

“Finding One Another”

by Carlo Griseta

Chapter 3

The “Third Things” That Replaced Us

Thomas told himself he was doing it all for the family. That was the phrase he repeated for years. The overtime. The travel. The constant pressure. The endless availability to everyone else. It was all “for them.” At least that’s what he believed.

Rachel believed it too for a long time. In the early years of their marriage, she admired how driven he was. He worked hard, loved deeply, dreamed big, and wanted to build a stable life for the people he cared about. And he did.

They built a beautiful home. Raised three children. Stayed active in church. Hosted holidays. Supported aging parents. Volunteered. Attended school functions. Managed sports schedules. Survived illnesses. Paid bills. Built a life others admired. But somewhere in the middle of all that building, their relationship slowly became secondary. Not intentionally. Gradually.

At first, it hardly seemed dangerous. Life was simply demanding. The children needed attention. Work required more energy. Church leadership responsibilities expanded. Financial goals increased. Parents aged. Stress accumulated.

There was always something urgent. And eventually, their marriage became the place they recovered from life rather than the place they deeply experienced life together. Years passed quickly. Rachel stopped asking Thomas to slow down because his frustration always seemed immediate whenever she brought it up. Not explosive frustration. Worse. Dismissive frustration. He would sigh heavily and say things like: “I’m doing the best I can.” Or: “You know how much pressure I’m



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under.” And Rachel genuinely understood. That was part of the problem. She understood so much that she slowly abandoned her own loneliness.

Thomas, meanwhile, quietly believed that his sacrifices should naturally communicate love. But love that is never emotionally experienced eventually becomes difficult to feel. One evening after dinner, Rachel stood watching old home videos while Thomas answered messages on his phone, again. Their youngest son appeared on the television screen as a child laughing uncontrollably while Rachel and Thomas chased him through the backyard years earlier. Rachel smiled sadly. “We used to have fun together,” she whispered. Thomas barely looked up. “We still do.” But even as he said it, he knew it wasn’t true, not really. They still shared life, but they rarely shared presence. Their conversations revolved around: obligations, updates, schedules, grandchildren, finances, church matters, health concerns, and responsibilities. But very little about: longing, affection, fear, dreams, loneliness, attraction, disappointment, or emotional need. The deeper relationship had slowly disappeared beneath what both of them now privately called “life.”

Rachel muted the television and sat quietly, then she asked a question Thomas had spent years unconsciously avoiding: “When did everything else become more important than us?” Thomas immediately wanted to defend himself, because from his perspective, everything he had done had been for the family. But somewhere beneath the defensiveness was another realization: He had spent years giving his energy to everything connected to the relationship while unintentionally starving the relationship itself, and now he wasn’t sure how to return.

Reflection Reading

When Good Things Quietly Replace Connection

Most relationships are not destroyed only by obviously harmful things, sometimes they are weakened by good things that quietly become ultimate things. Children. Careers. Ministry. Responsibilities. Financial goals. Community involvement. Caregiving. Achievement. Even helping other people. These are not bad things. Many are deeply meaningful, but when every emotional resource becomes directed outward, couples often stop nurturing the relationship itself, this happens frequently in long-term marriages. Especially among responsible, caring, service-oriented people. People who: work hard, sacrifice, provide, serve others, and carry enormous responsibility.

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Over time, couples may unintentionally begin giving one another only leftover energy. The relationship slowly shifts from: “We are building a life together” to: “We are managing responsibilities together.” This shift is subtle, and dangerous, because relationships require more than shared duty, they require shared emotional presence. Many people assume: “If I am sacrificing for my family, my partner should naturally feel loved.” But emotional connection is not always experienced through sacrifice alone. A person may deeply appreciate someone’s hard work while simultaneously grieving emotional absence. This often creates painful misunderstanding: one partner feels unappreciated, while the other feels emotionally abandoned. Neither person is necessarily wrong, they are simply experiencing love differently while slowly losing connection.

One of the greatest dangers in long-term relationships is the rise of “third things.” *Third things are anything that slowly consumes emotional attention that once belonged primarily inside the relationship.* Examples include: work, parenting, ministry, hobbies, social media, caregiving, achievement, crisis management, entertainment, extended family dynamics, or constant busyness.

Again, these things are not inherently harmful, but when couples stop intentionally returning to one another emotionally, the relationship begins weakening quietly beneath the surface.

Many couples eventually wake up after the children leave home or retirement begins and suddenly realize: “We built a life together... but we stopped building us.” This realization can feel devastating, but it can also become an awakening, because noticing the drift creates the possibility of choosing differently moving forward.

Individual Reflection Questions

Personal Reflection

1. What “third things” have consumed most of my emotional energy over the years?
2. Have I unintentionally given my partner leftover attention instead of intentional presence?
3. In what ways have busyness and responsibility affected our emotional connection?

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4. What role has work played in our distance?
5. What role has parenting or caregiving played?
6. Have I assumed my sacrifices automatically communicated love?
7. What emotional needs may have gone unattended in our relationship?
8. What activities or distractions most often pull me away emotionally?
9. When do I feel most connected to my partner?
10. What would it look like to intentionally prioritize our relationship again?

Shared Conversation

Conversation Guidelines

This is not a conversation about blame; it is a conversation about awareness.

Speak honestly. Listen gently.

Conversation Prompts

1. What “third things” slowly became central in our lives?
2. When did we begin giving most of our energy elsewhere?
3. What sacrifices do you feel have gone unseen or unacknowledged?
4. In what ways have we each felt emotionally neglected?
5. What do you believe we were both trying to survive or accomplish?
6. What helped us feel emotionally connected in earlier years?
7. What would help us intentionally return toward one another now?

Weekly Practice

Choosing Each Other Intentionally

This week is about creating small intentional moments of emotional priority. Not dramatic changes. Intentional attention.

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Assignment

During the next seven days: Schedule one uninterrupted hour together intentionally. No logistics. No problem-solving. No television or phones.

Use the time simply to reconnect emotionally.

Additionally: Each partner should write a short response to this question:
“What do I miss most about us?” Read your responses to one another slowly.

At least once this week: revisit an old photograph album, watch home videos, or share memories from earlier seasons of life together. Do not use these memories to create guilt, use them to remember that emotional connection once existed—and may still be possible again.

Closing Reflection

Many people spend years building successful lives while quietly neglecting the relationship meant to share that life. Not because they stopped caring, but because survival, responsibility, and busyness slowly consumed their attention. The tragedy is not always that love disappeared, sometimes love simply became buried beneath everything else, and buried things can sometimes be uncovered again — if two people become willing to stop merely managing life and begin returning to one another intentionally.