attended in my early twenties as a single adult. This couple had a lot of children, including a new baby. Yet I noticed that this couple always sat together in sacrament meeting, the husband with his arm around his wife's shoulders. This was quite noticeable to me, as it clearly contrasted with all the other couples I observed who were sitting apart, with their children in between them. This symbol of their unity was so powerful to me that when Richard and I married we chose to implement this policy and claim the blessings of it for ourselves (when Richard's callings have allowed us to sit together as a family during the sacrament).*

PRIORITIZING OUR MARRIAGE COVENANT

Sitting together in sacrament meeting (or other meetings) when we were first married and had only two children was simple. Yet, with five children, it has been tempting to put children in between us during sacrament meeting for containment purposes. However, we hold to this ideal as a symbol of our marital commitment and look for activities to occupy the children. At times the younger children attempt to squeeze their way in between us, but we don't let them! We remind them that no one sits between Mom and Dad and invite them to sit on either side of us. Sitting together in sacrament meeting creates opportunities to connect and show tenderness even during a worship service as we hold hands, lean against each other, put our arms around each other, or even whisper an occasional comment to each other. This has been one small and simple way we have chosen to remind ourselves and each other that we place our relationship first in our priorities, second only to our relationship with God.

In a Mormon Tabernacle Choir's *Music and the Spoken Word* message, the tender story of an elderly couple illustrates a husband's commitment to his marriage and to his wife. The wife was losing her sight and could not take care of herself the way she had previously throughout their lengthy marriage. The husband took it upon himself to start painting her nails for her. Although she could not see well, he knew that if she held her hands close to her face at just the right angle, she could see her painted fingernails. "They made her smile. He liked to see her happy, so he kept painting her nails for more than five years before she passed away."¹⁷ As we have shown, we must be conscientious about what we are supposed to be doing—building an eternal quality into our relationship. Conscientiousness is initiated by our own self-will or self-control. Researchers have defined self-control as the "capacity to override and alter one's responses, especially to behave in socially desirable ways."¹⁸ These researchers found that relationships fared best when there was a high level of total self-control in the relationship. In other words, if both partners have higher levels of self-control, thus exerting purposeful effort to show their commitment to marriage, the marriage will do better. In their study, areas in which these couples did well

Practice

Here is a journaling exercise you can do to evaluate the values and goals you have surrounding your marriage relationship:

- Write down the type of marital relationship you want to have. Write about how you want this part of your life to look.
- Write down a description of the person you would like to be in your marriage. Try to focus on your role in that relationship. Describe how you would treat your partner if you were the ideal you in this relationship.
- Rate this value in terms of importance. Scale 1–10. 1 (not at all important), 10 (extremely important) _____.
- Now, ask yourself, “How consistent is my life currently (past week or two) in making this value a realization?” Scale 1–10. 1 (not at all consistent), 10 (completely consistent) _____.
- Subtract consistency number from importance number = _____.
- Look at this number. A high score means you have a large discrepancy between what you value as important and how you are honoring or enacting that value in your day-to-day life. A large discrepancy is not desirable. A small number indicates that you are living your life more closely or consistently with your stated values. This is ideal. How are you doing? What are the obstacles, if any? Make a plan to overcome any obstacles.¹⁹

included the following: relationship satisfaction, forgiveness, secure attachment, accommodation, healthy and committed styles of loving, smooth daily interactions, absence of conflict, and absence of feeling rejected.²⁰ Our marriage is an example of this truth. Although we are *very* different from each other and do not naturally satisfy each other in many areas, we still try! And with that trying comes happiness and contentment together.

In a devotional at Brigham Young University (BYU), Bruce Chadwick—BYU professor of sociology—shared the following personal experience, an experience that demonstrated to him that he needed to alter his behavior to show marital and family commitment. He received a painful message during a family game one Christmas Day:

My wife and three sons independently wrote their estimation of my dominant personality trait on small pieces of paper. I was confident I would be labeled by my family as “kind,” “righteous,” “loving,” or similar positive traits.

Imagine my surprise when my wife’s paper said, “Bruce is a workaholic.” My three boys confirmed her diagnosis! [They] made it clear that in their eyes my career, profession, or work was the most important aspect of my life.

At this point, even though it was Christmas, I protested a little.

One of my sons replied, “Dad, we never went on a family vacation that did not involve your work.”

Again I wanted to reply: “True, but you—ungrateful son that you are—have been to Disneyland as well as to Walt Disney World, traveled to Central America, traveled Europe, visited the Holy Land, and lived two summers in a beach house on an island in the Pacific Northwest.” But it was Christmas, and I did not want to be a poor sport, so I remained silent.

In the days that followed I tried to justify how I lived my life to myself. But it did not do any good. No matter how I rationalized things, my dear family felt that my career was more important to me than they were. This is not and was not true. But the fact remained that that was the impression I had given by my actions. Since that time I have tried to make my priorities more visible. I occasionally say to Carolyn on Friday morning, “I will be done teaching at noon. Would you like to go to the temple this afternoon? Or go ride around the Alpine Loop, see a movie, or visit the gardens at

COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

Thanksgiving Point?" Or, if I am really feeling expansive, "Would you like to go shopping?"

I hope during the past 15 years that somehow I have altered the perceptions of my family. They are most important to me.²¹

DEBRA: In one couple therapy session, my client revealed that she had humbly examined her own contributions to the difficulties in the relationship with her husband and asked herself in prayer what sacrifice she needed to make for her marriage. She got the answer and exercised the courage to implement it. The change meant a lot to her husband, as it was an issue for which he had expressed concern repeatedly over time, yet her inattention led him to feel like she was disregarding his feelings. Now, by altering her behavior, she had created positive sentiment between them and contributed to the healing of some of their marital pain.

As seen by these examples, it takes self-control to alter our responses and do things purposefully to enhance our marital commitment. A common phrase we like to use is that we have to do our marriage *on purpose*. As we actively and intentionally do this, our marriage will be blessed.

Two very important principles, patience and selflessness, if learned and applied, can be particularly useful as we consider how our behavior toward our spouse demonstrates our commitment to them.

Patience

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf defined patience: "Patience is not passive resignation, nor is it failing to act because of our fears. Patience means active waiting and enduring. It means staying with something and doing all that we can—working, hoping, and exercising faith; bearing hardship with fortitude, even when the desires of our hearts are delayed. Patience is not simply enduring; it is enduring well!"²²

In the Book of Mormon, Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni served missions among the Lamanites. It was long and difficult work in which they "suffered every privation" (Alma

26:28) and “suffered all manner of afflictions” (Alma 26:30), yet when they were discouraged and “about to turn back” (Alma 26:27), the Lord told them to be patient in their afflictions and He would bless them with success. He did bless them, and they were extremely successful.

Patience is vital in marriage. How patient are you with your spouse? If they make mistakes or have certain quirks, are you willing to show your commitment by loving them anyway, without anger or resentment?

RICHARD: *Debra is a really good driver. But she has an Achilles heel: backing out of a carport or garage. I smile every time I think about it (while she cringes), but during the course of our marriage to date, she has broken off five driver’s side mirrors. Yes, five! For some reason, as she backs up, she miscalculates how close the car is to the left side of the wall of the garage door and the mirror gets ripped right off of its mount. The fourth time this happened, to my horror, I was actually there watching. I could see it unfolding right before my eyes, and I was trying to get her attention by yelling at her to stop, but to no avail. The mirror was now dangling off the side of the car! My first reaction was extreme frustration. But then when I saw her get out of the car in complete tears, exasperated at herself for having done it again, I realized that she was more frustrated with herself than I was. I knew, instead of anger and judgment from me, she needed consolation and love. And I needed patience. We had a few minutes of hugs, tears, some excuses about the kids in the back seat noisily distracting her, and a bit of laughter as I chided her. I then reminded her that, like the previous times, I could order a new replacement mirror online and have it fixed shortly. Problem solved! She has demonstrated her commitment to me as she has been patient with me for such things as slurping my cold cereal, burning the chicken wings while barbecuing, or repurchasing tools that I already own because I couldn’t find them in my messy garage, so the least I could do was patiently love her myself.*

President Uchtdorf taught that since the Lord is patient with us, we should be patient with ourselves and others. He indicated that we also make mistakes, and just as we want others to be understanding of us, we should be patient with them.²³ This is a developmental process, and most often changes occur in a subtle

Reflections

I am very time oriented, and punctuality is of the utmost importance to me. I am extremely efficient with my time and can accomplish a lot in a short amount of time because I am organized and always in a hurry. My husband is my polar opposite. He doesn't feel the need to rush like I do. He is very detail oriented, and when he does something, he does it very well but takes much longer to do it than I deem necessary. He is much more patient, and being late isn't a big deal to him. This single thing has been a tremendous strain on our marriage. I see him as lacking, whereas he sees me as impatient and high strung. Since I am extreme in one direction, and he is extreme in the other direction, this issue is a major battle for us. I am always upset that he shows up late or can't do something faster, and he feels attacked (and rightly so). For a long time I was so focused on what I thought he was doing wrong and on how clearly I was right that I was bitter and angry, even though he is a truly remarkable person with countless amazing qualities. I could see only what I thought he lacked. A quote from Henry B. Eyring has helped me: "Pray for the love which allows you to see the good in your companion. Pray for the love that makes weaknesses and mistakes seem small. Pray for the love to make your companion's joy your own. Pray for the love to want to lessen the load and soften the sorrows of your companion."²⁴ This quote has been life altering for me.

manner over lengthy periods of time. Thus, we will have to be patient as we work to develop patience.

Selflessness

Closely connected to impatience is selfishness. If we are struggling with patience, it generally indicates that we are focused on ourselves, on what we want or need, and on how a particular situation is failing to satisfy that self-focus. Selfishness causes us to lose perspective relative to our standing with our fellow men and makes us believe that our own personal fulfillment and happiness is of preeminent priority. President Gordon B. Hinckley taught that selfishness is the root of many of the problems seen in families today and that it is "the antithesis of love."²⁵ When it comes to marriage, President Spencer W. Kimball said:

The marriage that is based upon selfishness is almost certain to fail. . . . But the one who marries to give happiness as well as receive it, to give service as well as to receive it, and who looks

after the interests of the two and then the family as it comes will have a good chance that the marriage will be a happy one.²⁶

More recently, in his address to the Vatican Summit on Marriage, Henry B. Eyring indicated:

You have seen enough unhappiness in marriages and families to ask why some marriages produce happiness while others create unhappiness. Many factors make a difference, but one stands out to me.

Where there is selfishness, natural differences of men and women often divide. Where there is unselfishness, differences become complementary and provide opportunities to help and build each other. Spouses and family members can lift each other and ascend together if they care more about the interests of the other than their own interests . . . [and] replace their natural self-interest with deep and lasting feelings of charity and benevolence. With that change, and only then, will people be able to make the hourly unselfish sacrifices necessary for a happy marriage and family life—and to do it with a smile.²⁷

So if we are to show our commitment to our spouse, we need to develop a selfless attitude toward life, especially when it comes to marriage.

Commitment in Specific Types of Marriages

We have been talking about principles of commitment that are important for every type of marriage, such as prioritizing the

Gems

Dipama Barua, of Calcutta, a Buddhist elder and loving grandmother, exemplifies the spirit of selflessness.

“Around her was a palpable sense of stillness and profound well-being. . . . Dipama’s heart seemed to pervade her whole body, the whole room, all who came into her orbit. Her presence had a big impact on others. Those who lived nearby said the whole apartment block became harmonious after she moved in.” A young man became concerned with his self-focused lifestyle and thoughts and asked Dipama about what was in her mind. “She smiled and said, ‘In my mind are only three things: loving-kindness, concentration, and peace.’ These are the fruits of selflessness. With selflessness there is less of us and yet presence, connectedness, and freedom come alive.”²⁸

marriage ahead of other aspects of life, including self, children, or work demands. However, we would like now to look at three special types of marriages that require additional consideration when it comes to commitment: new marriages, chronically difficult marriages, and abusive marriages.

New Marriages

The concept of commitment in marriage takes on acute importance in the newlywed phase. You will find research and stories relative to newlyweds throughout this book, yet here we focus on one important piece of counsel relative to commitment: keep the long-term perspective.

When the honeymoon is over and reality sets in, our beloved spouse's faults can suddenly become glaring. In these times, it may become very easy to begin rethinking the whole concept of commitment. We understand how painful some of those early interactions can be; it is a refining process as we learn to adjust to each other and adjust to being married. Hang on. The course of your eternal marriage cannot be fully determined in only the first few months. President Spencer W. Kimball spoke about this adjustment period:

Two people coming from different backgrounds learn soon after the ceremony is performed that stark reality must be faced. There is no longer a life of fantasy or of make-believe; we must come out of the clouds and put our feet firmly on the earth. Responsibility must be assumed and new duties must be accepted. Some personal freedoms must be relinquished, and many adjustments, unselfish adjustments, must be made. One comes to realize very soon after marriage that the spouse has weaknesses not previously revealed or discovered. The virtues which were constantly magnified during courtship now grow relatively smaller, and the weaknesses which seemed so small and insignificant during courtship now grow to sizable proportions. The hour has come for understanding hearts, for self-appraisal, and for good common sense, reasoning, and planning.²⁹



Reflections

My husband and I have been married barely five months. Marriage has been an endless amount of changes, adjustments, and learning phases. Marriage is amazingly hard, but it's also the best thing ever! There's been so many nights where I just cry and my husband just holds me. I like to escape my stresses and problems by running away, and the biggest adjustment for me has been that I can't do that and be married. I can't run away from hard things anymore; this is for eternity. It's been difficult to always be vulnerable and let my husband in on my feelings that I try so hard to bury. I didn't quite understand how hard it would be. I need both my Heavenly Father and my husband to get through my feelings of wanting to run away during fights, of feeling unworthy as a wife or that I'm not good enough when I just see all of my shortcomings. I have to remember that no one is perfect and all I can do is wake up each morning and try my best for that day. I wouldn't change any of these experiences for the world. It's just that it is new, different, and scary—and that's okay!

The hour *has* come. Particularly as newlyweds it is important, when conflict arises, to give your spouse the benefit of the doubt, have an accepting attitude, and keep a long-term perspective. Each of us has to learn how to be married, and this is a developmental process that takes time—it can't be pressured, rushed, or forced. A significant aspect of learning how to be married is learning how to accept another person not only for the things we love about them, but also for the ways in which they are different from us. President Gordon B. Hinckley, quoting from Unitarian minister Jenkin Lloyd Jones, acknowledged this reality when he said, "Most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration."³⁰ As you work in this manner, you will find your levels of commitment to your new marriage increase as peace comes more consistently into the relationship and bonds of love and affection grow.

Reflecting on their marriage, Sister Marjorie Hinckley, wife of President Gordon B. Hinckley, related:

I was just sure the first ten years would be bliss. But during our first year together I discovered . . . there were a lot of adjustments. Of course, they weren't the kind of thing you ran home to mother about. But I cried into my pillow now and again. The problems were almost always related

to learning to live on someone else's schedule and to do things someone else's way. We loved each other, there was no doubt about that. But we also had to get used to each other. I think every couple has to get used to each other.³¹

Sister Hinckley illustrates for us here that many of the challenges in marriage as newlyweds are issues of minor adjustment and can be resolved within some weeks or months. At the time, these adjustment issues can be acutely painful, but if you remain committed to work the marriage process according to the principles of Christianity, in time many of these difficulties will be resolved. Elder David B. Haight, at the age of ninety-four, had this to say about his own marriage process:

When Ruby and I knelt at the Salt Lake Temple at the altar on September the fourth, 1930, holding hands and looking at one another, little did we ever realize what would lie ahead for us. . . .

Now, after we have been married 70 years, I can say to all of you that it gets better, that it gets better year after year, with the preciousness and the tenderness and the realization of some of the eternal blessings that lie ahead for us.³²

More recently, President Boyd K. Packer echoed this sentiment: "And if you suppose that the full-blown rapture

Reflections

I have been married for almost eleven months. In that time, we have had two deaths, three moves, three different cars, and four different jobs—not to mention that we both had been home from our missions for only about six months when we got married. Marriage sometimes is awful, but there are times when it is the most rewarding thing. From my limited experience, starting a marriage is like starting a very heavy and intense workout program after never working out. Disagreements in marriage are like running laps. Just like you feel sore after a hard run, with that stiffness and achiness carrying on to the next time you try running, in marriage the pain, frustration, and anger carry on to the next disagreements or differences of opinion. So the first bit of marriage is painful and hard, and you want to quit because there are differences that you think you will never overcome. But just like our muscles get stronger as we continue to work out, I have faith we will get stronger in our marriage.

of young romantic love is the sum total of the possibilities which spring from the fountains of life, you have not yet lived to see the devotion and the comfort of longtime married love. Married couples are tried by temptation, misunderstandings, financial problems, family crises, and illness, and all the while love grows stronger. Mature love has a bliss not even imagined by newlyweds.”³³

Chronically Difficult Marriages

We feel a great duty within the pages of this book to speak to the yearning and desperate hearts of those in chronically difficult marital relationships. Here we offer a brief discussion and suggest that more is to be found throughout additional chapters (we would particularly refer you to the latter half of chapter 3 and also chapter 7).

Sometimes marriage is a continual struggle as spouses seek to become unified. In these circumstances, it is frequently the case that the concept of commitment is reevaluated, as one is provoked repeatedly to ponder how much pain one must endure for the sake of their sealing covenants. Elder Timothy Dyches reminds us about the role of opposition in our lives: “As we draw near to Him, we realize that mortality is meant to be difficult and that ‘opposition in all things’ (2 Nephi 2:11) is not a flaw in the plan of salvation. Opposition, rather, is the indispensable element of mortality and strengthens our will and refines our choices. The vicissitudes of life help us fashion an eternal relationship with God—and engrave His image upon our countenance as we yield our hearts to Him (see Alma 5:19).”³⁴

Commitment in difficult marital relationships may be more difficult to procure, but when we partner with our Savior He will show us how we can honor our marital covenants and remain committed to our spouse. Such is found in a story by Elder Spencer Condie:

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," she said with a smile, "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." She continued, "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," she said. "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."³⁵

Reflections

*My husband and I
have been married
over twenty years.
Being married has
been the hardest thing
I have ever done in
my life. Staying in this
relationship continues
to be a daily struggle.
Each day I try again.
There are positives
and negatives. I try
to be committed to
my children and the
family we are raising.
[She began to cry.]
I don't want to be a
single parent, and
I don't want to be
divorced. I don't
want to desert my
husband, and I don't
want to give up.*

As Elder Condie illustrates, the Lord can provide us with the personal revelation we need relative to our difficult marital relationships. There is great power in seeking the whisperings of the Spirit through prayer and pondering. We discuss principles of personal revelation relative to our marriages in chapter 9. We also discuss the importance of humility and the willingness to look at our own contributions to our marital difficulties in chapter 7.

Some spouses in chronically difficult marriages are unified in their desire to improve the quality of the relationship and will work together to try to do so but simply continue to struggle in the practical application. These couples will find that the ideas throughout this book speak to them and encourage them in their journey. However, in some marriages spouses are not unified in this desire. It is not uncommon to have one spouse that is willing to work to improve the relationship while the other spouse seems to have “checked out.” If this is the painful situation in which you find yourself, please know that a great deal of what we address in this book to improve the quality of marriage can be done *without* your spouse’s participation. We can practice or implement of our own accord various strategies to improve the relationship with our spouse, exercising our agency to do good things and behave well in our marital relationship, regardless of whether our spouse is on board. For example, we can choose to increase the positivity-to-negativity ratio in our relationship (see chapter 5) by saying a kind word, leaving a supportive note, or doing an act of service in spite of how they treat us or their overall attitude toward our marriage or the gospel.

Furthermore, if you find yourself in this most painful circumstance, be assured that this difficult marriage can be the very thing to exalt you—through humbly receiving schooling from the Spirit. Regardless of whether your spouse ever makes any efforts to better their relationship with you, the process of showing love, patience, tolerance, or any other Christlike virtue on your part will change you. You will learn more about the Savior

in the process of emulating Him; He knows the pain of rejection, and He is “acquainted with grief” (Mosiah 14:3). Ultimately, the marital relationship, although not as you may expect, will have served you well relative to your efforts to seek Christ and to take His “image in your countenance” (Alma 5:14).

Chronically difficult marriage produces a refiner’s fire that is white hot. There are tremendous sacrifices and pain required in these circumstances. There is disappointment of not having all we had hoped for interpersonally, spiritually, or even romantically. If you are in this type of marriage, we are sensitive to your plight and plead for your welfare. Yet we have a tenacious testimony of the promise that Christ will compensate us for every loss, as taught by Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: “The Lord compensates the faithful for every loss. That which is taken away from those who love the Lord will be added unto them in His own way. While it may not come at the time we desire, the faithful will know that every tear today will eventually be returned a hundredfold with tears of rejoicing and gratitude.”³⁶

Reflections

Prior to our marriage, I was unaware that my wife had been abused as a child. However, shortly into the relationship the consequences of that abuse became evident. Like many abuse victims, my wife lives in a mode of self-preservation. Because her abuser often controlled her, as an adult she understandably feels the need to control everything and everyone. That control manifests itself in many ways, including an insistence on a life of celibacy. Many of my wife’s struggles are of such a nature that were I not a Latter-day Saint and a believer in eternal families, I would have left many years ago. However, the gospel and my temple covenants have given me perspective on relationships, mental health, and human frailties. They have given me the strength to endure a very painful and unfulfilling relationship—and even the motivation to nurture and love her in spite of her inability to emotionally and physically love me. Some will feel my choice to stay, love, and nurture in spite of this is the wrong choice. However, the gospel convinces me that she needs my love and that the selfless taking up of this cross is what Christ would have me do.

Reflections

Before marriage I saw in my husband-to-be all the traits of a fine, upstanding man. Shortly after our marriage he broke temple covenants but remained active in the Church. He personified the wonderful, friendly, loving, helpful man in public, but in the privacy of our home he was difficult and unpredictable. I never gave up on him. I forgave. I tolerated. I counseled with him. I prayed for him and for me. He never overcame his weaknesses—they only got worse. There came a time I contemplated leaving him. As I prayed about it, the answer was that I didn't have a celestial marriage and I could leave, but if I wanted to learn more about the Savior, I could stay. I chose the latter. We have now been married more than fifty years. The Savior has been my partner through these difficult years. Every day is a challenge, and every day I turn to the Lord for help and strength. I try to follow Him. I strive to be the best I can be. I am committed to my temple covenants. My commitment to my temple covenants has brought great peace and joy to me, as well as a more intimate relationship with the Savior.

As our Father in Heaven accomplishes His work in us, we will not only be compensated for our losses, we will be transformed because of them. We firmly believe that the refiner's fire will ultimately be the very thing that helps us to become Christlike and lift us up eternally. Christian author C. S. Lewis wrote about God's ability to make us new creatures, to transform the wretched. We assert God's plan to do this for difficult marriages as well. He implores us:

Do not despair. He knows all about it. You are one of the poor whom He blessed. He knows what a wretched machine you are trying to drive. Keep on. Do what you can. One day (perhaps in another world, but perhaps far sooner than that) He will fling it on the scrap-heap and give you a new one. And then you may astonish us all—not least yourself: for you have learned you're driving in a hard school. (Some of the last will be first and some of the first will be last).³⁷

Abusive Marriages

As we speak with conviction about being committed in marriage, even throughout difficult or chronically painful relationships, let us not

be misunderstood. We are not in any way advocating subjecting oneself to abuse. Abuse is not acceptable. Those who abuse others will be held accountable to God and to the Church. President Gordon B. Hinckley said: “No man who abuses his wife or children is worthy to hold the priesthood of God. No man who abuses his wife or children is worthy to be a member in good standing in this Church. The abuse of one’s spouse and children is a most serious offense before God, and any who indulge in it may expect to be disciplined by the Church.”³⁸

Abuse may come in a variety of forms, such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, emotional abuse, or even financial abuse. We also recognize that abuse can be perpetrated by either spouse, that women can also take on the role of abuser in some marriages.

It is difficult for those in abusive relationships to know the best way to confront and handle the abuse. Particularly, those who are conscientious of their Christianity may struggle as they weigh their efforts to apply various gospel principles, such as commitment, charity, or patience to their circumstances. As second counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, Sister Aileen H. Clyde declared the following in general conference:

If charity is not always quick to our understanding, it may occasionally be quick to our misunderstanding. It is not charity or kindness to endure any type of abuse or unrighteousness that may be inflicted on us by others. God’s commandment that as we love him we must respect ourselves suggests we must not accept disrespect from others. It is not charity to let another repeatedly deny our divine nature and agency. It is not charity to bow down in despair and helplessness. That kind of suffering should be ended, and that is very difficult to do alone. There are priesthood leaders and other loving servants who will give aid and strength when they know of the need. We must be willing to let others help us.³⁹

Sister Clyde clearly teaches us that we are not to tolerate abuse. How might one alter abusive circumstances in their marriage? In the current culture of our day, as divorce is quickly recommended

COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

for many minor issues, it is also readily recommended for more severe, abusive circumstances. Although divorce is strongly discouraged within the Church generally, Church leaders have acknowledged that sometimes divorce is appropriate. Elder James E. Faust expressed: “‘Just cause’ [for divorce] 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.”⁴⁰

If the presence of abuse suggests “just cause” for divorce, divorce need not *necessarily* be the choice when abuse becomes a player in marital discord. We will now discuss several short-term/crisis interventions or longer-term options that we feel seek to honor commitment to the marital covenant and may be helpful while also proving useful in healing and reclaiming health from an abusive relationship.

First and foremost, if your life is in danger, do not hesitate to call 911. When other intense circumstances develop in your relationship, safety planning can be crucial to your welfare in the event of a dangerous exchange. This type of plan may include calling a domestic-abuse hotline or accessing its information online. For example, the National Domestic Violence Hotline⁴¹ is available 24/7 and offers information regarding the following: types of safety planning (including safety planning when pregnant, safety planning with children, or emotional safety planning), advice on how to leave a relationship, and legal procedures (such as restraining and protective orders). It also provides broader information on how to define abuse and how to enact elements of healthy relationships and healthy conflict resolution. Another option for crisis intervention may be going to a shelter or another safe location.

Longer-term options to address abuse may include counseling with priesthood leaders or your Relief Society president. Although most local Church leaders are not trained, licensed mental health professionals, because they have stewardship over you, the Lord will bless them with spiritual insights and counsel that can soften hearts and assist you in navigating this delicate circumstance. A priesthood leader, as a judge in Israel, can also provide Church discipline when necessary and be a valuable sounding board if divorce becomes a serious consideration. If the nature of your abusive circumstance renders working with priesthood leaders unreasonable or additionally threatening for you, counseling with your Relief Society president may be an option that could provide similar supports.

In addition, another longer-term option to address abusive dynamics in a marital relationship may be to attend therapy. Ideally, attending

Reflections

Abuse in my relationship began with the control of sex. As we got further into life, the verbal abuse became terrible. There was also some physical abuse. If I didn't work, I was trash. If I didn't have sex with him, I then wasn't good enough to sleep in the same bed. I realized that this was becoming a normal routine for us, and I could not leave or walk away—I was always too afraid to be alone. I coped by eating and drinking soda. Everything I felt was put into food. I also worked more hours at my job than needed so I didn't have to go home. So many times there were threats of separation or divorce, and I would encourage him to stay, which I thought was better than being alone with four small children. He paid me money to keep me quiet. Eight months ago, after a long eighteen years, we separated. I felt strong and weak at the same time. My teenagers and I quit fighting. I am overcoming my eating disorder. My kids are in counseling at school. They sleep with me for security and rely heavily on the arm of God. I am now teaching them to never give up and that they can do hard things. Moving on from abuse is so difficult. You feel alone and that you would like to give up, but then the next day dawns and the sun shines and your children look to you for all—and you get up and do it. I'm not sure if my husband and I will survive this separation. I love him and pray daily he and I could get counseling and make this marriage eternal, but he has not yet been willing. But I love myself more every day and my children more every second, like a new birth for each of us.

Reflections

My husband and I met and fell in love pretty quickly and married in an LDS temple. Early on, it was clear to me that my husband's expectation of a marriage was far different than mine. When he came under stress, he directed that towards me. The verbal abuse was just getting worse, including an altercation where I feared for my life and called 911 for help. After four years of a rocky marriage, I took our two sons and left. It was extremely liberating to finally be free from his abuse. For six months, I lived as a single mom working two jobs while he was across the country. I wanted things to work out; I wanted him to wake up! But even over the phone, knowing he could lose me forever, his cruel words cut deep. I filled out the divorce papers. The kids and I visited him for Christmas, and we saw a therapist a couple times. At the end of our visit, my husband mentioned moving back from New York to Utah—I was shocked he was willing to do so. I will never forget the day he came home. He was a changed man. He washed dishes, played with the kids, helped cook dinner, and expressed appreciation for me. I completely forgave him based on my faith in our Savior's Atonement healing our wounds. It was as close to a fairytale as you can get! It has been seven years since then. We now have six children and a love that I never knew existed. Change and forgiveness are possible!

counseling as a couple would prove the most beneficial to begin the long process of restructuring the marital and interpersonal relationship dynamics and reducing abusive behaviors. However, one spouse can still make great strides attending therapy alone. A therapist can assist in setting appropriate boundaries, improving communication skills, promoting self-confidence, changing dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors, and working toward forgiveness. Therapy is a process (see the appendix to this book for a more thorough discussion on the therapy process), and it will take time to see the fruits of the process bear out, but it can be life changing for both partners as the marriage moves toward a healthier state. Yet for more severe cases of abuse, “counseling for both spouses may not be effective and may even increase the risk of further abuse. In such cases the most effective treatment may be court-ordered domestic violence counseling for the perpetrator.”⁴²

Lastly, if abusive patterns continue, temporary separation may be an option that could promote healing. Separation could include financial separation in cases of

financial abuse, or a physical separation in the case of physical, sexual, verbal, or emotional abuse. Sometimes a separation encourages healing as the pattern of abuse is interrupted, and spouses are given the space and time to reflect and decide what they really want out of the marital relationship. Seeking counseling during the separation can be very helpful in order to learn how to more effectively interact with each other in a healthy manner.

In some marriages, the circumstances will not improve, and divorce may be entirely appropriate and necessary. How does one know when that time has come? This can be known only to each person individually through the gentle whisperings of the Holy Spirit. In order to be worthy to discern the Spirit's promptings, you will want to rid yourself of anger, malice, resentment, or a desire to retaliate toward the abuser (see chapter 4 on forgiveness). Mighty prayer and reliance on the grace of our loving Savior will help you know the right choices for you in your particular circumstance and to help you know of God's great love for you as His child. In these very stressful yet critical times, we advocate attending therapy as well as visiting with Church leaders to receive the support, comfort, skills, and assistance to guide you through the difficult process of divorce and the critical post-divorce healing process.

Conclusion

We can create a stable and happy marriage by fully committing with our hearts, words, and behaviors to our relationship with our spouse. We must maintain tenacious commitment, even when times get difficult. We must check ourselves relative to how the current culture of our day may be negatively influencing our view of marriage and our willingness to do the work required to build and grow together over time. When we are committed, our spouse knows it, and the trust and security they feel will help

COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

us to feel more loyal to them. This will bring the blessings we desire to fruition, one day at a time, with continued and hopeful commitment to our marriage and God's process for the exaltation of His children. We can secure and maintain joy and happiness of an eternal quality, finding fulfillment as we "strive together toward perfection."⁴³

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PRIORITIZING OUR MARRIAGE COVENANT

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