

inviting intimacy

group leader's guide

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This guide is to be used in conjunction with *Inviting Intimacy: Overcoming the Lies and Shame* by Marian Green and Luke Brasel (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2016).

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about this study

Inviting Intimacy meets women in their pain and frustration when the sexual experiences of their past have left them hurting and struggling in their relationships. Often the scars of these previous physical relationships leave women unable to find the vibrant intimacy they long for within the godly confines of marriage. Gently, lovingly, and without judgment, the authors share candid stories and practical advice that lead women toward hope and healing in their hearts and relationships.

Through thirteen studies, women will explore the various struggles they face, from learning to trust to finding contentment to discovering practical, biblically-based solutions to each challenge they face along the way to healing. Creative ideas for opening and closing each study make leading easy and unintimidating. The questions go deep, allowing for self-discovery, leading toward practical solutions, and inviting transparency, all while creating a comfortable and safe environment. Group members walk hand in hand, guided by the Spirit toward renewed hearts. Together, they'll discover the Source of true intimacy and the intimate, fulfilling relationship he longs for them to enjoy.

week 1
confessions of a cactus
unlearning the lessons of promiscuity

to the facilitator

Matters of sexual intimacy are among the most personal and private things we can reveal about ourselves. It isn't easy to share private matters with people we're just getting to know. Yet a few simple steps can help create a safe, comfortable, and inviting atmosphere that fosters sharing, healing, and growth.

To start, make sure everyone feels welcomed and loved from the moment they walk in. Then allow a little extra time before the discussion begins to get to know one another and pray together. Open with a simple ice breaker. For example, ask each woman to briefly introduce herself and then to share what their best day ever would look like.

Next, establish a few ground rules. Start with these three:

- What people share with the group stays with the group and will not be repeated outside of it. Confidentiality will be strictly kept.
- The meeting space is a shame- and judgment-free zone. Everyone is in this together, loving each other, giving grace to each other, and working as a sisterhood to learn, grow, and heal.
- Privacy will be respected if there are things someone isn't comfortable sharing.

Then open the study time with prayer. Take a few moments before the Lord to set a tone of quiet peace for your study. Invite the Lord to love, heal, teach, and transform each person.

focus on God's Word

Few things impact a deeper part of our souls than those related to our sexuality. Everything associated with this part of our lives somehow connects directly with the very core of our being, like a raw nerve to the heart. Meant to be treated gently, when the heart is not, it seeks a way to protect itself. Author Marian Green called this self-protection a callus. Such calluses may protect that tender spot in us, but they also serve as barricades to intimacy. True intimacy requires a vulnerability that our calluses cannot allow.

Marian described herself as a prickly cactus, when she longed to be a lush flower. The experiences that impacted her ability to embrace intimacy she called thorns. These were specific moments in her life that taught her lies she came to believe, such as she was disposable, performance secures love, and sex is a commodity to be traded.

Not only does a life of promiscuity present such lies as truth, but it shrouds us in shame. We saw the truth of Ephesians 4:19 in our lives, when we gave ourselves over to promiscuity. We listen to the Accuser's voice (Rev. 12:10–11) rather than God's. Knowing that deviation from God's intended model for sex is sin, we feel the story must stop there forever—with us mired in sin's repercussions of guilt, shame, and frustration. But it doesn't.

God can bring healing. But it is a process, just as the wounding was. We begin the process by answering God's question to Adam and Eve in the garden: "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). And we acknowledge there may be a difference between what we think healing should be for us, and the greater work God has in mind. Then, the healing can finally begin.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. What did you imagine intimacy within marriage would be like? How has the reality differed from that?
2. Marian described the "thorns" in her life that influenced how she views intimacy. What were the thorns in your life? Prayerfully consider each one. What lesson did they teach you?
3. In general, how does promiscuity impact a person's heart? How has it impacted your heart?
4. Why is it often difficult to discuss sexual shame with even our closest friends? If you've risked doing so before, what was the experience like?
5. Read Ephesians 4:19. Marian shared that the layers of her callus include lies, such as she is unworthy or consumable. What lies form the layers of your callus?
6. Read Revelation 12:10–11. What is Satan called? List the accusations you hear him making about you. How does this line up with how God sees you?
7. Author Luke Brasel, in his section of the chapter, asserts, "It is OK not to be OK" (*Inviting Intimacy*, p. 25). What makes it easy or difficult for you to believe that?
8. In the garden, right after Adam and Eve sinned, God asked, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). What does it say about God that he intentionally sought them out at such a time?
9. If you answered the question "Where are you?" in your journal, what did you discover about yourself in the process?
10. What would complete healing look like to you? As a group, and without judgment, compare how your answers are the same or different.
11. Luke suggests that some expectations and demands about what healing looks like need to be set aside while other should remain. How can we tell the difference?
12. On a blank piece of paper, silently draw a backpack and pictures inside it that represent the dreams and expectations you have for healing. (Scribbles count! This is for your eyes only.) Circle the expectations you should keep and cross out those that might weigh you down in your journey toward healing. Share one circled item or one crossed-out item with the group.

wrap-up

Encourage each woman to get, or give herself, a pedicure sometime during the next week. As part of it, invite her to put lotion on her feet to help soften or prevent calluses. And encourage them to purchase a pumice stone as a reminder that God can remove those calluses that seek to protect our hearts and souls. Close with prayer. Ask the Lord for courage to be honest with him about the thorns in our lives and for a sense of his grace to cover our shame.

week 2

madly married

engaging the formula for intimacy

to the facilitator

This week, group members will likely still be getting to know each other. The comfort they feel will still be in its early stages. Again, start with a simple ice breaker. Try asking each woman to share how she knew her husband was the one for her. Questions like this, which reveal something more personal than, say, your favorite brand of toothpaste, begin to open hearts without putting anyone on the spot. Always let women know they can feel free to pass on answering.

focus on God's Word

It takes two to tango. The dance of intimacy requires the same. And when one partner can't hear the music, it often leaves *two* hearts sitting on the sidelines like wallflowers. Marian shared what it was like when her husband invited her to have "an evening." Though she knew the damage it caused, she could not accept his invitation to the dance. Sometimes she simply rejected his advances. Other times, she admitted, she started fights to ensure sex wouldn't be expected. An effective, though often subconscious, technique. Self-protective instincts wield great power.

Marian sought to understand what she longed for, what was missing, what was preventing her from saying yes to her husband. She realized what she really wanted was intimacy. Sex and intimacy, she found, are not the same things. She sought to understand the difference. That led her to the first insight toward her healing: Intimacy with God provides the framework for intimacy with her husband. Luke 10:27 spelled it out: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . soul . . . strength and . . . mind." This was the same way she was to love her husband. This was intimacy. And intimacy, in time, would express itself sexually. But there is more to the verse: "Love your neighbor as yourself." And it begged a question: Did she truly love herself?

As Luke Brasel pointed out, this isn't a matter of mind over matter, but rather of working from the inside out. First, it's important to do the internal work, to start with healing your heart—loving and forgive yourself. Then, as healing begins, the gateway to intimacy opens. And that is the path to a healthy sexual expression of love and desire. At a foundational level, sex expresses intimacy; it doesn't generate it.

The end goal of all of this isn't great sex. Rather, as in anything, it is for God to be glorified. Jesus made it clear we glorify God when we love others and love him. A vibrant, passionate, intimate marriage reflects our unique relationship with God as his bride. Not only does that glorify him greatly, but it brings healing and joy to our own lives as well.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. As we seek healing, what might be some loving ways to respond when our spouses initiate sex, especially when we are not yet ready?
2. Marian described herself as an “amputee of emotions” (*Inviting Intimacy*, p. 30). How would you describe yourself when it comes to sex and intimacy? An amputee? Highly emotional? Something else?
3. Write your own definition of *sex*.
4. Write your own definition of *intimacy*.
5. Read Luke 10:27. What does it mean to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and body?
6. What does it mean to love your spouse this way?
7. Marian asked herself, ‘Did I love myself? Had I made peace with the woman I was?’ (p. 34). How would you answer those questions and why?
8. None of us are whole; we are all broken. Have you tried to make loving as Jesus calls us to a matter of “mind over heart”? What was the result?
9. Luke says, “Before you can love anyone well, you must do your own internal work” (p. 35). What makes it hard for you to do the internal work? What might help you overcome these things?
10. We all come to marriage with expectations of what sex within marriage will be like. Where do these expectations come from? In what ways do you think these do or do not line up with God’s expectations?
11. “Sexual activity is a reflection of intimacy and not the other way around,” Luke claims (p. 36). Explain why this might be true. Why do we see it backward?
12. What might a sex-first relationship look like? What might an intimacy-first relationship look like?
13. List three specific things you will do this week to focus on true heart and soul intimacy, rather than just on sex.

wrap-up

Read Luke 10:27 together again. Then use it as a template for your closing prayer time. Pray over each phrase one at a time, first that God will show each person how to love him with their whole hearts. Then with their souls, etc. Then go back through each phrase again, one at a time, praying to know how to love our spouses in the same way. Invite those who are comfortable praying aloud to add their own one-or-two sentence prayers to yours as you move from phrase to phrase.

week 3

sticky love

being sealed by God's Spirit

to the facilitator

As we walk further on the journey to healing, we're turning our eyes toward God as our source of help. Begin with the following icebreaker question: What are your favorite comforting things to do? This may be things like taking a bubble bath, going for a run, or listening to music. Then open with prayer, asking God to help us understand what it means to love ourselves and to see what intimacy is through who he is. Invite others to pray as well.

focus on God's Word

As believers, we've often heard the command to love others as we love ourselves (Luke 10:27). But somehow in our minds, we get stuck in the first half, loving others. We miss the fact that God expects us to love ourselves. After all, how can we truly love others if we can't even love ourselves?

In our longings for real love and to ease the loneliness we feel, promiscuity becomes a tempting solution. Thus, as Marian described, we get stuck in an endless cycle of seeking to fulfill our hearts' needs through promiscuous sex, finding it doesn't satisfy, getting more deeply hurt, and then circling right back through the process over and over. We must step out of the cycle and learn to love ourselves.

Marian pointed out that as we do so, we must let go of what we have been taught intimacy is and seek to understand its true meaning through the Trinity. God, as a Trinity, is intimacy; he is union, oneness, and love itself, all bonded together with a sticky kind of love. That same Spirit of love dwells in us, filling in the cracks, and making us whole.

But first, we must seek to have our longings and desires met in God. We must run to him. Everything we long for is in him. He is our safe place. Our place of love where we can find the healing and the heart fulfillment we so desperately seek.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. What is the difference between loving yourself in a way that is prideful and selfish and loving yourself in the way Jesus expects us to in Luke 10:27?
2. Marian admitted, "I never knew myself. It is hard to love someone you do not know" (*Inviting Intimacy*, p. 41). What are some things you can do to know yourself better?

3. As a child, what did you learn love was based on? What did you learn love was based on as an adult?
4. How is the Trinity the perfect model of intimacy?
5. Describe a time when you or someone you know felt too broken to receive God's love.
6. How can knowing the "sticky Spirit" who holds you together and who restores you with *kintsugi* love, help you love yourself better?
7. How can we begin to replace the imperfect definition of love we learned from our family and friends with the perfect definition of love that God models?
8. What are some specific steps you will take to help you more fully embrace God's love for you?
9. How can loneliness be healthy? What makes it unhealthy?
10. Describe the safest place you've known. Share a time when you realized God was like that.
11. What do you currently do to comfort your heart when you feel lonely?
12. List three alternative ways you can comfort your heart that will help you fill your loneliness with God instead.

wrap-up

Look online for pictures of *kintsugi* pottery. Print one and make a copy for each member of your group. Hand them out at the end as reminders of the beauty and value of God's restoration. Close by singing or listening to a hymn or praise song that focuses on God's love for us. Anything from a classic hymn like "Oh the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus" to a more contemporary praise song such as "I Could Sing of Your Love Forever." Then close in prayer.

week 4
my mountain of failure

embracing acceptance

to the facilitator

Open the group with a time of prayer. Then ask each group member to share their favorite Bible story if they have one. When everyone has shared, ask them to consider what their own story might look like if it was included in the Bible. After all, God works in our lives just like he worked in people's lives back in biblical times.

focus on God's Word

As Marian shared, there are moments in our lives when we are startled by how quickly time passes. Such times cause us to reflect on how precious each moment of life is. Suddenly we realize we want to live—and love—more freely so that every second counts. But this freedom we desire is not the destructive “freedom” to love that promiscuity once offered. Instead we long to love with the freedom that comes from the pure love God gives us.

Marian found a mentor, someone who could help her journey from the valley of worthlessness and despair to the mountaintop of God's grace and restoration. Walking with someone who has traveled the path can make a profound difference. And when we reach that place, we no longer want to be defined by our sin but by the acceptance of God and the transformation he brings. It's hard to reconcile the truth that while God calls us to holiness, he loves us unconditionally. But he does—always has, always will. And it's about God, not our performance. This truth releases us from toxic shame. Toxic shame leaves us feeling unlovable, unworthy, and hopeless. But healthy shame, while it points out our need for God and his forgiveness, leads us to his grace and mercy and leaves our sins wiped out by love.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. What sparks in you a realization of the fleeting nature of life and the preciousness of time?
2. Marian had moments when she felt her failure was irreparable. If you've felt this way, what, if anything, has helped you see God's grace?
3. Who is or has been a mentor in your life? Describe that relationship. If no one is right now, who could be? What would it take for you to share your struggles with intimacy with that person?

4. What in your life reminds you that in God's eyes you are enough? If nothing right now, what might you begin to add to your life that would reinforce this truth?
5. List the things you tend to think you must do to be acceptable to God.
6. What is the difference between seeking to live an obedient life that pleases God and striving to win his acceptance?
7. What makes it difficult for you to believe that God accepts you apart from your performance?
8. How would you explain the difference between healthy shame and toxic shame? Describe a time when you experienced each.
9. Which would you say: "I do therefore I am," or "I am therefore I do"? Why?
10. In your deepest heart, how do you think God views you? What might Scripture have to say about that?
11. In just a couple paragraphs, write your spiritual story similar to the book of Esther in the Bible. Title it "The Book of [insert your name]." Don't shy from the struggles of your past. End with a sentence or two that points to where you sense God may be taking your story and how he may use it.

wrap-up

Encourage each group member to expand on creating a simple book of her spiritual story this week. The format can be as creative or basic as they like, from a handmade book to a computer file. Then close in prayer. This time, focus the prayer around ways we know God loves us.

week 5
a bouquet of flowers
daring to trust

to the facilitator

Open this session by listening to or singing a hymn or praise song focused on trust in God. Some examples might be “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” or “You Are My Hiding Place.” Then pray together, inviting the Lord to bring peace to your hearts and assurance of his trustworthiness and love.

focus on God’s Word

Sage, Marian’s daughter, struggled to trust. She could mimic what a trusting relationship looked like, but her heart never accepted the safe and reliable love and security offered to her. Similarly, we struggle to trust God. We know we should trust—and sometimes even know what it should look like—but it doesn’t always reach our hearts.

We need to allow God to heal us, to bandage our wounds (Isa. 1:5–6). As a starting point toward this, we must believe that it is OK to wrestle through our pain and struggles with God, to share how we feel. God invites us to (Isa. 1:18). Before we can do this, though, we must answer this question: Do we truly believe deep down that God is safe? Or perhaps better asked: Is he good?

Understanding where we put our trust provides the answer. Trusting in anything other than God to meet our needs is idolatry. But we can grow in our trust in God. With this foundation, we can increase the trust in our marriages. As Marian said, “If I am placing trust in God, whose Spirit is the sticky love keeping our marriage glued together, then yes. Yes, I can learn to trust that my marriage is a safe place to lay bare” (*Inviting Intimacy*, p. 72). And it’s not necessarily our desires that are wrong but where we turn to fulfill them. Fulfilling them through anything but God is a fragile web that cannot hold (see Job 8:14–19).

As we seek to trust, we must acknowledge our fears. They can show us where healing needs to happen. As the psalmist said, “Fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10). And as our wounds begin to be bandaged, healing happens and trust grows—first trust in God and later trust within our marriages.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. Marian shared her experience with her daughter, Sage, who learned at an early age that she couldn't trust others with her heart's needs. In what ways are you like Sage when it comes to trusting God with your heart? How are you like Sage when it comes to trusting your spouse?
2. Read Isaiah 1:5–6. While God spoke this specifically to Israel, it reveals his heart for his people even today. How does your heart respond when you read these words of God to Israel?
3. Why is it sometimes so easy to continue living in a way that beats us up emotionally?
4. Read Isaiah 1:8. Have you ever poured out your heart fully to God? If not, why not? If you have, what was the experience like?
5. What specific things can we do to begin to trust God with our hearts' needs for safety and intimacy?
6. Marian said, "[Idolatry] happens when trust shifts from God to someone or something else" (p. 73). How can we know when our trust has shifted away from God to someone or something else?
7. Read Job 8:14–19. List some of the things you trust in that are nothing but a spider's web. Then list several times in your life when God has proven himself trustworthy.
8. What does your heart fear? What are you protecting yourself from?
9. When is fear healthy and when is it unhealthy?
10. Is God safe? How do you know this intellectually? What does your heart require for it to answer that question?
11. How might our lives—how might *your* life—change if we (you) truly believed God is good?
12. Luke quotes Dan Allender, author of *The Wounded Heart*: "Those who trust God most are those whose faith permits them to wrestle with him over the deepest questions of life" (p. 78). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
13. What are some specific things we can do to help our hearts truly believe that God is good?

wrap-up

Close by having each person share a time in their lives when they saw that God was good. Then invite each person to search during the next week for a psalm or other Scripture that speaks of God's goodness. These will be to share at the next meeting. If this might be a struggle for some, take a moment to provide some suggestions for how to do this, such as looking up the word *good* in a Bible concordance or searching on a Bible resources website, like biblegateway.com. Then close in prayer.

week 6

memory monsters

rewiring the brain

to the facilitator

This week, focus on the necessity of facing painful memories head on. Most people find this very difficult to do. Today, create an especially comforting space. Perhaps let the lighting be a little dimmer; play soft praise music as people enter; provide warm coffee, tea, or cocoa; and offer a few small indulgent snacks, like brownies. Then as you pray to begin, ask for a sense of love and security as you talk.

focus on God's Word

Marian kept her painful memories of intimacy locked down, so she avoided sex, which often triggered them. This hurt her husband and left her stuck with the very memories she no longer wanted. To move past this, she first had to remind herself that she had a new identity and was neither the same person nor in the same place as before. She also had to learn to be mentally present during intimacy. Along the way, she was helped by her husband's admission that the reason he desired sex was because that was when he felt closest to and most loved by her. She wanted those reasons to be hers.

To deal with painful memories, we must realize they come out of trauma. Anything that disrupts our story is trauma. And, while life does often require us to feel unsafe, trauma occurs when we are not ready to feel unsafe. All sexual experiences then, have the potential to be traumatic because they require vulnerability. That's why they are intended for a safe relationship where that vulnerability can be protected.

But what can be done with the memories that haunt us? We must face them so we can change the way we remember. We must redirect them so we can create a new emotional ending to the story they tell. But we must find and develop safe relationships in which to do this—safe relationships with ourselves, with others, and especially with God. Within this context, we can do the work of facing our memories and change can begin to occur.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. How do you protect yourself from reliving painful memories? In what ways are these helpful or harmful?
2. What are some negative impacts that come with a lack of desire? For you? For your spouse?
3. What, if any, effective ways have you found to reclaim your mind when negative memories take over?
4. Sometimes we allow our past sins to define us. If your best friend was struggling to see that she is more than her past sins and that they do not define her life now, what would you tell her?
5. Why do you think men desire sex? How do you respond to Marian's husband's answer: because it was when he felt closest to her and most loved by her?
6. How easy or difficult is it for you to see the painful memories you lock away as coming out of trauma?
7. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being the worst), how hurtful was the trauma in your life, especially as it relates to sexual relationships?
8. Luke asserted, "When we are helpless and are not ready to feel unsafe, we experience trauma" (*Inviting Intimacy*, p. 90). Can you give an example of this, a time when you were ready to feel unsafe and a time when you weren't?
9. Sexual activity inherently requires vulnerability. What happens when that vulnerability isn't closely guarded within a relationship? What would respect and protect that vulnerability?
10. Luke said, "Allowing memories to return lets you write a new ending—this time in the presence of a safe relationship" (p. 95). What might be an example of a "new ending" for a painful memory?
11. Of the three types of relationships we need to be safe—with self, with others, and with God—which might be the hardest for you to learn to feel safe in? Why?
12. List some safe people who can journey with you toward healing. What specific things would you like each one to do to support you? How will you communicate this to them?

wrap-up

Consider closing with a physical illustration of overcoming old memories. Have each woman write or draw on a small piece of paper a word or small picture that represents a memory she wants to rewrite. Then have each person use a red pen to write "Not the End" over what she has written or drawn. Close with prayer.

week 7

desire: part 1

wanting God's goodness

to the facilitator

If possible, bring a fake food item, such as a plastic apple, along with the real thing. As you begin, ask the group which one they would pick if they were hungry. Just for fun, assign one person to pretend they are in a television commercial for the real item and someone to pretend they are in a commercial for the fake one. Have them give all the reasons a hungry person would pick their item over the other. After a while, explain that these illustrate the difference between false intimacy and real intimacy, which we will be discussing today. Open with prayer. This time, have each individual who is willing to pray thank God for something they learned so far in this study.

focus on God's Word

Marian longed for the desire she pushed away. Like many of us, she sought to spark it through means that only left her hurting more. When she discovered through a Bible study on Song of Songs that God actually approves of sexual desire when fulfilled within his boundaries, she took another step toward healing. She found that God himself has desires, and he gave us desires. In fact, we're even called to desire things, like the "greater gifts" God offers (1 Cor. 12:31). But our desire gets distorted and seeks fulfillment in unhealthy ways (Gal. 5:16). The one desire, however, that will never lead us astray is the desire for God. God invites us to taste and see that he is good. And once we do, we can never get enough. God invites us to desire him. Through this realization, Marian discovered that desire between spouses also can be an invitation to intimacy.

As we seek to answer this invitation, it's helpful to understand the three types of intimacy: false intimacy, real intimacy, and perfect intimacy. False intimacy is the illusion of intimacy offered by the world, and it leaves us thirsting for more. Real intimacy is the best possible connection in a fallen world. And perfect intimacy is what God originally designed us for in Eden. But recovering desire and reaching real intimacy is a process that begins with submitting and surrendering our desires—and our sexuality—to the Lord.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. Marian mentioned that she read romance novels and studied Song of Songs to try to spark desire. Each had a different outcome. What are some ways you've sought to ignite desire? What was the result?
2. When it comes to desire, "God has created a gift in both the longing and the fulfillment," Marian said (*Inviting Intimacy*, p. 101). Give an example of something you desire that you enjoy both the longing and fulfillment of. (Marian's was coffee.)
3. Explain the difference between good desire and wrong desire.
4. Marian said there was only one desire that moves toward life: the desire for God himself. What steps can you take to foster your desire for him?
5. God invites us to desire him. That invitation is an invitation to intimacy. How can godly desire within a relationship also be an invitation to intimacy?
6. Read Exodus 36:26. As you are made new in Christ and given a new heart of flesh, what can this mean for your desires?
7. In what ways do you see your new spiritual nature warring with your old nature when it comes to your desires?
8. Read Romans 8:5. What's one way we can help our new nature win the battle?
9. Describe the differences between false intimacy, real intimacy, and perfect intimacy. Why is it important to understand the differences between the types of intimacy?
10. How does experiencing perfect intimacy help us move past the pain of false intimacy and toward embracing real intimacy?

wrap-up

In closing, encourage each woman to memorize Ezekiel 36:26. Pass out index cards for the women to write the verse on. Then, read the verse three times together out loud. This will help aid memorization. Ask the ladies to post the card somewhere they will read it each day which will also help make learning it easy. Close in prayer.

week 8

desire, part 2

participating in ministry

to the facilitator

As you begin, read Acts 2:42–47 together. Go around the circle asking each person to share what they imagine it was like to experience a church community like that. If they were there, how would they personally have felt in it? Then open with prayer.

focus on God's Word

Marian said that she desired to desire. She longed to be like her friend, whose attitude regarding intimacy was “Give of myself as much as possible,” while Marian’s was “Give of myself only when necessary” (*Inviting Intimacy*, p. 112). Marian even found herself picking fights and creating excuses just to push her husband away. She wondered what she was missing.

The answer, she found, was in the early church, where people worshiped using all of the senses while they ate, drank, fellowshiped, sang, and learned together. As she studied the church today, she discovered that some of the “romance” was lost when believers became an audience during worship rather than participants. And the same was true in her marriage. She’d become an audience to intimacy rather than a participant. Instead of “owning” her body, which she saw as an object to possess, Marian needed to “own” her desire for intimacy.

She needed what Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 2:16 call a renewed mind, a mind that saw everything, including her marriage and sexuality, through God’s eyes. She discovered that celebrating the physical relationship God had given as a gift was a form of worship. And that brought freedom.

The protections we use to guard our hearts and souls block us from enjoying life to the fullest. Two of the strongest weapons against intimacy are apathy and rage. But whatever armaments we wield, we must identify them, put them down, and allow ourselves to feel the hard feelings we feel. God will use them to restore and renew us to a place of connection, love, and worship.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. Marian admitted her philosophy was "Give of myself only when necessary," while her friend's was "Give of myself as much as possible." How do these perspectives line up with Scripture?
2. When you throw up barriers to block attempts at intimacy, do you get called on it by anyone, or do you get away with it?
3. How is a woman's romantic life impacted when she acts as an audience to it rather than a participant?
4. If a woman views her body as an object and herself as the owner, how might this impact her view on sex? Her relationship with her husband?
5. What changes when instead of claiming ownership of our bodies, we claim ownership over our desire for intimacy?
6. Marian explained she seeks to nurture thoughts and feelings of love and relationship throughout the day. List some specific ways you can do this too.
7. Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 2:16 refer to a renewal of our minds. How would your viewpoint on your marriage and intimacy within it be changed if you saw it from God's point of view?
8. How might sex be an expression of worship to God?
9. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being strongest), how strong is your desire? Where would you like it to be? How much hope do you have that you can get there?
10. Luke mentioned apathy and rage as two examples of weapons we use to fight our desire. What weapons do you use? How effective are they?
11. Luke called apathy the deadliest weapon against desire. Why is it? And why is it so effective?
12. What are some ways rage might be used as a weapon?
13. Why would you and others rather express these damaging emotions than face the uncomfortable emotions you are trying to avoid? In what ways are our fears about feeling negative emotions justified or not justified?

wrap-up

Close by asking each woman to pray before God silently in her heart, confessing the ways she blocks intimacy, asking for grace to put those weapons down, and asking the Lord to give her courage to face the feelings she struggles to avoid. After a few moments, end the silent prayer time with a short prayer aloud thanking God for caring about each individual heart so personally.

week 9

relational blindness

choosing contentment

to the facilitator

Open the session by handing out blank sheets of paper. Have each person fold a page in quarters, forming four quadrants. In two of the squares, ask everyone to draw a picture or symbol that represents where they once were before God began to transform their lives. (Assure everyone this doesn't have to be fancy. It's for their eyes only.) Then open with prayer.

focus on God's Word

Marian shared how the unexpected lure of a man other than her husband opened her eyes to the discontent she felt. An older, mentoring couple shared with her three things that contributed to this discontent: the three Cs—comparison, criticism, and control. Comparing our spouses to others', criticizing them, and trying to control them greatly damages both our marriages and our own contentment.

Proverbs 19:23 and Philippians 4:11–12 remind us that contentment is essential to life. It is also key to intimacy. Resting in where God has us isn't always easy, but we don't do it in our own strength (Phil. 4:13). We depend on the Spirit. Yet we can work alongside him as we train our minds to focus on the things God wants us to. Instead of getting stuck in a negative mind-set, we turn our minds, as Philippians 4:8 recommends, to things that are noble, good, right, and lovely. Taking off the relational blinders, caused when our focus remains exclusively on the negative, begins to transform both our outlooks and our relationships.

Luke pointed out that another key to contentment is to begin to see the larger story of our lives, the grand story God wants to tell. Our mission and purpose is so much more than the little storylines we get caught up in. A story that is too small cannot capture our hearts and fulfill our deepest longings. Instead, God's larger story helps us to see beyond to all he offers us. And when we trust him and open our hearts up to his story and to his desires, we discover contentment and can open our hearts to the fullness life offers.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. Marian described a time when she felt intensely lonely in her marriage. How common is that feeling? What causes it? When have you felt that way?
2. Marian also shared that she was tempted to be with a man who wasn't her husband. What causes a woman who struggles to desire her husband—even though she wants to—to desire someone else?
3. When have you felt discontent in your marriage? What led to this feeling?
4. Marian was helped by an older couple who mentored her and her husband. Who does, or could do, this for you?
5. How are the three Cs—comparison, criticism, and control—evident in your heart toward your marriage? What impact have they had?
6. How would you define relational blindness? What have you struggled with it?
7. Read Philippians 4:11–12 and Proverbs 19:23. When have you felt most content? When have you felt far from it?
8. How is contentment key to a healthy, vibrant marriage? How might contentment actually lead to fulfillment?
9. Read Philippians 4:13. Where does the strength to find contentment and stay in our marriages come from?
10. Read Philippians 4:8. How can thinking of such things help toward contentment in your marriage? How does focusing on negative things harm it?
11. List five things that are good, noble, right, and lovely. about your marriage and your husband.
12. Luke pointed out that knowing and embracing the larger story of our lives is essential to contentment. What might he mean by “the larger story” God has for us?
13. Why is it hard to focus on the larger story sometimes? Why is it easy to get caught up in smaller stories?
14. What specific things will you do to better understand and embrace the larger story of your life?

wrap-up

To close, ask everyone to take out the folded paper they drew on at the beginning of the study. In the final two squares, which are still blank, ask each person to draw two things that represent the larger story of what God is doing in and with their lives. This will become something of a picture book of their story, just for them. Close in prayer.

week 10
measuring me by the standard of she
quitting comparison

to the facilitator

As you open this session, offer each woman a glass of cold water, asking them to share what their favorite go-to drink is when they are extremely thirsty. Then pray together. Ask the Lord to help each of you see how you each reflect his glory and to release you from the comparison trap.

focus on God's Word

Many of us would admit that comparing ourselves and our lives to others' comes naturally; in fact, it likely started when we were very young. But as Marian said, "Comparison begins with self and leads us to calculate the distance between where we are versus where we think we should be" (*Inviting Intimacy*, p. 144). Comparison steals our motivation to do what God calls us to, takes our confidence, and leaves us feeling completely alone.

Intimacy requires togetherness, which isn't possible when comparison comes in. And intimacy demands generosity, which comparison prevents. Comparison leaves us thirsty. Yet Jesus invites us to drink of his living water, just as he invited the woman at the well (John 4:10). In him we can find living water that always satisfies (vv. 13–14) and can become springs of that water for others. This water, which Jesus offers, leads to life. But the water that does not come from him is contaminated and leads to death. Comparison is death. The only satisfying life is one that depends on his Spirit. One that finds life fully in him. When our focus changes from what we lack in life to what we have in him, intimacy can thrive.

We are God's masterpieces (Eph. 2:10). Yet we allow toxic shame to prevent us from accepting that truth. We miss that we were intended to shine. When we grasp the unique way God has made us, we can give ourselves to our relationships and the world. No one else can offer the world what God gave us to offer. Comparison hijacks this. We can't glorify God if we don't allow the one-of-a-kind masterpiece he created in us to shine before the world. You can only give of yourself and experience true intimacy when you realize you have something precious to offer.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. Why is comparing ourselves to others a losing proposition? Why do we do it?
2. Share a time when you found yourself comparing yourself to others.
3. How can comparison steal our voice? How can it leave us isolated and alone?
4. How does comparison prevent generosity, something essential to intimacy?
5. Read John 4:10. How is someone who has the living water different from someone who does not? How can you tell the difference between them?
6. Read John 7:37–39. How do we find the living water spoken of here (even as believers) in our daily lives?
7. What contaminated wells have you drunk from rather than accepting the living water Jesus offers? What was the outcome?
8. “To become a source of God’s living water is to transition from ‘not enough’ to ‘more than enough’” (p. 153). What specific steps can you take to make this transition and become a source of living water?
9. Read Ephesians 2:10. List several reasons why God deserves praise for who he made you to be. How is God honored when we embrace who he made us to be?
10. What gifts did God give you so that you could use them in your unique way for his glory?
11. How can we encourage each other to recognize that we are God’s masterpieces? How can we help each other avoid comparison?

wrap-up

As you close, invite the group members to write Ephesians 2:10 on an index card. ask them to put it on the mirror where they get ready in the morning. Encourage participants to read it each morning for the next week to themselves, placing their own name in the verse: “_____ is God’s workmanship.” Close in prayer.

week 11
intimacy's slow death

resisting the urge to criticize

to the facilitator

As you begin, bring out a small treat or healthy snack and set it in front of everyone. But tell them they aren't allowed to have any until you say they can. Leave it out through much of the study, but do not let anyone enjoy it until you are more than halfway done. (Don't reveal when you plan to let them eat in advance.) When you do allow them to have some, discuss what it felt like to long for some, but to have to live with that unmet desire. Open with prayer.

focus on God's Word

"Criticism," Marian said, "transitions [each of us] from a member of the band to a solo artist" (*Inviting Intimacy*, p. 163). As healing slowly began in some aspects of her marriage, Marian began to see the role criticism played in damaging the relationship. Twisted by a mix of self-protection and pride, her expectations and her reactions, when those expectations weren't met, were often skewed. Anger brewed. Her heart hardened. As she found, "Intimacy cannot breathe blanketed beneath criticism" (p. 163).

Second Samuel 6 tells the story of King David's wife, Michal's, criticism of him when he danced in the streets praising God for victory. Eventually, she came to despise him, and their marriage died. For Marian, this story served as a cautionary tale. She needed to reject pride, bitterness, and anger, just as Jesus rejected the bitter gall in Matthew 27:34. He rejected the numbness that comes with bitterness, and so would she. And the key to this is forgiveness. We must forgive ourselves, those who have hurt us in the past, and our husbands just as Christ has forgiven us.

Proverbs 4:23 advises us to carefully guard our hearts as though they were fortresses under attack. As Luke said, we reject bitterness not by changing those we are critiquing but by changing our own hearts. We must recognize the constant cycle of longing, disappointment, action, shame, contempt, and penance. Each phase of the cycle must be acknowledged and understood. But the cycle can only be broken through repentance and forgiveness. And by learning to live in the tension of unmet desires, trusting God's grace and love to give us all we need and more. In this way, we discover freedom.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. Why is criticism such an effective means of protecting our hearts, despite its obvious negative ramifications?
2. What does it look like when a woman hardens her heart?
3. What lies is criticism based in?
4. How do we distinguish between criticism, which damages relationships, and speaking the truth in love?
5. When have you seen the damaging impact of criticism in your life or in someone else's?
6. Read 2 Samuel 6. What was the impact of Michal's criticism? How might the struggles of her heart (whatever they were) have been handled in a more productive and marriage-strengthening way?
7. Jesus rejected the pain-numbing, bitter drink called gall offered at his crucifixion. What might we gain by rejecting the pain-numbing bitterness in our lives?
8. Practically speaking, what might forgiveness look like in the hurting areas of your life?
9. Luke discussed the cycle of addiction and its phases: longing, disappointment, action, shame, contempt, and penance. What has this looked like in your life?
10. Forgiveness (yourself and others) and repentance are key to breaking the cycle. What are some specific steps you can take toward forgiveness of yourself and others?
11. What does it mean to live with unmet desires and dreams? Is this just a pessimistic place to dwell, or is a joyful life still possible? Explain.
12. What dreams and desires do you need to learn to leave unmet?
13. As you seek to release contempt and bitterness, forgive yourself and others, break the cycle of addiction, and live peacefully with the reality of unmet desires, name one way a friend could support you in one of these areas.

wrap-up

In closing, as you pray, allow some time for group members to silently bring their unmet desires before the Lord. You may wish to allow about five minutes for this private prayer time. Then close by asking the Lord to fill your hearts with love and trust toward him so much that all other desires fade.

week 12
a living souvenir

letting go of control

to the facilitator

Begin this session by asking each woman to share a favorite story from her life that involves something good and unexpected happening. Then open with prayer, asking the Lord to help each of you learn to trust him more, to embrace fear, and to release the need for control.

focus on God's Word

When Marian's life seemed to veer off the path that led to her dreams and God's promises, she struggled with anger and fear. She took this out on her husband, though it was really aimed at God. "Control," she said, "is rooted in the fear that God's goodness has limitations" (*Inviting Intimacy*, p. 182). Fear births pride and self-dependence, strangles love, and destroys communication. What she couldn't see, however, was that the path God put her on really was leading to the fulfillment of her dreams and his promises.

It's easy in the midst of fear and disappointment to fall into seeing our bodies as commodities: Give me this if you want that. The world tells us our bodies are objects, but in reality they are our homes. When we see ourselves as objects we possess, we feel we are ours to control rather than to give. We separate ourselves from others. "Independence resists surrender and declines the invitation to intimacy," Marian found (p. 188). So she allowed herself the grace for a redo, the chance to try again whenever she pulled away from intimacy. Slowly, she began to see sex as an invitation to know and be known, rather than as something that happened to her. In time, she understood it to be a holy gift not as something dirty to avoid.

As Genesis 3 reveals, we go our own way when we don't trust God's intentions toward us. Our desire for control stems from our answer to the question, "Is God good?" The way to fight this need to control is to embrace fear, to recognize it. It is not the enemy; our response to it is the problem. We can decide how we want to respond to fear. Rather than fear signaling us to shut down, it can show us where we need to embrace trust and faith.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. Share a time when you were disappointed in the path God was leading you on only to discover later it was the best one for you all along.
2. How do you respond when you are angry or disappointed with God? Do you withdraw from him and other relationships? Fight for control? Something else?
3. How does control strangle love and corrode communication? How does it lead to a life of aloneness?
4. When we see ourselves as commodities, as objects, we can determine what, how much, and when to give of ourselves. What is the result? What is the result when we give all of ourselves instead?
5. How might the practice of a redo (freedom to immediately change your behavior) be helpful as you seek to trust and grow in intimacy?
6. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being the strongest), to what degree do you see sex as something that happens to you? How might a person begin to move down the scale?
7. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being the strongest), to what degree do you see sex as holy and a gift? How might a person begin to move up the scale?
8. Why do we doubt that God's intentions toward us are good? How can we strengthen our conviction that his intentions are good?
9. How does embracing fear help us fight our need to control?
10. How is fear a gift?
11. How can fear lead you toward faith?
12. What specific steps can we take when something triggers our fear and need to control?

wrap-up

Read Psalm 91 together out loud. You can read it in unison or go around the group having each person read a few verses. Encourage the women to read the psalm each day for the next week. Then close with prayer.

week 13

landmarks of never-the-sames

learning the art of failure

to the facilitator

During this last session, you might begin by asking group members to share which truths have been the most encouraging and helpful to them over the past several weeks and which truths have been the most challenging to work through. Then pray, asking the Lord to help you all move forward into all he has for you. And pray that if you fall from time to time along the way, you will fall into his grace.

focus on God's Word

None of us will achieve perfection this side of heaven. We will all fail at times. The question is less whether if this will happen, but what we will do when it does. Marian shared that although she has made great strides toward intimacy, she still struggles along the way. We must pick ourselves up. We must keep moving forward.

One helpful change toward this goal is to begin to lean more on the Spirit than on our own power to change us. This doesn't relieve us of responsibility. But there's a difference between praying, "Lord, help me to love my husband" and "Lord, love my husband through me." We also must embrace the truth of how the Lord responds when we fail. Marian found Peter's encounter with Jesus after the disciple's denial insightful (John 21:15–17). In love, Jesus pressed in, asking whether Peter loved him. But Jesus used two different words during his questioning: *phileo* and *agape*. *Phileo* is a brotherly love, something akin to liking someone or something. *Agape* is a selfless, all-consuming, fully-content-in-the-beloved kind of love. And we have the same question to answer. Do we find *agape* or *phileo* love in our relationship with God? What do we find in our relationship with our husbands? In our other relationships?

Yet it's important to realize that we can embrace the lessons of failure and be at peace with it as a part of our journey. When we fall, it can be an opportunity to fall before the Lord in repentance and worship, then get right back up and walk into our future, a future of wholeness and intimacy.

focus on life

Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. How do you respond when you fail?
2. What makes it harder or easier to get back up when you fail?
3. What lies do you hear when you fail? How can you counteract those lies?
4. List some ways we can encourage, help, and strengthen one another when we fail, as we all will at times.
5. Describe the difference between praying for God to help us change and praying for him to change us.
6. How are things different when we ask God to love through us rather than ask him to make us loving?
7. Read John 21:15–17. Describe Jesus' response to one who fails.
8. Marian explained the difference between two types of love: *agape* (selfless, content, consuming, needing no other) and *phileo* (closer to a feeling of liking something or someone). Would you say you *agape* or *phileo* God? Why?
9. Would you say you *agape* or *phileo* your husband? Why?
10. How can you grow in *agape* toward God? Toward your spouse? Toward your family and friends?

wrap-up

As you end this study together, close with prayer, asking the Lord to continue the work he has begun in your lives. Then discuss as a group ways you can continue to support one another in your journey to wholeness, healing, and intimacy. This is a time to make solid plans to do some of these things. It could be follow-up times together, starting another study, choosing an accountability partner, making prayer commitments, or any number of other options. If possible, try to nail down times and/or commitments. Close with a little time left for fellowship.