

# THE LONG GAME

Chapters 9 & 10 • Based on *The First Few Years of Marriage* by Jim Burns and Doug Fields

## THE TRANSFORMATIVE ARC OF THIS SESSION

From a **marriage running on feelings, fragile under pressure** → to a **marriage anchored in a forever promise that goes the distance**

### Anchor Scriptures

*"Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."*  
Ecclesiastes 4:12 (NIV)

*"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."*  
Ruth 1:16 (NIV)

*"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."*  
Galatians 6:9 (NIV)

### How to Use This Guide

This study guide is designed for couples walking through the First Few Years of Marriage book and video series together. Each session includes Scripture for reflection, real-life stories that illustrate the principles, questions for couples discussion, and personal reflection for journaling. Work through it at your own pace. There are no wrong answers here — only honest ones.

**For best results:** Read Chapters 9 and 10 of the book, then watch Session 6 together. Open your Bibles. Then work through this guide at your own pace, saving the discussion questions for conversation with your spouse. Close with the prayer together.

### Introduction

This is the last session — the one about the long game. Jim and Doug end where every lasting marriage ends up: on the power of a promise. Not the feeling of love, which comes and goes, but the covenant underneath it — the vow that becomes the cement when the feelings get rocky. The Hebrew word for this is *ahava*: love as complete devotion, an action and a choice to stay and keep pursuing your spouse to the end.

They're honest about what tests that promise most in these years: the "baby quake." A child's arrival brings sleep deprivation, financial strain, doubled chores, and a quiet shift of focus that can leave a marriage drifting. The way through is to keep the marriage in its proper place — God first, marriage second, children third — and to stay intentional with rest, daily connection, and pursuit. And the hope they leave you with is real: two-thirds of unhappy marriages become happy within five years if the couple simply doesn't give up.

Before you dive in, take a moment to settle in. Invite God into this time. Start with one honest sentence to each other about where your marriage is today.

### To begin:

- Think back over these six sessions. What's one thing about your marriage that's different now than when you started?

## Scripture Foundation

Before we talk about what to do, we start with what is true. These three passages anchor everything in Session 6. Read each one slowly — out loud and together if you can.

“*Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*”  
Ecclesiastes 4:12 (NIV)

“*Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.*”  
Ruth 1:16 (NIV)

“*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*”  
Galatians 6:9 (NIV)

## Reflect

- Which of these three verses speaks most directly to where your marriage is today? Why that one?
- Ecclesiastes 4:12 describes a cord of three strands. What would it look like to weave God more intentionally into your marriage as the third strand?

## The Long Game

Jim and Doug close the series with the truth that holds everything else together: the power of a promise. Feelings fluctuate; the covenant endures. The Hebrew *ahava* is love as complete devotion — a verb, not a mood, modeled by staying and pursuing. The toughest test is often the “baby quake,” and they prescribe a clear hierarchy — God, marriage, children, vocation, everything else — plus intentional rest, the daily one percent, and a refusal to quit. The two stories below are about couples who chose the long game.

### A STORY TO REFLECT ON

#### Sixty-Six Years

Scripture: Ruth 1:16

Jordan and Mia were running on fumes. Their daughter was four months old, neither of them had slept more than three hours straight in weeks, and that morning they’d had a hissing, exhausted fight in the church parking lot about whose turn it was to change a diaper. They almost didn’t go in. They were not, at that moment, a billboard for marriage.

An older couple sat in the row ahead of them — Walt and Eleanor, who everyone knew had been married sixty-six years. After the service, Eleanor turned around, looked at the baby, then looked at the two haggard young parents, and laughed kindly. “Oh, I remember that look. That’s the no-sleep look. We had four of them. Hardest years of our marriage.”

Jordan, surprising himself, asked the question out loud: “Sixty-six years. How? What’s the secret?” He half-expected something sentimental. Eleanor didn’t hesitate. “There’s no secret, honey. We just didn’t quit. There were years I didn’t feel a thing for him.” She patted Walt’s hand. “He’ll tell you the same about me. We made a promise, and on the days the feeling was gone, the promise was still there. You don’t leave because the feeling left. You stay, and the feeling comes back around.”

Walt added just one thing, quietly: “Love’s a verb, son. It’s mostly the staying.”

Driving home, the baby finally asleep in the back, Mia reached over and took Jordan's hand — the same hand she'd wanted to swat in the parking lot two hours earlier. Neither of them said much. But something had reset. They weren't going to white-knuckle their way to feeling in love again. They were going to keep the promise, today and tomorrow, and trust that the staying was the love.

#### BIG IDEA

Ahava — the Bible's word for committed love — is not a feeling you fall into. It's complete devotion: the choice to stay and keep pursuing, especially on the days the feeling has gone quiet. Love is mostly the staying.

#### Reflect on the Story

- Eleanor admitted there were years she "didn't feel a thing." How does it change things to hear that even a sixty-six-year marriage had seasons without the feeling?
- "Love's a verb — it's mostly the staying." Where in your marriage right now are you being invited to stay and keep pursuing, even when the feeling is quiet?
- Walt and Eleanor leaned on the promise when the feeling was gone. What did you actually promise on your wedding day, and how could that promise carry you through a hard season now?

#### A STORY TO REFLECT ON

##### The Baby Quake

Scripture: Galatians 6:9

Nobody warned Andre and Lila how a seven-pound human could level a marriage. Within two months of bringing their son home, they'd become a tag-team that never tagged — passing the baby back and forth, passing blame back and forth, too tired to be kind. Lila poured everything into the baby. Andre, ashamed to even admit it, felt jealous of his own son, and then guilty for feeling jealous, and then resentful, and the whole ugly spiral just kept turning.

They were, in the language of their study, in a full baby quake — sleep gone, money tight, the house a disaster, intimacy a distant memory. And underneath it all, a quiet drift: they'd stopped being a couple and become two co-managers of an infant.

The course correction started with one uncomfortable conversation about order. Their group had talked about a relational hierarchy — God first, then the marriage, then the kids. Lila bristled at first: how do you put your marriage before your baby? But the longer they talked, the more sense it made. A strong marriage was the very thing that would give their son a stable home. Loving each other well wasn't stealing from him — it was the best gift they could give him.

They didn't overhaul their lives. They reclaimed fifteen minutes a day — their one percent — after the baby went down, phones in the other room, just the two of them talking like people who actually liked each other. They traded off so each got one real stretch of sleep a week. They asked another couple from group to take the baby for two hours so they could sit at a diner and remember they were more than a feeding schedule.

It was not instant. Some days still unraveled. But they had decided not to grow weary, not to give up — and slowly, over months, the harvest came. The resentment thinned. The teamwork returned. One night, laughing about something their son had done, Andre realized he wasn't jealous anymore. They'd planted, through the worst of it, and they were finally beginning to reap.

### BIG IDEA

The baby quake is real, and the drift it causes is quiet. But a marriage put back in its proper place — God first, then each other, then the kids — becomes the very stability a child needs. Don't grow weary. The harvest comes to those who don't give up.

### Reflect on the Story

- Andre felt jealous of his own child — then guilty, then resentful. Whether or not you have kids, where has something good (a child, a job, a cause) quietly crowded your marriage out of its proper place?
- The relational hierarchy puts marriage before children. Does that surprise you? How could loving your spouse well actually be a gift to your kids (or future kids)?
- Andre and Lila reclaimed fifteen minutes a day and refused to give up. What's one small, doable rhythm you could protect in your busiest season?

### Couples Discussion Questions

These questions are designed for couples to honestly discuss. Take your time. Listen more than you speak. Be sensitive and compassionate to what your spouse is feeling.

1. Jim and Doug say the power of a promise — not feelings — is the cement of a marriage. Where have you been relying on feelings to carry your marriage, and what would it look like to lean on the promise instead?
2. The Hebrew word *ahava* means love as complete devotion — an action, not an emotion. What's one concrete action of devotion you could offer your spouse this week, regardless of how you feel?
3. The relational hierarchy is God, marriage, children, vocation, everything else. Honestly, what does your current order look like? What's one adjustment that would put things back in place?
4. Jim and Doug point to a hopeful statistic: two-thirds of unhappy marriages become happy within five years if couples persevere. They call pain "fertilizer." Where might a current difficulty actually be growing something good in you?
5. They urge couples to Sabbath — to "exhale" — and to use teamwork so each spouse can rest. What's one way you could help your spouse rest this week? What helps you exhale?
6. Looking back across all six sessions — drift, fun, differences, conflict, intimacy, the promise — what's the one course correction you most want to carry forward into the long game of your marriage?

### Personal Reflection

Set aside fifteen quiet minutes this week. Find a pen and a place where you won't be interrupted. Sit with these questions and write whatever comes — unfiltered, unpolished.

- Finish this sentence: "The promise I most want to keep to my spouse for the long game is..."
- Finish this sentence: "The thing currently competing with my marriage for first place is..."
- Where do you need to stop waiting for the feeling and simply choose to stay and pursue?
- What is one rhythm of rest, connection, or devotion you want to build into the long game, starting this week?

### A Prayer

*God, thank You for walking with us through these weeks — and through these first years. You are the third strand that makes our cord strong. When our feelings run out, hold us to the promise we made. Teach us the kind of love that is a verb, the staying kind, the *ahava* that doesn't bail when life gets hard. Put our marriage back in its right place — You first, each other next, everything else after. And when we're weary, remind us that the harvest comes to those who don't give up. Amen.*