



CLOSER
7 DEVOTIONS FOR COUPLES

BY JIM AND CATHY BURNS



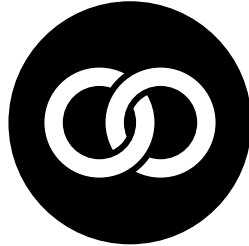
ABOUT LIVING ON THE EDGE

Living on the Edge exists to help Christians live like Christians.

It was established in 1995 as a radio ministry of pastor and author Chip Ingram. It has since grown into an international discipleship ministry with a clear vision: to be a catalytic movement of Christians living out their faith in ways that transform families, churches, and communities for the common good and the glory of God.

Living on the Edge creates Bible-based teachings and tools that challenge and equip spiritually hungry Christians to become mature disciples of Jesus.

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Introduction
CLOSER
7 DEVOTIONS FOR COUPLES

Over the past thirty years we have tried almost every marriage devotional, and to be perfectly honest, we have usually failed at having the discipline to continue. The busyness of life or the feelings of guilt because we missed so many days often caused us to silently ignore what we knew was important for our growth. This book is the result of our trying to draw closer to each other while having a true desire to improve our spiritual growth as a couple.

We have friends who read the entire Bible together and others who have an extended time with God together every day. That's not us. We try to pray together almost every day, and we've settled on a weekly time for further spiritual connection. If you are farther along the road than us, this book may not work for you; or you can power through it in fifty-two days instead of fifty-two weeks. Our challenge to couples is to start small and invest thirty minutes a week. That may sound wimpy, but we figure something is better than nothing, and that's exactly what most people settle for: nothing.

Closer is meant to be done together whenever possible. Each reading starts with a Scripture and a story or main point relating to a theme in your life and marriage. We kept the Scripture and body of the devotional short because we have found the best way to go through a devotional for couples is to read it together. The most effective and impactful part of each devotional might not be in the words we wrote but rather the "Faith Conversations" and "A Step Closer" dialogues you and your spouse can have after you have read the words together. We have found that we learn best when we talk about the important topics related to our marriage, and that without directed communication, we can easily slack off and move toward shallowness.

We challenge couples wherever we go to invest a set amount of time each week to come together to be inspired, communicate, and pray together. Our experience is that we have never met a couple who has gotten a divorce after praying together daily and having a spiritual growth time at least once a week. Perhaps the least developed part of most relationships is spiritual growth. For some, it's too overwhelming. For others, it might be that they can't connect because there is tension or anger. We find that regardless of how you are feeling about each other, setting apart a regular time to focus on the practical side of your spiritual life will do wonders for your relationship. Actually, over the years we have seen miraculous results when couples take the challenge to grow together spiritually. The result we hear most often is that they grew *closer* to God and *closer* to each other.

So here's the deal. We want to challenge you to a weekly time together to focus on your spiritual life as a couple. If you miss a week, don't quit—just pick up where you left off. This opportunity for togetherness is not about a legalistic time; it's about setting a priority for practical spiritual growth and connection. Take the challenge! Some of the devotionals will be more meaningful to you than others, but just keep on keeping on. These Scriptures, stories, and observations are some of our favorites. The discussion topics have brought about great times of connection and even a few tears or tension. But the net result has been a drawing closer together. This challenge will take some discipline and willingness on your part to draw near to God and to each other. These two verses make a lot of sense to us: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8 nasb), as well as Paul's advice to Timothy, "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7 nasb). With these thoughts in mind, we hope you will find the closeness, intimacy, and connection that is available to those who seek it and put these words into practice. When you have finished going through this devotional together, let us know how it worked for you. We would love to hear your story.

Blessings,

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NOTE: This resource from *Living on the Edge* contains the first seven devotionals. If you are interested in the rest of the book, go to www.homeword.com/closer

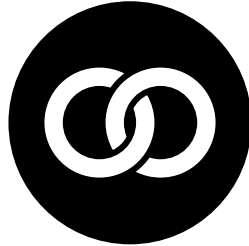
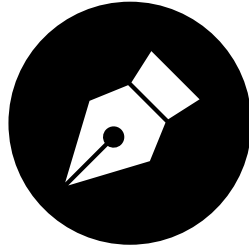


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TRUSTING THE AUTHOR OF YOUR STORY

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*
(Proverbs 3:5-6)

What is the story of your courtship and marriage? Has God been present from the start? We think he was, no matter if you recognized it at the time or not. Some couples meet under extraordinary experiences that can happen only through God. Our neighbors met and married in a Japanese internment camp during World War II. When they died some sixty years later, it was within twenty-four hours of each other. Jim's parents met on a blind double date in which his mom actually thought she was dating the other guy, not his dad. Walt and Barb Larimore met in the playground sandbox at their church at age five. They are the only love each has ever known. Todd and Becky both lost their spouses early in their marriages. Todd's wife died of a brain tumor and Becky's husband was killed in a skiing accident. Together they have blended their families and their lives. Both would say in the midst of their sorrow, God also brought them joy.

We met on our first day of college and were "just friends" before we started dating. As we look back, it's pretty random that two kids from different parts of California chose the same university, had classes together, and found common friends with common goals. After a couple of breakups with a few starts and stops through college, we married one week after graduation. Of course, hindsight is much easier than foresight, but as we look back, God was present.

What is the story of your relationship? How do you see your early days, as well as today? Plagued with infertility, we look at each of our children as miracles from God. We had to learn to trust in Him. There have been times of sickness, and times where dreams came true and

dreams were taken away. There have been career changes and moves to other cities. Hopes appeared and promises were broken. But through it all, God was and is present. There is really nothing all that spectacular about our marriage, but every time we take a deeper look at our life together, one word pops up: miracle. Without God's presence, comfort, prodding, and guidance we don't think we would have made it. Even during the times when we didn't know He was carrying us, He was and is still doing it today.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart." These are great words but not always easy to do. They mean that no matter what happens, place your life and marriage into the loving arms of God. Your hope and your faith can rest in God's assurance that He will never leave you or forsake you. And that is quite a promise. So, what do you need to completely trust God with right now?

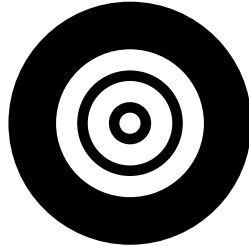
"Lean not on your own understanding." Some people have called belief in God a crutch. We think of it more as an iron lung. Every couple has a choice to lean on God and not their own understanding. We hope today you will choose God. He definitely knows a lot more about life and relationships than any of us. You may not always know exactly where He is taking you, but wouldn't you rather have the God who created the universe actively guide your life and marriage than, well, you? Is there something going on in your life right now where you just don't understand what's happening? In what areas of your life do you need God's presence?

"In all your ways acknowledge him." Today permit God to be involved in your daily activities and relationships. Jesus said it so well in the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [all that we need] will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). It is pretty incredible to watch couples move from doing life on their own to acknowledging God in their decisions. As one couple we know said, "As we sought God's help and intervention, it just seemed to all fall together." That's the point! Where do you need to acknowledge Him today?

"He will make your paths straight." What a wonderful promise! God doesn't promise the path will not be difficult at times, but He does promise—as we put our trust in Him and not do things on our own—that He will guide us. How incredible to look back on our life and marriage and say, God was here.

Faith Conversations

- Courtship and marriage are different for everyone. Let's talk about where we see God in our story.
- The Bible says to trust in the Lord with all your heart and he will direct your path. What does this promise mean to us as a couple?
- Here is how you can help me put my trust in the Lord's guidance more often: _____. How can I help you?



DON'T LOSE SIGHT OF THE GOAL

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:14)

We live in a beautiful beach town, Dana Point, on the coast of Southern California. We never tire of the view. On most days when we are near the water, we see Catalina Island, twenty-six miles offshore. There are a few days when it is foggy and you can't see it, but it is forever etched in our minds. People board boats from the harbor in our town to visit this magical island every day of the year. Some people take a fifteen-minute helicopter flight. A few brave souls paddle board to the island, but very few ever try to swim there.

In 1952, Florence Chadwick decided to swim from Catalina Island to the shores of Southern California. She had already swum the English Channel, so in her mind, this would be easier. She jumped in the water one cold day in winter. No problem for Florence Chadwick. But as she swam hour after hour with a boat following her to make sure she was all right, fog settled in and she began to wonder how much farther she had to go. At last she motioned for the boat to pick her up. As it turned out, Florence was only a half mile from reaching her goal. She wasn't too exhausted or cold. The fog had simply obscured her vision from her target. So she quit.

On the day of our wedding we had a goal: to draw closer to each other and closer to God. Too many times, though, the weight of home responsibilities, work pressures, kid worries, and all the rest fog our vision for closeness. Spiritually speaking, everyone has foggy days. But God is there to say to us in His quiet, persistent voice, *"Don't quit. Persevere. Do all you can to keep your eyes focused on the prize."*

The writer of Hebrews gave us a formula for perseverance: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (12:1-3). The way not to grow weary and lose heart in your marriage is to keep your eye on the goal. Stay focused on Jesus, our goal, our sustainer, our Savior.

Faith Conversations

- Has there been a time when fog surrounded our marriage?
- What areas of our lives do we need to persevere in right now?
- How can I help you do that?



THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.. (Mark 11:25)

All marriage authorities say the same thing: A healthy marriage is one in which forgiveness is practiced. To develop a closer relationship it is vital to give forgiveness but also receive forgiveness with grace. One of the most remarkable stories in the entire Bible is an amazing example of forgiveness, when Jesus forgives a woman caught in the very act of adultery (John 8). It is very good news for all of us imperfect people.

The woman was first brought to Jesus in shame. Jewish law was clear; she could be stoned to death. (We still don't know why the man involved in the sin was missing.) When told of her sin, though, Jesus didn't immediately respond to the woman. He looked into the condescending eyes of the crowd and made this statement: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Jesus then bent down and wrote something in the sand. One by one, people dropped their stones and went back to town, leaving Jesus alone with the woman. Now we hear their intimate conversation. "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" Sheepishly, probably with tears in her eyes as she sees the people walking away, she replies, "No one, sir." Then Jesus looks into her frightened eyes and says, "Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."

Did Jesus say her sin was okay? Not at all. In fact, He told her to leave her life of sin. The words "Neither do I condemn you" are the same ones He says to Christians even now. He loves you completely and unconditionally. And with this amazing love we can find the power to forgive. It's the mother of a young boy innocently shot and killed by a gang member who had the courage to eventually shower forgiveness on the killer and change his life forever.

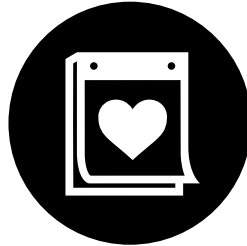
It's the husband who, after hearing of his wife's affair, says, "Honey, that just doesn't sound like you. Let's go to our pastor for counseling and see if we can work this out." It's the daily acts of forgiveness between a husband and wife that may have the most profound impact. Forgiveness is powerful for both the person offering forgiveness and the one receiving it.

The great writer and thinker Philip Yancey says, "Forgiveness halts the cycle of blame and pain, breaking the pain of ungrace." He goes on to say that "forgiveness loosens the stranglehold of guilt in the guilty party, even if a just punishment is still required. Forgiveness creates a remarkable linkage, placing the forgiver on the same side of the party who did the wrong."¹

Faith Conversations

- What brings you hope from the story of Jesus forgiving the woman caught in adultery? Does anything in the story disturb you?
- When have you experienced forgiveness from me that was especially meaningful to you?
- Is there anything either of us needs to ask forgiveness for? Let's take some time to talk about it.

¹"The Chain of Ungrace," October 9, 2008, *Our Daily Bread*.



A NON-NEGOTIABLE DATE NIGHT

Take delight in honoring each other. (Romans 12:10)

When the butterflies of early romance flutter away, they are often replaced by the familiar, predictable feelings of long-term attachment. This can be a good thing, but sometimes romance needs to be rekindled. Weekend getaways are wonderful—when you can get away—but day-to-day living quickly eclipses those rare romantic times. We have noticed that friends who keep the spark in their marriages seem to have one thing in common: They have regular, non-negotiable date nights. Even date nights can become routine, but when a couple proactively injects novelty and energy into their relationship, those exciting butterflies return, re-creating the chemical surges of early courtship.

Do you have a regularly scheduled date with your spouse every week or every other week? If you don't, you may be missing an emotional connection that will keep the fires burning in your relationship. Couples who don't put energy and focus into their dating relationship settle for second best in their marriage bond. It becomes more of a business relationship. I know that I (Jim) have to often ask myself: "Am I giving Cathy only my emotional scraps?" I need—and want—to reserve some of my best energy and focus for our weekly date. For us, this means we try to focus more on each other rather than the latest household bill or our children's schooling.

We have read of a study where researchers instructed married couples to spend ninety minutes a week on a date with each other. The couples who did this tended to enjoy their marriage more than couples who did not take time out for regular dates. The researchers then divided the dating couples into two groups. They challenged one group to do "exciting" activities that appealed to both the husband and wife, like attending a concert or play, and

physical activities like hiking or skiing. These are the dates that typically take some time to plan. The other group was asked to do pleasant, more common activities like dining out or going to a movie. Although both groups enjoyed the dates, the couples that shared exciting, more unique activities tended to maintain more romantic intensity.

So make a regular date with your spouse a nonnegotiable appointment. Then plan the date *before* you are heading out of the driveway! At our marriage seminars we invite couples to think outside the box about possible dates. Enjoying a stronger emotional connection will benefit your relationship, and the romance isn't all that bad either!

Faith Conversations

- Are you satisfied with our dating relationship?
- What can we do to enhance the romance in our marriage?
- What have been some of your favorite dates with me over the years?



THE HAPPINESS EFFECT

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. (Proverbs 17:22)

Did you know that happiness is contagious? According to a twenty-year study, a person's sense of joy and outlook on life can often be determined by how cheerful their friends and especially their spouse are. Actually, this isn't too surprising. The Bible says a great deal about our attitudes, including this insight: "A cheerful look brings joy to the heart and good news gives health to the bones" (Proverbs 15:30). This means laughter just may be the best medicine for a warm, intimate, loving marriage. Studies also show that laughter and joy boost your immunity, improve your mood, ease aches, and relieve stress. Humor actually relieves negative thoughts associated with physical and emotional health problems.

Our good friend Ned Brines quoted his father used to say, "Choose your spouse wisely. This decision will determine 90-percent of your happiness and 100-percent of your unhappiness!" We aren't sure this is universally true, but it definitely makes sense.

There was a season in our life when we realized we had pretty much stopped having fun together. Raising our children, paying the bills, juggling an overcrowded schedule, and other responsibilities had crowded out joy. One small reminder not to take life so seriously was to put a magnet on our refrigerator. It simply read, "Are We Having Fun Yet?"

If you are a negative Nancy or a grumpy Greg, guess what? At times your spouse and your kids will run from you. We are drained by negativity and what the Bible calls a "constant dripping," but we are naturally drawn toward laughter, joy, and fun.

Here are two lessons to work on with this “happiness effect.” First, *lasting joy is not a matter of what’s happening around you but inside you*. True happiness is tied to internal qualities and character strengths, not external events. This means we have to work on our character and the issues of our heart before we work on the external. Second, *you can choose to be a person of joy, and it will have a very positive on your spouse*. There is an old country song that basically says, “Don’t chew me out all day, whine and gripe about me from morning till supper and then expect me to love you at night.” Sure it’s a bit harsh, but the point is clear.

Happiness in marriage is a choice, and we have found that if you take care of the special moments, the years will take care of themselves. Here are three building blocks to happiness:

1. Take time to bring pleasure, joy, and good times to you and your spouse. Are you proactive in bringing cheerful energy to your relationship?
2. Engage your life in service and worship. Do you take time to regularly worship God and bring happiness to others through service?
3. Live a purpose driven life. People whose lives are packed with meaning are almost always happier. Would you say you have a meaningful and purposeful life?

Faith Conversations

- On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest), how do you rate yourself on the “Happiness Scale”? _____
- How would you finish this sentence? “I am most happy and cheerful when_____.”
- What could I do or be to make you happier with our marriage?



SERVANT LOVE OR SELFISH LOVE?

Serve one another in love. (Galatians 5:13)

Helen and Lee have one of the finest marriages we know of. They are in their late sixties, and there is still a sparkle in their eyes as they look at each other. They constantly hold hands, and you can tell their love has grown over the years, not diminished like that of so many couples.

One time at a marriage conference, we asked them, “How do you keep your marriage relationship so strong and refreshing?” Helen looked at Lee and Lee smiled. He took her hand and spoke to her, not to us, “Do you remember what I told you the day of our wedding?” She smiled back and said, almost bashfully, “Of course.” He said, “I’m going to out-love you every day of our marriage.” Helen looked at Lee and said, “And what did I say to you?” She answered her own question, “No, I’m going to out-love you every day.” Only then did they focus on us and say, “They’re not fancy words, but we have really tried to live by that promise to each other.”

Marriage is not a 50/50 proposition. It’s about mutual submission and being a servant lover even when we don’t feel like it. In the healthiest of marriages there are seasons when it is more like an 80/20 deal, but that just comes with the territory. Showing honor to each other is about being proactive and intentional with your commitment to serve your spouse. Nobody said it would be easy, but with effort it can be done. Your marriage is worth it. Outdo one another in showing love daily.

Neither of us would at first think we are selfish lovers. We tend to be people pleasers and will try to walk the extra mile even when it isn’t healthy. Yet we have found this concept challenging because we have often placed too many expectations on each other. Your spouse

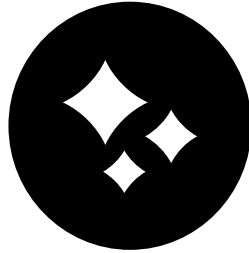
can't read your mind. The most effective way to share your needs is to spell out those needs to your spouse.

During a tough time at work, our friend Tom asked Kim not to bring up job problems too late at night. It would get his mind spinning and he was having trouble sleeping. Kim needed to bring up the work-related issues for her own peace of mind, but she honored Tom's request by applying self-discipline to the situation and asking when would be a good time in the next twelve hours to have a talk about work. He was much more ready to tackle her questions over morning coffee. That's a simple illustration of being a servant lover rather than a selfish lover.

Put all you can into your relationship. You will see results, and even if you don't right away, you will know you are doing what is right. Relationships that try to "serve one another in love" are the ones that are most long-lasting and fulfilling.

Faith Conversations

- Are there situations right now that make it difficult for you to show me respect? Are there times when it is difficult to love me?
- The Bible says, in Ephesians 5:25–33, "Husbands, *love* your wives . . . and the wife must *respect* her husband" (emphasis added). This Scripture speaks specifically to a wife's need for love and a husband's need for respect.
- Husband: How can I *love* you more effectively?
- Wife: What are specific ways I can show *respect* for you?



THE PURITY CODE

Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life. (Proverbs 4:23)

The road to a safe, intimate marriage relationship always takes the path of purity and fidelity. Sadly, when emotional and sexual infidelity, including pornography, enters a relationship, it breaks apart the relationship almost every time.

The call for sexual purity before marriage is nothing new. But we invite young people—and married couples—to make a lifelong commitment to something we call the *Purity Code*.

In honor of God, my family, and my (future) spouse, I commit my life to sexual purity.

This involves:

- Honoring God with our bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:20)
- Renewing our minds for the good. (Romans 12:2)
- Turning our eyes from worthless things. (Psalm 119:37)
- Guarding our hearts above all else. (Proverbs 4:23)

As we said, as much as unmarried people need to live by the Purity Code, so do married couples. Healthy marriages make sexual integrity a priority. Proactive couples set up wholesome boundaries to guard their hearts from toxic relationships that could damage their marriage. David Carder, in his excellent book *Close Calls*, says he has counseled thousands of people who have experienced adultery. Almost all of them thought they were immune to having an affair. Because boundaries were not established, these people experienced a growing mutual attraction that could have remained an innocent friendship or shared interest,

but because of the lack of healthy boundaries, moved to infatuation, an inordinate clinging to the new partner, and entanglement or sexual involvement.

Today, make a commitment to live by the Purity Code. Do whatever it takes to live above reproach and to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). The course of your life will be determined not by how much money you have or the type of house you live in but by the way you have guarded your heart. Enter the right road with purity and integrity. The writer of Proverbs 10:9 said it well: “The man of integrity walks securely.” His spouse will walk securely too.

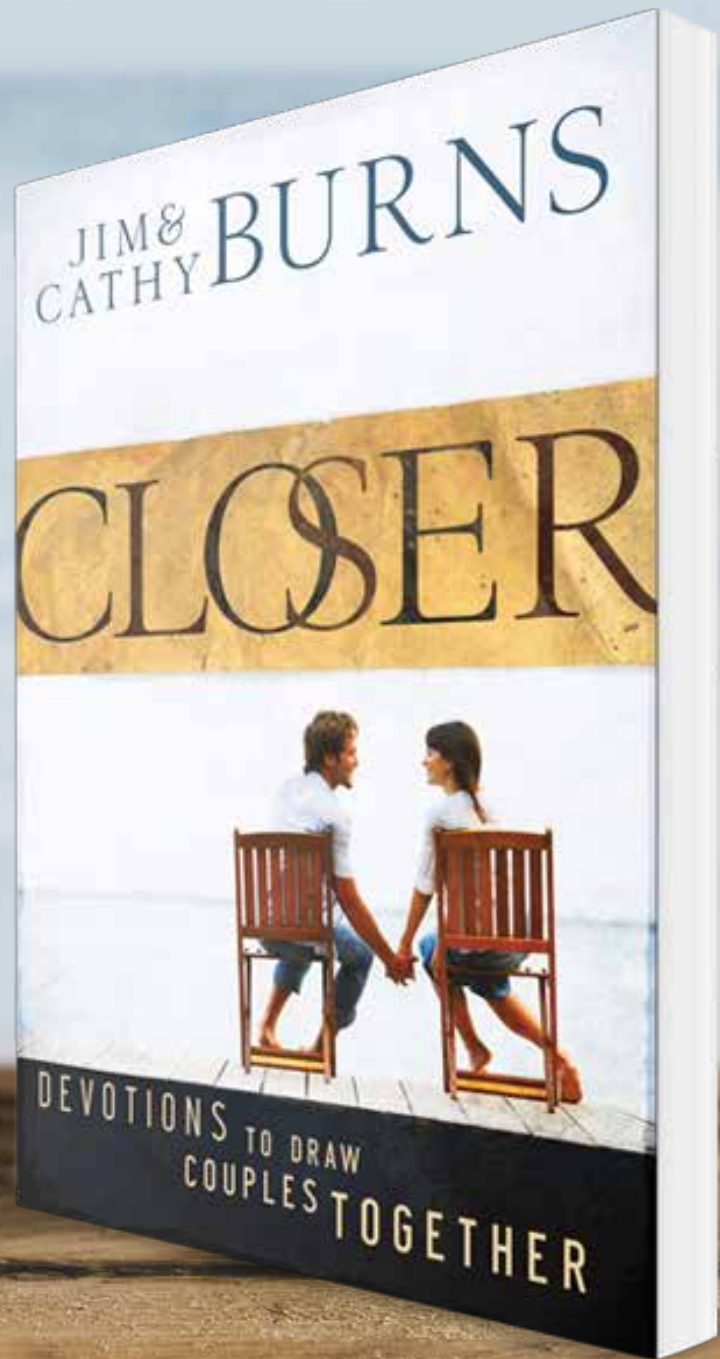
Faith Conversations

- How would you finish this sentence? “I commit my purity and integrity to you in these specific ways _____.”
- Has there ever been a time when you were concerned about my fidelity?
- How would you finish this sentence? “Of the four steps in the Purity Code, the one I want to commit to working on the most is _____.”

²David Carder, *Close Calls: What Adulterers Want You to Know About Protecting Your Marriage* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2008), 9.

A Year of Devotions to Draw Couples Together

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