For Elizabeth,
my faithful life companion
and friend!
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Introduction: My Testimony

Recently my publisher asked me to revisit this book, *A Husband After God’s Own Heart*, which I had written 12 years before. It was a good exercise in seeing whether my thinking had changed with regard to the book’s subtitle—that is, the *12 Things That Really Matter in Your Marriage*. In review, I was glad to observe that the 12 core principles really do matter as much as ever.

But as I reflected on what I have learned since I wrote the book, I began to realize that many of the issues I faced as a husband could have been alleviated if I had better understood my heart and how it affected my actions, including everything I have done or will do in my marriage. With that in mind, I want to share some new thoughts at the beginning of this updated edition of the book.

Is It Heredity or Environment?

Most husbands have the perception that their marriage started on their wedding day. That was my thinking as well. I pictured myself as a clean slate, a blank canvas ready to be
filled in with actions that would result in a picture-perfect marriage. Oh, I knew I had a few little issues in my personal life, but I didn’t think they would cause any problems in my marriage. The truth, however, is that every past event or decision in your life shapes you in a way that affects every future event or decision. The person you are on your wedding day is the person you are bringing into your marriage.

You and I are affected by different things that influence and shape our lives. These influences aren’t to be used as an excuse for any negative behaviors or actions exhibited in us. All I’m saying is that we are the products of not only our life experiences, but also how we interacted with those experiences. Everything that we are—both our good points and bad points, as well as our sin nature and how we respond to temptation and sin—is a part of what we bring into a marriage.

Understanding Who You Are

What is your background? Did you have brothers or sisters? What kind of relationship did your parents have? Were they divorced? Did you grow up in a blended family? These are all things that shaped you into the man you were when you walked down the aisle and said, “I do” to your bride.

It has taken me a long time to realize that I am a product of my past, and that I brought lots of baggage into my marriage. I hope as I share about my background and how it impacted my marriage, you’ll be able to look at yourself and your relationship with your wife and better understand why married life isn’t always as smooth as you would like it to be. You may have heard the saying, “Marriage is the union of two selfish people.”
Introduction: My Testimony

Now, not all of the baggage you bring into your marriage is a matter of sin. But when you let your problems go unchecked and you don't yield them to God, and instead unleash them on your wife, they can become matters of sin that require repentance toward both God and your spouse. That's why it's important for you to examine your issues and behaviors and deal with them before they become sin or have a negative influence on others.

My Home Life

Being an only child has many benefits. I didn't have any competition for my parents’ attention. I was the focal point of the George household. My parents were middle-class people who didn't have much money, but I never lacked for food, clothing, and shelter. I was never truly deprived while growing up. At one point or another, I got most of what I needed, and much of what I wanted.

Another factor that influenced my life was the fact I had a stay-at-home mom who was always there when I left for school and when I returned home. In fact, during grade school and junior high, she would have lunch waiting for me on the kitchen table because both schools were a one-block walk from our house. Because my mom didn't work outside the home, she was available to do all the cooking, cleaning, and laundry for me and my dad. We never lacked for clean clothes and hot meals. My mother was always ready to help us. This was my background as I stood before my bride Elizabeth during our wedding ceremony.

What's more, I thought I was about to marry a woman just like my mother—a woman who would cook my meals,
iron my shirts, and take care of everything else I needed. For some reason I happened to expect that Elizabeth would do what my mother had done. I envisioned myself being the king of my castle, the captain of my ship, the master of the house.

My Dad as a Provider

My father had a lot going for him. He was a smart man with good business sense, and he had generated a good living for me and my mother as an independent auto parts salesman. He would leave home every Monday and during the week, he would visit a circuit of garages and gas stations and provide items needed to run these businesses. From an early age, my father gave me chores to do each week while he was gone. Then when he arrived home after doing a circuit, I would help him restock his truck. Later he would take me with him on his circuits, and I would observe how he interacted with his clients. So I learned how to work. And that likely explains why I later became a salesman too!

My dad also taught me the value of money and instilled a sense of thrift in me. Each week he would give me an allowance and say, “If you save it all, I’ll give you half of the money back to do whatever you want with it.” This helped me to learn the value of money and develop the habit of saving it.

With these personal skills that my dad modeled and instilled in me, I thought I was ready to be a good provider for my new wife. In this aspect I was close to being right on. My dad’s work ethic and business sense has benefitted my family for decades. Unfortunately, he died before I realized how much I had gained from his input into my life. But for a husband to be a good provider is not enough.
My Dad as a Husband

In the early years of my marriage, I didn’t realize that a man providing for his wife is only a part of what marriage was all about. When it came to being a husband, my father’s example was less than positive. He had his own personal baggage that he had brought into his marriage to my mom. My mother was a Christian, and my father was not. So as an unbeliever, he could only act out of his unregenerate nature and what he had learned in his own upbringing from the example set by his parents. I determined that I would never treat my wife in the same way my father treated my mother. I was going to be nicer. But even though I had the best of intentions, still, the example set by my father instilled a pattern of negative behavior I’m still working to overcome to this day.

It’s a Matter of the Heart

So there I was, a self-absorbed and newly married man who thought my marriage revolved around me and not my wife, or even the two of us as a couple. I expected Elizabeth to do for me all the things my mother had done. Though I was a Christian, I was not actively walking with the Lord when I met my bride-to-be. I was not walking by the Spirit and thus easily reverted to the only model I knew—that of my father.

Was it any wonder that my marriage had its problems, with me being the biggest one of them? It wasn’t until later—about eight years later—that I realized I had a “heart problem.” My problem wasn’t physical. It was spiritual. Jesus diagnosed my problem in Mark 7:21-23:
What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.

Not until eight years into my marriage did I realize that my sinful heart was driving my behavior and destroying my marriage. Once I came to this realization, I began to acknowledge and deal with my heart. I came to the point that I realized that a daily spiritual examination of the heart was necessary if I wanted to enjoy the right kind of relationships with God and with my wife.

A Happy Marriage Begins with You

I don’t know where you are in your marriage. I hope and pray that you and your wife are enjoying a relationship that has few or no issues or arguments. Even so, because of our fallen human nature, problems are always bound to come up. That’s why it’s so essential for us to ask God for His help in our lives and marriages.

The starting point of every good marriage is going to God every single day and saying, “Search me, God, and know my heart” (Psalm 139:23). Doing what this psalm advises helps us husbands to realize that, frequently, we ourselves are part of the problem!

You see, I cannot “fix” my wife, but I can ask God to “fix” me. I can’t get my wife to change, but I can ask God to help me change. I can’t get my wife to read her Bible, have devo-
tions, go to church, or be a better parent to the kids, but I can, with God’s help, do all these things while I pray for my wife to join me in these spiritual practices. If I want my marriage to be better, then I need to be better. I can’t change my wife or anyone else, but by God’s grace, I can change myself by first changing my heart.

Do you want a better marriage? I know you do. Otherwise you wouldn’t have opened this book. With that in mind, let’s move on together and learn more about what it takes to become a husband after God’s own heart.
Growing in the Lord

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Matthew 6:33

When I was a young boy, I couldn’t wait to grow physically. At each phase of my early life, I wanted desperately to have the physical maturity to compete in sports at the next level...with the big boys! And even while I was at one particular point of growth, I exercised daily to develop my body to compete in sports at the next level.

On the other hand, when it came to growing in the mental area, I wasn’t quite as motivated. My parents didn’t have much formal education, so they were happy with whatever I accomplished in school. Surprisingly enough, with all of my efforts to succeed in the physical area, I ended up excelling in school in the mental arena.

And then there was the spiritual area of my life. I would like to report that my spiritual growth, which started when I was just six years old, was a magnificent upward spiral, and
that it had few, if any, valleys. But no. Sad to say, my spiritual growth in those early years was an up-and-down roller coaster. And the downward drop on that roller coaster continued on into my early adult life and had a serious effect on my marriage.

I’ll share more about my spiritual growth and the how-to’s of growing in the Lord throughout this chapter, but for now, I want to make the statement (and I’m sure you will agree) that spiritual growth takes even more effort than physical growth.

It’s true that spiritual development takes terrific effort. But, my friend, it’s also true that the rewards are great, especially when it comes to being a husband...and that’s what this book is all about. I want us to note how growing in the Lord occurs, and how that growth gives essential help for you and me for our life in general and our marriage and family in particular.

And keep this in mind as you read: No matter how old you are or how long—or short!—you’ve been married, the day you accelerate your growth in the Lord is the day your marriage is positively impacted, improved, and strengthened!

**First Things First**

If you’re like most men and husbands, you’re probably extremely busy. You’re out there in the world every day, working and slaving away. Then, when you get home, more work awaits you—the work of taking care of your home and finances. And if you have children, you get home only to switch hats and try to be a good dad. With all these respon-
sibilities, it’s easy to conclude that there just isn’t any time for growing spiritually.

Well, my new friend, that’s why we want to start our study of what it means to be *A Husband After God’s Own Heart* with this most strategic topic. Why?

*Spiritual growth determines priorities.* Spiritual growth is the key to all that’s important in your life. That’s what Jesus meant 2000 years ago when He told a listening audience not to be anxious about life and living. He said, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’” (Matthew 6:31). These things are definitely needful, but they are not what’s really important. They are not your first priority.

What *is* really important is your spiritual growth. Why? Jesus went on to say that instead of worrying about the necessities of daily life, you should “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and *all these things* shall be added to you” (verse 33). In other words, *you* are to seek a life of spiritual growth and following after God’s priorities for your life. Then, friend, *God* will provide for you and your family. That’s God’s promise! Seek God...and have everything! Seek the world...and lose everything (Luke 9:25). The right choice seems pretty obvious, doesn’t it?

Put first things first
and we get second things thrown in:
Put second things first
and we lose both first and second things.¹

*Spiritual growth promotes purity.* Besides determining a man’s priorities, spiritual growth also promises help in the
area of purity. In Psalm 119:9 the psalmist asked the question, “How can a young man keep his way pure?” (NASB). Of all the questions men ask me, most of them deal with the area of purity. With all that is going on in our world today, Christian men are having a hard time staying pure, thinking pure thoughts, and developing pure habits.

But this is not new. Temptation and sin have been around since the beginning of history. God knows the struggles we face. In fact, God faced those same issues firsthand in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 2:17-18). And God says we can have victory. How? In the psalm I just shared, the psalmist answered his question on purity in the same verse with this advice, “By taking heed according to Your word” (verse 9). Victory is ours if and when we heed God and His Word. So spiritual growth—through prayer, study of the Bible, and obedience—is the answer. Again, the psalmist follows up his earlier question of purity with this answer: “With my whole heart I have sought You; oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You” (Psalm 119:10-11).

Do you struggle with purity? If so, you are not alone. The Bible says that temptations are “common to man” (1 Corinthians 10:13). No man is immune to sexual temptation or a myriad of other kinds of temptations (verse 12). But there’s hope!

Continuing on in 1 Corinthians 10, the Bible reports that God has provided a way of escape (verse 13). And what is the way of escape? Answer: Growing in the Lord and His grace! The process of growing in the Lord exposes us to the spiritual resources that we have been given to fight the battle and gain
the victory in the areas of our struggle, whether it’s with physical temptations like lust, or with other kinds of temptations like pride, greed, or anger.

Let’s not be like the rich man I read about in the newspaper who died of starvation. He had all the resources needed to live well, but he was too stingy to use some of those resources and therefore starved to death. God has provided the resources for you, my friend. Make it your business to find out what those resources are. Then use them to gain the victory in the battle for purity.

*Spiritual growth produces discernment.* As we move through this book, I will talk constantly about leadership—leadership as a husband, leadership as a parent, leadership in the many areas of your life. God’s husband knows where he is going. God’s husband also knows how to get there, and he is able to guide his wife and children. How is this possible? Because God’s kind of husband has God’s wisdom and discernment.

Where does a Christian man get this wisdom and discernment? I think you know the answer—from God’s Word. And why is spiritual wisdom important? “That we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting” (Ephesians 4:14). Our wives, our families, and our churches need godly men who have discernment—discernment to deal with life and life-issues

Growing in the Lord is essential for becoming a man of right priorities, a man of purity, and a man of spiritual perception.
on a spiritual level. That maturity comes as we grow in “the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (verse 13). Such maturity is called Christlikeness, which means to live and act as Christ lived and acted.

Not only do we need discernment for understanding the Bible, but we also need wisdom for the everyday decisions we must make as husbands, fathers, employees, and employers. Again, spiritual maturity is the answer. The writer to a group of Jewish Christians in the first century laments over their lack of growth. Hear his disappointment:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe (Hebrews 5:12-13).

God is speaking to you and me today through this same text, and He is just as concerned today with our maturity as He was 2000 years ago with those readers. We as Christian husbands need to be teachers of spiritual things—if not verbally, then at least with our lives.

How does one remedy a lack of maturity? How does one gain the maturity needed to make wise and godly decisions? The inspired writer goes on again to give us the answer:

Solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their
Growing in the Lord is essential for becoming a man of right priorities, a man of purity, and a man of spiritual perception. I pray that you have long ago recognized this fact and are well on your way along the road to maturity. When I think of you, I feel like the apostle John when he wrote to his readers, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 John 4). But if you haven't been aware of your need to grow in the Lord, I hope and pray that you have at least had your eyes opened to the absolute necessity of spiritual growth.

Deciding to Grow

One of my favorite men of the Old Testament is Joshua. Why him? Well, he was a great man who made the right choices in important decisions throughout his lifetime. For instance,

- Joshua was a man of great humility. He made a decision early on in his life to nurture the heart of a servant. How could he not be humble? After all, he was Moses’ understudy for 40 years. This was the Moses whom God described as “very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). And Joshua was called the servant of Moses (Numbers 11:28).

- Joshua was a man of great courage. Talk about “peer pressure”! Joshua made a decision to go against
popular opinion and, along with Caleb, gave a positive report about the Promised Land that the Israelites were told to enter, giants and all (Numbers 14:6-9)!

Joshua was a man of great faith. He made a decision to trust in God’s ability to defeat the people inhabiting the Promised Land. Ten of the men who were sent to spy out the land came back with stories of “giants” and pictured themselves as “grasshoppers” next to these giants. Joshua and Caleb, however, had faith in God and declared, “If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us” (Numbers 14:8)! Joshua’s decision, shared by Caleb, earned them the privilege of being the only men of their generation to enter the Promised Land. All the others had weak faith and chose poorly. God reports that Joshua “wholly followed the Lord” (Numbers 32:12).

Joshua was a man of great integrity. Even toward the end of his long life of service, Joshua was still making decisions for himself and for his family to serve the Lord, and not the false gods that surrounded them. And with the strength of his great faith, he called others to commit themselves to the same standard as well. Joshua exhorted, “Choose for yourself this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15).

I think you can see why Joshua was such a key figure in the Old Testament and why I admire him so much. He was
constantly making the hard decisions—the right decisions—
decisions to serve God and not follow after the world and its
allurements.

You and I need to respond to Joshua’s challenge to “choose
today whom you will serve.” And don’t fail to notice that
Joshua, as the leader of a nation, included his family in his
commitment: “As for me and my house, we will serve the
LORD” (verse 15). My friend, Joshua’s resolve needs to be ours
as well. Again, growing in the Lord will help strengthen your
resolve to be a godly husband who will stand up in the midst
of an evil society and declare his commitment to lead his
family away from the world, toward God, and into service to
God. Perhaps this is a good time to ask God to give you
Joshua’s resolve as you read my personal prayer of commit-
ment. May it be yours as well!

Dear God in heaven—the God who blessed
Joshua for the decisions he made to honor and
follow You—may this be a new beginning for
me. May I resolve that, as of today, my life will
better reflect Thee...that I will seek Your righ-
teousness with my whole heart...that I will make
a daily commitment to grow in my relationship
with Your Son, my Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.
Dear Lord, my desire is to be a husband who
leads by example, loves sacrificially, and serves
selflessly. May I become a husband after Your
own heart. Amen.
Reaping God’s Blessings

I recently read a quip that suggested, “If you don’t like what you are reaping, change what you are sowing.” Perhaps you know that some things aren’t quite right in your home. You know that somehow your spiritual growth (or lack thereof) is connected with what’s not quite right in your life and marriage. But, with all the pressures of family and job, you can’t seem to “fit in” growing in the Lord. So you struggle on.

Friend, I just described my life in years past. I was sowing selfishness and personal gratification. I was living a life of personal ambition. My goal was to be a highly successful executive for a big company. I was off doing my own thing, and, believe me, God was not part of the equation! And my life and my marriage were reaping frustration and disappointment. My wife was even on the verge of leaving me.

But then a change came. By God’s grace, we became a Christian couple. Ours became a Christian marriage. With God’s help I began to change what I was sowing, so to speak. And I have to say, it wasn’t easy. One day I would sow a bag of good seed. The next day the bag was full of bad seed. But I desired to grow, and I sought help. I found men who could disciple me and show me what it means to be a husband after God’s own heart. Slowly I stopped living a life of selfishness and personal gratification and started to more and more consistently live for Jesus Christ. As I was growing in the Lord and learning how to love my wife, God began to
bless. And He blessed, as Ephesians 3:20 says, “exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think”!

Marriage is a great invention of God. And a marriage where the husband desires to love his wife as Christ loved the church is a true witness to the reality of the Christian faith. But a marriage that honors Jesus Christ is not easy to come by. If you want this kind of marriage, then, like me, you are going to have to work at it.

God wants to bless you and your marriage. And, brother, God will bless you and your marriage when you follow His blueprint. I trust you have made some significant commitments while reading this chapter. And I pray you have committed to growing in the Lord. That’s where you and I must start. It will require work, but oh, the blessings that await you!

How’s Your Heart?

You may or may not have read my book A Man After God’s Own Heart,2 but in that book I constantly challenge the man reading it to check his heart. The title of that book was taken from God’s description of King David as found in Acts 13:22. David wasn’t always the man he should have been, but deep down in his heart, God could see that he had a desire to follow after Him.

I’m going to now pick up where I left off in A Man After God’s Own Heart and ask that same question again. How’s your heart? Do you truly want to grow spiritually? Do you want to follow God and His commands for your life? These are hard questions, but they must be asked...and they must be answered. It’s critical right now to stop and answer. Is your answer yes or no?
You may want to say yes, but perhaps you are thinking, *I can’t live that kind of perfect life! I’ve tried, and I end up stumbling and falling. I can’t be perfect.* Well, brother, relax! I’m not talking about perfection. David wasn’t perfect, and I’m not perfect. In fact, no man is perfect (Romans 3:23). The only man who was perfect is Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Hebrews 4:15). No, what I am talking about is progression. Yes, like David, you and I stumble and fall at times. Yet God’s man—God’s husband—gets up off the deck when he’s fallen, seeks forgiveness, and moves on. Even though you might go two steps forward and one step back, that’s still progression! And that’s spiritual growth!

Once again, how’s your heart? I believe you do have a heart for God and the things of God. And I believe you want to be a husband after God’s own heart. I know I do. So together, let’s keep moving through this book. And together, let’s keep growing spiritually so we too can grow to “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

In the next several pages we are going to continue looking at this vital topic of growing in the Lord as we consider the “little things” you and I can do that will make a big difference in our marriage, but for now, remember...
when you grow in the Lord,
you grow in your ability to be a godly husband,
you grow in your ability to be a godly parent,
and you grow in your ability to lead.
So...

*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,*
*and all these things shall be added to you.*

*Matthew 6:33*
Little Things That Make a Big Difference

1. **Read your Bible every day.**

   It’s been calculated that if you read your Bible just ten minutes a day, you will read through it in one year. So decide on a time. Then pick a place. Start in Genesis 1:1 or Matthew 1:1. It doesn’t matter where you start...as long as you start! The idea is to regularly and systematically read through your Bible. No other book can claim to be “living and powerful...a dis-cerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Allow God to work in your life and marriage as you read and meditate on His Word.

2. **Go to church every week.**

   Obviously this isn’t such a “little” thing because church is such a big part of the Christian life. Church is where you and your family can corporately worship God, learn biblical truth from gifted pastors and teachers, fellowship with other believers and couples, and minister your spiritual gifts. It’s true you can worship God anywhere, but God has established the church so that we would worship Him somewhere (Hebrews 10:25). If you can make it to work five days a week, why can’t you make it to church one day each week?
3. **Visit a Christian bookstore.**

   Ask God, before you go into your local Christian bookstore, to show you which books would be helpful to you at this stage of your life and marriage. Then walk in and ask directions to the men’s section for yourself and the marriage section for your marriage. Browse through the titles and prayerfully select those that attract your interest. Also, maybe it’s time to upgrade your Bible with a study Bible that has explanatory notes in it. Or, if you have trouble understanding the language of your present Bible, find a translation that is a little more reader-friendly.

4. **Seek out a mentor.**

   If you’ve ever had a personal trainer or coach, you know how helpful it was in your physical or business training. Well, a discipler or mentor can be just as helpful in your spiritual training. You know you should be growing spiritually, you know you should be improving in your marriage, but you are not quite sure how to get the job done. A mentor can help. Find someone who has gone before you, who is wise and mature in the things of the Lord and can help intensify your training as a Christian and as a husband. Remember, “Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17 NASB).

5. **Sign up for a Bible class or Bible study.**

   God has given “pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints” in the church (Ephesians 4:11).
These men are gifted by God’s Spirit and have studied and prepared to teach God’s Word and assist you in your growth. Usually the size of a study group or class is small, which is less intimidating and gives you more freedom to ask questions. And to make your participation even more beneficial, why don’t you and your wife sign up for a couples Bible class or Bible study together?

6. Pray for your wife.

Prayer is a spiritual discipline. When you pray, you are acknowledging that God is an active participant in your life. Taking time each day to pray will strengthen your spiritual life, which, in turn, will strengthen your marriage and have its greatest impact on your wife.

I think you will agree your wife is a busy lady. She wears a myriad of hats. She has a multitude of roles and responsibilities. And she is the major reason for any good thing that is happening in your life. So why shouldn’t you pray for the growth, protection, and purity of the most special person in your life? Other than a godly mother, mother-in-law, or aunt, you might be the only person on the face of this earth who is praying regularly for your precious wife. Ask her for a photo. Then place it on your desk at work or near your computer. Whenever your eye catches a glimpse of her smiling face, remember to shoot up a prayer for whatever you know she is doing about that time of day.