



# GODLY ROMANCE

*The Song of Solomon*

*Bryan Craddock*

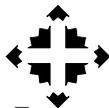


# GODLY ROMANCE

*The Song of Solomon*

by

*Bryan Craddock*



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Introduction

## *Why Song of Solomon?*

When you walk into a ferocious headwind, you instinctively lean into it. You scrunch up your eyes and clench your jaw with determination. You plod forward, fighting for every step. But those heading in the opposite direction bound along effortlessly. They seem footloose and free, but their reckless lack of control could lead to a nasty fall. Whom would you rather follow?

A powerful wind blows across the moral landscape of our world. It relentlessly presses people to ignore

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God's design for marriage and sexuality. Many allow that wind to carry them along. Though their recklessness will inevitably lead to emotional (and sometimes physical) injury, they still celebrate their freedom.

That morally lax lifestyle is nothing new. That wind has blown through every culture throughout history. The Old Testament book of Judges, for instance, shows the consequences this lifestyle had in Ancient Israel. The men of Gibeah tried to rape a Levite man who stopped to spend the night in their town. He cowardly gave them his concubine, whom they then viciously abused and left for dead. Ultimately, civil war resulted and the tribe of Benjamin was all but destroyed.

But in every culture, there are some people who choose to resist. They lean into that ferocious headwind with a scowl. They condemn immorality and immodesty in the name of Christ. They may fight the culture, calling everyone in society to follow their standards of decency. But as they do so, they can easily go too far. Their negativity about immorality can make all sexual desire seem impure. The mention of it may

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prompt strong feelings of embarrassment, shame, and guilt.

Ironically, those attempting to defend the Bible can unwittingly undermine its teaching. The Bible does not support such prudery. Several passages in both the Old and New Testaments present romance and sexual desire in a positive light as a blessing from God. We could consider Genesis 2, Proverbs 5, 1 Corinthians 7, or Ephesians 5, but the best example is the Song of Solomon.

The Song poetically describes the relationship between a young couple. It follows their story from their first meeting through their wedding and beyond into the struggles of married life. Many Jewish Rabbis and Christian leaders, particularly those in past generations, have interpreted the song as an allegory of God's love for Israel or the church. Marriage is often used as an illustration of God's love for Israel and for the church, but the allegorical interpretation of the Song seems to be driven by the overreaction against sexual immorality that we have been considering.

A more natural reading is to view the Song as a celebration of godly romance, but there are also

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problems with this view. The first verse introduces the book as, “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.” Traditionally, people have taken this to mean that Solomon authored the book. But Solomon is a terrible model of godly romance. 1 Kings 11:1-4 says,

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father.

How can we reconcile Solomon's ungodly polygamy with the devoted relationship portrayed in the Song? Bible scholars have suggested several different answers to this question. Some say that Solomon wrote the Song in his youth about his first love, but that he later

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succumbed to temptation. Others argue that someone else wrote the Song to Solomon as a parable to expose his worldly behavior.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon expressed regret over many of the choices that he made during his life. So, he may have written this song at the end of his life in retrospect to demonstrate the best way to approach romantic relationships. In the book of Proverbs, he addressed this issue for young men, while the Song focuses primarily on addressing young women.

So, why do we need to study the Song of Solomon? We all need a godly perspective on romance, a perspective to help us resist the world's permissiveness and to keep us from a prudish overreaction. If you are currently married, the Song encourages you to fan the flame in your marriage to keep it burning bright. If you hope to begin a romantic relationship sometime in the future, the Song gives you an example to follow. Even if you have chosen to remain single, you still influence others who are in or are pursuing romantic relationships.

May God shape our thoughts according to His Word!





## Chapter 1

# *Passion That Lasts*

Gasoline burns fast and hot, but that doesn't always help when you're trying to start a long-lasting campfire. When a fire flares up quickly, it tends to burn itself out. The logs end up scorched on the surface, but just as cold as they were before.

A lot of people have the same problem with their romantic relationships. They explode with passion, but then it all fizzles. Some people think that's just how it goes, so they settle into a cold-sterile relationship for the long haul. Others move from one relationship to

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another, thinking that sooner or later the fire will finally catch. I don't think either approach lines up with God's design.

Keeping a fire going takes work. You have to start small and let it build. You have to fan it and stir up the coals. You have to keep adding fuel. We see the same dynamic in romantic relationships.

So, how do we develop a passion that lasts? The budding relationship described in Song of Solomon 1:1-2:7 demonstrates six ingredients. These ingredients are important for everyone regardless of whether you are in a romantic relationship. They influence all your relationships with God and people, but they have a particular impact on romantic passion.



### *Ingredient 1: Imagination*

You need wood to fuel a fire. But massive logs don't burn well. You must put forth the effort to split them first. Romance requires some advance work too. We think that love is all about feelings, but feelings for someone are rooted in how we think about them. The fuel for lasting passion is imagination.

The Song of Solomon begins in verses 2-4 of chapter 1 with a young woman's imaginative thoughts. She is speaking to her friends that she calls the daughters of Jerusalem, and they affirm what she is thinking.

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[She] Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine; your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out; therefore virgins love you. Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers.

[Others] We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you.

Her mind is filled with thoughts of her beloved. She imagines the feel of his lips and the touch of his hands. She thinks of the smell of his cologne. She thinks about his name, his outstanding character and reputation. She imagines running away with him and being able to spend the night with him.

We need to be wise about how we use our imagination. The Song does not tell us where the couple is at in their relationship. Their interaction described in this chapter was probably not their first meeting. In Proverbs 4:23, Solomon said, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” If we let our imagination go too far too fast, then it can get us into trouble.

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Imagination must align with marital commitment. Matthew 5:28 tells us that Jesus said, “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” We must not allow our thoughts to drift to whomever catches our eye. Instead, those who are married or who are heading into marriage must focus their thoughts and desires exclusively on their spouse.

Thoughts like this come easily early on in a relationship, but they require more effort later. If our minds become consumed by the demands of work, finances, or raising children, the fire of passion will begin to grow dim. Husbands and wives need to put forth the effort to split some wood, so that there’s something to burn. Lasting passion requires imagination.



## *Ingredient 2: Acceptance*

I don't think any toy has stirred up more controversy than the Barbie doll. With her bleach blond hair, perfect complexion, and unrealistic proportions, many people blame her for creating a false standard of beauty that undermines girls' self-image. Plastic dolls and photoshopped models make this struggle harder, but as we'll see in a moment, women have always found things they would like to change about themselves. Those concerns can erode a person's confidence and sense of self-worth, but romantic passion flows from accepting who you are.

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In Song of Solomon 1:5-6, we hear the young woman working through this issue. She says,

[She] I am very dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has looked upon me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept!

Standards of beauty vary in different times and cultures. People in our culture pursue the perfect tan, but this woman was concerned about the darkness of her skin. Apparently, wealthy women in that day had fairer skin because they stayed inside, but this girl's family required her to work in their vineyards. She did not have time for all the beauty treatments those women had, but she was nevertheless able to regard herself as being "lovely." Humble confidence like this is attractive. It easily overcomes any supposed imperfections.

A healthy self-image like this is rooted in a clear understanding that we are created by God. Genesis 1

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reveals that God created mankind in his image, but David personalized this in Psalm 139:13-14. He said,

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.

Are you willing to praise God for how he made you? Self-acceptance is an important ingredient in a passion that lasts.



### *Ingredient 3: Initiative*

There's no better image of time than the grains of sand passing through an hourglass. We must seize the moment. Opportunities are not guaranteed to come again. That principle applies to everything in life, including romance. Initiative is an essential ingredient of lasting passion.

Some traditionalists insist that women should be passive about romance. They argue that women must wait and let men take the lead each step of the way, but the Song of Solomon does not support that assertion. In verses 7 and 8 of chapter 1, the woman takes the initiative.

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Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon; for why should I be like one who veils herself beside the flocks of your companions?

[He] If you do not know, O most beautiful among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the shepherds' tents.

As mentioned previously, this conversation was probably not their first interaction. She was seizing the moment, finding an opportunity for them to spend time together. She was still concerned, however, about doing so in a proper way. We know from the story of Tamar back in Genesis 38, that women who veiled themselves and lingered around men were assumed to be prostitutes. The woman in the Song did not want to give anyone that impression, but she did want to spend time with her beloved.

Of course, how we use our time is an important part of our spiritual life. In Ephesians 5:15-16, Paul wrote, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” He was speaking in broad terms about

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all of life, but in the flow of his letter this statement lands right after a section about avoiding sexual immorality and before a section about married life. Invest your time in wise ways that benefit your walk with God, and that benefit your marriage. Romance is a wise investment!

Here again, couples naturally think of spending time together early in their relationship, but people get lazy over time. If you are married, seize the moment. Carve out time to be together. Make plans, be spontaneous, do whatever you can to invest in your relationship. Initiative is required for lasting passion.



### *Ingredient 4: Adornment*

In the theater, there is something magical about a spotlight. It makes the star stand out. It gives them a certain glow that highlights their unique character. One of the ingredients of lasting passion is adornment, finding ways to highlight your best characteristics.

In Song of Solomon 1:9-10, the man imagines how jewelry would highlight the woman's beauty. In verse 11, the group speaks up again to add their affirmation.

I compare you, my love, to a mare among  
Pharaoh's chariots. Your cheeks are lovely  
with ornaments, your neck with strings of  
jewels.

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[Others] We will make for you ornaments of gold, studded with silver.

Most women today would not be thrilled to be compared to a horse. What was the man thinking? Scholars tell us that the prized mares that pulled the Pharaoh's ceremonial chariot were decorated with lavish jewelry. The woman may be tending her flock of goats having come from working in the vineyard, but the man imagines her adorned with the finest jewelry to highlight her beauty and demonstrate her inestimable worth.

As the Song continues, the woman speaks of being adorned with fragrances. Chapter 1, verses 12-14 says,

[She] While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance. My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi.

In that culture without running water, bathing was not as easy as it is today. People used oils and perfumes like nard and myrrh. So, the woman thinks of the fragrance she is wearing and the memorable scent of her beloved.

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She enjoys his smell like a cluster of flowers in a desert oasis.

Of course, jewelry, cosmetics, and other adornments can be overdone to such an extent that it conveys the wrong impression. In 1 Peter 3:3-4, Peter advised women,

Do not let your adorning be external--the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear--but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.

Character is always the priority, and any external adornment should reflect our character.

Nevertheless, to develop lasting passion in a relationship couples would be wise to follow the example set in the Song. Take care of yourself. Pay attention to how you look and smell for your beloved. Adornment is part of lasting passion.



## *Ingredient 5: Admiration*

Words are powerful. They can build up and they can tear down. We see that dynamic at work in every relationship, but particularly in romance. To cultivate lasting passion, couples need to work at expressing admiration for one another.

The couple in Song of Solomon models this kind of interaction in chapter 1, verses 15-17.

[He] Behold, you are beautiful, my love;  
behold, you are beautiful; your eyes are  
doves.

[She] Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved,  
truly delightful. Our couch is green; the

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beams of our house are cedar; our rafters are pine.

He speaks to her appearance, captivated by her eyes. She compliments him and imagines their future together. She envisions a vibrant and secure home.

As the Song continues into chapter 2, some doubts seem to creep in. In verse 1 the woman says, “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.” It is difficult to know what plants are indicated by the original Hebrew words here. It is safe to say that she wasn’t envisioning the kind of roses or lilies that we know. She probably had in mind scraggly wildflowers of some sort. So, in verse 2 the man reassures her by saying, “[He] As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young women.” He turns her moment of doubt into praise.

She responds in verse 3 by saying,

[She] As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

Some people have tried to find sexual innuendo here, but we will see in a moment that she probably had nothing like that in mind. The picture of an apple tree

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communicates that his words gave her a sense of being protected and nourished.

Do your words protect and nourish? In Ephesians 4:29, Paul said, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” If we should relate to all people this way, how much more should this instruction be applied in a romantic relationship? We should always be careful how we speak. Work at speaking words of admiration.



## *Ingredient 6: Patience*

There's a huge difference between a sprint and a marathon. Sprinters exert all their effort in just a few short seconds. The race is finished in the blink of an eye, but the marathon runner cannot do that. The enthusiasm of the crowd at the beginning of the race pushes her to go fast, but wisdom tells her to pace herself. A passion that lasts requires that same kind of patience.

In Song of Solomon 2:4, the scene changes. She says, "He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love." They are enjoying some kind of celebration. The most literal rendering of

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the place is house of wine. Her beloved has openly declared his love for her, and she is swept up in the moment.

In verse 5, she says, “Sustain me with raisins; refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love.” She wants to give herself to her beloved. In verse 6 she imagines it: “His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me!” But she knows that it’s too soon.

They’re not yet married, so she must be patient. In verse 7 she says, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.” Gazelles and does know how to run fast, but they are also good examples of caution. The woman in the Song wants this relationship to grow to be all that God designed it to be. Lasting passion requires patience.

Before marriage, godly couples must be patient with their sexual desire. After marriage, patience is needed in other ways. Married couples begin to truly understand one another’s sins and shortcomings. If they expect immediate change in their spouse, they will

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be sorely disappointed. They will grow critical and bitter, and passion will not last in that environment.

They must learn from the patience of God. In Colossians 3:12-13, Paul wrote,

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Here again, these words were intended to shape all our relationships. Shouldn't these characteristics be reflected on an even deeper level in a romantic relationship? Lasting passion in marriage requires us to reflect God's patience toward our spouse.

### *Conclusion*

The couple in Song of Solomon models a passion that includes imagination, acceptance, initiative, adornment, admiration, and patience. We have also looked elsewhere in the Scripture to confirm that these characteristics align with how God desires us to live.

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My question for you is, “Are you willing to trust God’s Word?” Aside from what anyone else says, are you willing to follow his commands and guidance for your life? He is your Creator. If you have never done so, I invite you to begin to rely upon him. You may have ignored his commands about sexuality in the past. Understand that God in his love sent his son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for all our sins so that we can be reconciled to him. We receive that forgiveness by faith. Trust Him.

If you want to learn more about how God relates to us, I would encourage you to read Psalm 139. Earlier I quoted verse 14 where David spoke of God creating him. If you struggle with self-image, I would encourage you to meditate on those words and commit them to memory.

Perhaps today one of these ingredients stands out as a special focus for you. If so, devote some time to thinking more about that quality. Search the Bible for other places where it’s taught, and pray for God’s help to change. Then, take action. You may need some romantic imagination, some initiative, or some admiring words.

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May God help us grow in passion and purity for His glory.

### *Questions for Further Reflection*

1. Who or what has had the most influence in shaping your understanding of romantic love?
2. How do you think your understanding of romantic love aligns with biblical teaching?
3. To what degree are each of these ingredients present in your life?



## Chapter 2

# *Deeper Love*

Several years ago, I led a College Ministry Spring Break trip to Florida’s Gulf Coast. For a few of the students, this trip was their first opportunity to travel outside of Michigan. Our plans included daily Bible study, outreach, and, of course, spending time on the beach, but one day it was rainy. So, we spontaneously decided to drive to Orlando for the afternoon, and we ended up at Disney World. We did not have the time or the money to go into the parks where all the rides and attractions are. We went to the shopping areas, we even

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took pictures at the entrances of the parks. We were frustratingly close, but still on the outside.

A lot of relationships are like that trip to Disney World. There is an illusion of closeness, but the connection is only superficial. People stay distant for any number of reasons. Some are afraid to open themselves up because of bad experiences in past relationships. Others shut down a relationship because of bitterness over some unresolved conflict. Then there are those who are so absorbed with themselves that they just use people without developing any real attachment. To make matters worse, most of us do not have any good examples of deep relationships to emulate.

I believe that God has given us the example we need in the Song of Solomon. Previously, I pointed out that as king of Ancient Israel, Solomon ignored God's design by accumulating 700 wives and 300 concubines. Most of those marriages served to establish political alliances with foreign nations, so he was an expert in superficial relationships. In the Song, he was probably looking back to celebrate the one true relationship that he should have maintained.

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Song of Solomon 2:8-3:5 describes how the couple's relationship developed prior to their wedding. They model six dimensions for pursuing a deeper love. So, if you are in a romantic relationship, this example shows you how to draw closer. These dimensions are also present to some degree in every relationship, even our relationship with God. So, whatever your situation is, you have something to learn from this passage.



## *Dimension 1: Time*

When my wife and I began our relationship, I was living on campus at the University of Southern California in downtown Los Angeles. She lived north of the city in an area that was forty minutes away without traffic. In Los Angeles there's always traffic, but I never hesitated to make that drive, even to spend a few brief minutes with her. At the beginning of a relationship, couples instinctively know that the pursuit of a deeper love begins with time.

The couple in the Song of Solomon did not have traffic to worry about, but they must have lived some

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distance apart. In verses 8-10 of chapter 2, the woman says,

The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away,

He journeyed far just to catch a glimpse of her, but he hoped for more interaction.

We find an even greater investment of time in the story of Jacob and Rachel. In ancient times, it was common for men to pay a price for their bride. Since Jacob was far from his family, all that he had to give was his time. He worked for Rachel's father, and Genesis 29:20 tells us, "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her."

Earlier in the Song we saw the importance of taking initiative and seizing the moment. But here we are reminded that this initiative must continue in a

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relationship. Focused time is necessary for a relationship to grow deeper.

Couples do this instinctively at the beginning of their relationship, but they lose sight of it later. They are no longer miles apart. There are no walls or windows in between, yet couples can settle for living as disinterested roommates. Don't allow that to happen! Deepen your love. Spend focused time together.



## *Dimension 2: Thoughts*

Every person has a unique perspective on life, but those thoughts are not visible like a pair of sunglasses. We often hold back our thoughts because we want to be accepted. We say the things that we think people want to hear, particularly in a romantic relationship. But this unwillingness to open up keeps our relationship on a superficial level. To pursue a deeper love, we must share our true thoughts.

I think we hear this kind of openness from the man in Song of Solomon 2:11-13. He says,

for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth,

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the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away.

I doubt he spoke that way around other men. One pastor described this outburst as creative begging and pleading, but let's give the man the benefit of the doubt! He enjoyed springtime, and being in love made his senses even more attuned. He openly shared his thoughts, and invited his love to experience nature with him.

Of course, people are not always this open with their thoughts. Proverbs 20:5 says, "The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out." To understand a person's thoughts and purposes, you must truly listen without interrupting, pressuring, or pre-judging. When someone feels the freedom to express their thoughts, you may find that your perspectives on many things differ, but that's not necessarily bad. When the matter is an issue expressed in Scripture, those who follow Christ are called to align our thoughts with his (2 Cor 10:5), but there are countless other issues (likes

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and dislikes and ideas about how to do this or that) where we are free to make our own choices. The pursuit of deeper love requires that we learn to understand and appreciate those differences.



### *Dimension 3: Person*

Most people avoid the spotlight at all costs. We can be self-conscious before groups and even before individuals. Yet the pursuit of a deeper love requires not just sharing thoughts, but allowing someone to see you and hear you as you really are as a person.

In Song of Solomon 2:14, the man pursues the woman by saying,

O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

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He simply wanted to enjoy the sight of her face and the sound of her voice, but she was like a shy dove hiding away in the clefts of some rocky cliff. For their relationship to continue to grow, she needed to become comfortable with his gaze.

Becoming comfortable with that level of openness was a necessary step toward God's design for married life. Genesis 2:25 describes the openness in the Garden of Eden by saying, "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." They were perfectly at ease with the shape of their bodies and the condition of their souls. But sadly, their innocence did not last long.

Genesis 3 tells how they succumbed to the serpent's temptation. After they sinned, they began to feel shame. They covered up their bodies, and their intimacy was shattered as they began to cast blame upon one another.

Though we still struggle with feelings of guilt and shame, we find forgiveness and freedom in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul explained that sexually immoral people would not enter God's kingdom. But then in verse 11, he said,

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And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

This salvation is not just a spiritual matter. It should directly affect how we view our bodies. Paul made this connection in 1 Corinthians 6:20. He wrote, “For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” He then pointed out the implications of this idea for married life in 1 Corinthians 7:4. How does someone glorify God with their body in marriage? He said,

For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

With consciences cleansed through faith in Christ, a couple can let down their defenses to give themselves fully to one another. Pursue a deeper love in the dimension of who you are as a person.



### *Dimension 4: Problems*

They say that good things come in small packages, but the same can be said of problems. You do not always see them coming. They are like a mosquito that you don't notice until it bites. They are like a germ of which you are unaware until it makes you sick. Relational problems also start small, and one of the dimensions in pursuing a deeper love is learning to work through those problems.

Song of Solomon 2:15 says, "Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom." It is not clear whether the man or the woman is speaking at this point, but one of

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them is asking for help. There is a type of small fox in the Middle East known for burrowing and eating vines. Imagine the frustration of a blossoming vine suddenly dying because its roots had been chewed up. That would have been a familiar experience for vineyard owners in Israel, but the couple probably spoke of it here as a picture of how small problems could damage their relationship.

Even the most lovable people have certain habits that we may dislike. You might point out the habit, but it's not intentional. The person isn't even aware. Over time those little differences can become big sources of frustration and bitterness, but learning to humbly overlook those issues is part of pursuing a deeper love.

In those situations, we need to follow Paul's instruction in Philippians 2:3-5. He wrote,

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,

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Jesus modeled true humility for us, and through his union with us, he can enable us to adopt the same mindset.

How are you handling the little problems in your relationships? Have you become critical and bitter, or are you practicing the humility that leads to a deeper Christ-like love?



### *Dimension 5: Heart*

There are things we like and things that we treasure, things we get if we can and things we pursue relentlessly. There are temporary agreements that meet a momentary need and lifelong promises that we will never break. There are commitments that we bend as needed and commitments that shape and mold us at the very core of our identity. The pursuit of a deeper love must take place in this dimension of heart and soul.

In Song of Solomon 2:16, the woman declares her commitment. She says, “My beloved is mine, and I am his.” Couples today might say something like that in a

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flippant way, but this woman framed her words to express a covenant relationship. Throughout the Old Testament, God often spoke this way about his covenant with the nation of Israel. For instance, in Exodus 6:7 he said,

I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

The Lord pledged his unwavering commitment to Israel, and the woman in the Song was pursuing that same commitment to her beloved.

Her heartfelt devotion to her beloved only served to deepen her desire for him. I think her statement in the second part of verse 16 should be read together with verse 17. She says, “he grazes among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains.” As with many other places in the Song, some people take these verses as a picture of sex, but I think she is simply returning to where she began in verse 8. Her beloved is off taking care of his flock of

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sheep, but she is longing for a new day when he can make the trip to visit her again.

Her commitment to her beloved is so deep that she even dreamed about being with him. In verses 1-3 of chapter 3 she says,

On my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not. I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"

We have all had those disturbing dreams when you cannot find what you are looking for, and that seems to be what she records here. She describes her man as the one her soul loves. She was fully devoted to him whether awake or asleep.

With the fickleness we see in so many romantic relationships today, you might wonder whether that kind of commitment of heart and soul is possible? I believe that Jesus Christ enables us to exercise this kind of love. First John 4:10-11 says,

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In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

The woman in the Song may have only dreamed about losing her beloved and searching the city for him, but we were actually lost. Jesus came to seek and save us. He paid for our sins and pledged himself to us in an everlasting covenant. So as John said in 1 John 4:19, “We love because he first loved us.” Our relationship with Jesus should shape all our relationships, but particularly our romantic relationship. Pursue a deeper love in the dimension of heart and soul.



### *Dimension 6: Home*

Animals can get aggressive when their young are threatened. Imagine facing down a lioness protecting her cubs. Human moms and dads can be just as protective. So, the pursuit of a deeper love inevitably involves the tricky business of navigating family dynamics.

Early in a relationship, parental oversight is an important part of God's design. We see this dynamic reflected in Song of Solomon 3:4-5. The woman may still be relating what happened in her dream of trying to find her man. She says,

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Scarcely had I passed them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her who conceived me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

Whether dream or reality, she does not run off with the man. She brings him home, and she repeats the same statement to the daughters of Jerusalem that she said back in verse 7 of chapter 2. She knows that it is too soon to run away with her beloved. She must be patient, so she takes advantage of the protection and accountability that family provides.

This relationship changes once a couple is married. Genesis 2:24 says, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Some have claimed that this verse only applies to the man’s family not the woman’s, but that is an argument from silence. As a couple becomes one flesh, they become a separate family unit. There are inevitable problems in a marriage when a husband or a wife or their parents refuse to let that

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healthy separation develop. The pursuit of a deeper love means that couples must learn to navigate the dynamics of home and family.

### *Conclusion*

A deeper love is not just about stronger feelings. It's about spending time together, sharing thoughts and perspectives, being open about who you are as a person, working through problems, growing in commitment, and navigating the dynamics of home and family. Do these dimensions come to mind when you think of relational depth?

This kind of love does not happen spontaneously. The love of God is what enables us to pursue a deeper love. Do you believe that he sent his Son to save you and draw you into a relationship with him? Have you personally received his love? If not, I encourage you to turn to him today. If you want to learn more about his love, I would encourage you to devote some time to reading 1 John 4.

If you already have a relationship with God, then perhaps you need to focus on one of these dimensions of deeper love. If you are in a romantic relationship,

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think about which dimension needs the most attention. Ask God to help you grow. Or perhaps, you need to consider how these dimensions apply to your relationship with God or with other people. Don't settle for shallow relationships. Seek to reflect the love of God.

Perhaps there is someone in your life who needs to hear about his love. Would you be his ambassador? Tell them the good news that God loved and sent his Son to die for our sins so that we can have a relationship with him forever.

May the perfect love of God fill our hearts and shape our relationships!

*Questions for Further Reflection*

1. How did this study change your understanding of relational depth?
2. What are some of the barriers you must overcome to pursue a deeper love? How does the love of God address those barriers?
3. On which dimension do you most need to focus? What steps could you take to do this?



### Chapter 3

## *Finding Joy in Marriage*

Some people invest a lot of time and money in wrapping a gift. They search for nice paper that has the right color and texture. They find some fancy ribbon and figure out how to tie it in an intricate bow. Their package is an exquisite work of art, but the impression only lasts for a moment. Once the gift is given, the bow is untied and the paper is torn apart.

The gift inside should be enjoyed more than the wrapping, but sometimes that does not happen. Have you ever received a gift that you just could not figure

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out? Maybe it was some handy gadget that everyone was talking about? It was supposed to make life easier, but it was just too complicated. After a few minutes, you gave up. You hid it away in a drawer or just threw it out.

I think many people today treat marriage this way. We have heard that it is a precious gift from God, so we invest a lot of time and money in all the wrappings: fancy dresses, palatial venues, and grand feasts. But when the big day finally arrives, the wedding festivities are over in the blink of an eye. We expect married life to be filled with endless bliss, but we cannot figure out how to make it work.

How can anyone find joy in marriage? I think we find a helpful example in Song of Solomon 3:6-5:1. That portion of the Song describes Solomon's wedding day and points us to three sources of joy in marriage. The problem we have is that our sinfulness hinders us from experiencing that joy. To find joy in marriage we must draw upon the power of Christ to fight against those sinful tendencies in our hearts. So, as we walk through this passage of Scripture, I will attempt to layout a spiritual battle plan.



### *Source 1: Commitment*

If you ever find yourself hanging by a rope, knots become extremely important. The last thing you want in that situation is a careless knot that will unravel as soon as you pull on it. You need a carefully tied knot that will hold firm. That idea is not what we have in mind when we speak of “tying the knot” in marriage, but maybe it should be. When your world is turned upside-down, the firm commitment of a loving marriage can be a source of comfort and joy.

Song of Solomon 3:6-11 gives us a sense of the careful preparation that preceded Solomon’s wedding. It says,

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What is that coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of a merchant? Behold, it is the litter of Solomon! Around it are sixty mighty men, some of the mighty men of Israel, all of them wearing swords and expert in war, each with his sword at his thigh, against terror by night. King Solomon made himself a carriage from the wood of Lebanon. He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple; its interior was inlaid with love by the daughters of Jerusalem. Go out, O daughters of Zion, and look upon King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.

The custom in those days was for a bridegroom to retrieve his bride and bring her to their wedding feast. Friends would join in to make the procession a grand event, and there was probably none grander than the one described here. You could smell them coming—the most expensive fragrances that money could buy. Solomon came with more than a few friends; he had sixty of Israel's best soldiers to provide security. He rode in an ornately crafted carriage that was probably

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carried on men's shoulders. It even sounds as if he did much of the work himself. This wedding was no spur of the moment idea. The royal court was in full support, including his mother. For Solomon, this was a day of great joy.

Sadly, an expensive celebration does not necessarily mean that the knot is securely tied. Solomon succumbed to political pressures and ended up marrying hundreds of wives. His subsequent behavior makes these lavish preparations seem tacky.

He later regretted his lack of commitment. Toward the end of his life he wrote Ecclesiastes 9:9, where he said,

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

God's design is for our marriages to reflect his unbreakable commitment to us. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul said, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Jesus was so

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committed to us, that he died for us so that we can spend eternity with him.

Jesus even used the picture of a wedding procession like this one in the Song to describe his future return. Matthew 25 records his Parable of the Ten Virgins who were waiting with their oil lamps to light the way for the bridegroom's procession. Even though the wait may be long, he tells us as his followers to keep watching. Revelation 19 then likens his return to a wedding feast.

Jesus may have had this picture in mind in John 14:3. There he assured his disciples of his return by saying, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." We can fully trust his commitment to us.

God's commitment to us in Christ is the foundation for commitment in marriage. In those times when life is hard, a husband and wife can encourage each other by their commitment to one another, standing together with their hope anchored in the faithfulness of God. In those times when your spouse is hard to get along with, you can remember the joy of your wedding day,

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drawing strength from the faithfulness of God to rejoice despite the difficulty. If you're not married and you are craving the security of commitment, be encouraged that God is committed to you. There is joy in knowing that someone is committed to you.



## *Source 2: Beauty*

They say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Different cultures throughout history have had very different ideas of what makes a person beautiful. Some of those ideas can be extreme and impossible to obtain. People can become obsessed with exercise and diet, striving to look like the photoshopped models in magazines. Our media saturated culture distorts our ideas of beauty, but we need to think of beauty in a much more independent and personal sense. The only eyes that matter are those of God and of your spouse. Beauty should not be an oppressive burden; it should be a source of joy in marriage.

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In Song of Solomon 4:1-7, the man celebrates the beauty of his bride. He does not compare her to anyone else. He simply enjoys who she is, and expresses his delight in relation to other beautiful sights he has seen. His comments sound strangely awkward to us, but that impression demonstrates how personal his thoughts are.

He begins in verse 1 by saying,

Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold,  
you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind  
your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats  
leaping down the slopes of Gilead.

It may sound to us that she had a bad hair day, but she probably had vibrant black curly hair. Gilead was a fertile area where a flock of goats would grow to be healthy and strong. That was beautiful in his world.

In verse 2 he compliments her smile.

Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that  
have come up from the washing, all of which  
bear twins, and not one among them has lost  
its young.

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It may not have been common in those days for someone to have all their teeth. Again, he speaks in terms that reflect his experience.

In verse 3 he says, “Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil.” Some people wonder if he is drawing imagery from Israel’s history. In the book of Joshua, the scarlet thread was the sign that Rahab had chosen to align herself with God’s people rather than the people of Jericho. The pomegranate was used on the hem of the high priest’s robe. But I think he was probably just struck by the color of her face.

In verse 4 he says, “Your neck is like the tower of David, built in rows of stone; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors.” She was probably wearing necklaces that brought this picture to mind. She had a strength and a bearing that were attractive to him.

In verses 5-7, he says,

Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that graze among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go away to the mountain of myrrh and the

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hill of frankincense. You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you.

He soaks in everything about her physical appearance, but he does not make any critical comments. That would be devastating. He simply celebrates how God made her.

So how can a couple cultivate this kind of interaction in their marriage? Other passages of Scripture give us helpful insight. We need to make a distinction between public and private. In 1 Timothy 2:9-10, Paul wrote,

likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness--with good works.

Scripture encourages women to be modest in public, but not in private with their husband. Let him delight in how God made you.

Similarly, men must fight to control their eyes in public. Job spoke of this commitment in Job 31:1. He said, "I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then

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could I gaze at a virgin?” Job was enduring an intense period of suffering in his life, and his wife was not offering much encouragement (Job 2:9). He was tempted to find some relief by gazing at other women, but he refused. This is not some legalistic restriction; this is wisdom. A man needs to reserve his gaze for his wife in private. She must become his definition of beauty, and he should tell her even if his attempts sound awkward.

What about those who are not married? Exercise self-control. Ladies, be modest. Men, reserve your gaze. It is hard to be patient, but wait for the Lord to bring the right person into your life.



### *Source 3: Desire*

We all know what it's like to crave some of our favorite sweets. It could be honey, chocolate, or something else. Our diet becomes dull without them. But when that taste finally hits your tongue, your senses explode. The ability to satisfy a desire like that is a blessing from God. The same can be said about sexual desires.

In Song of Solomon 4:8-11, the man expresses his desire for his bride. He says,

Come with me from Lebanon, my bride;  
come with me from Lebanon. Depart from  
the peak of Amana, from the peak of Senir

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and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards. You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride; you have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! Your lips drip nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue; the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

As we saw previously in the Song, the woman lived some distance from the man. Here he refers to the area to the north of Israel where there were wild animals: Lebanon, Amana, Senir, and Hermon. As he gazed upon her beauty, his desire was to take her home to be with him, and he relates that desire to the things he craved: wine, spices, nectar, honey and milk. He had similar feelings toward her, but they followed God's design and waited for their wedding day. Though it sounds strange to us, he calls her *sister* as a term of endearment. They were the closest of friends.

In verses 12-16 he envisions her as a beautiful garden behind a locked gate. He says,

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A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed. Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all choice spices—a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon. Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its spices flow.

He thinks of her as a place where his hunger and thirst can finally be quenched.

In the second part of verse 16 she responds. She says, “Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.” The wait is over. They no longer need to deny themselves. They are now married and the gates are open.

Chapter 5 begins with the man’s response. He says,

I came to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gathered my myrrh with my spice, I ate my honeycomb with my honey, I drank my wine with my milk.

But then someone else speaks, and says, “Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love!”

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Scholars debate who makes this statement, and why they speak up at such a private moment. Some point out that during an ancient wedding feast, a bridal chamber would be prepared for the couple. The feasts lasted several days, so at some point the couple would step out for their time together while the rest of the guests continued the celebration right outside. So, these words in the Song could be the man telling the guests to go ahead with their feast while he enjoyed time with his bride. But the daughters of Jerusalem have served as a chorus earlier in the Song, this is probably their encouragement to the couple.

Some Bible teachers have suggested that it could be God himself who speaks these words. Though that interpretation does not quite fit with the flow of the Song, I think we can say that God would certainly be in full agreement with these words. The Bible makes it clear that one of God's purposes for marriage is to satisfy sexual desire. In Proverbs 5:18-19, Solomon used similar imagery in his advice to men. He said,

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in  
the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a  
graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all

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times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.

No other woman should be the object of a man's desire, only his wife.

Hebrews 13:4 says, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." We must be clear in our minds. Sexual desire is only wrong when it is pursued outside of marriage. But within a marriage, it is a gift from God designed to bring unity and joy to married life.

## *Conclusion*

We need the perspective that the Song of Solomon provides. Our world pushes women to flaunt their beauty and give away their body apart from any commitment. It justifies men who live without restraint. But God's design is for men and women to experience joy in marriage as they share life-long commitment, beauty, and desire.

The fundamental question we all face is whether we are willing to trust God. Do you believe that he is our Creator? Do you believe that he has both the right and

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the wisdom to tell us how to live? Since he has that right, we all have a problem, because we have not followed him as we should. Thankfully, in his grace and mercy he sent his Son to pay the price for our sins. Have you received his forgiveness? If not, begin to trust him today. If you are working through that decision, I would encourage you to spend some time reading John 14. As we saw earlier, that chapter records the words of Jesus about his commitment to us.

But more to the point, are you trusting God's design for marriage? If you are single, are you willing to wait to experience these joys? If you are married, have you given up or are you pursuing the joy that God intended? Perhaps there is some way that you need to work at encouraging your spouse this week.

May God help us to follow his design for our lives.

*Questions for Further Reflection*

1. Who are some good examples of marital commitment? From the Bible? From your life?
2. What passages would you share with someone to help them understand a biblical perspective on beauty?
3. Do you think most Christians grasp the biblical perspective on sexual desire? Why or why not?





## Chapter 4

# *Handling Conflict*

I love owning a car, but I hate getting it repaired. It's always expensive, and it always seems to break down at the most inconvenient times. Our family van runs well most of the time, but we have had problems with it on three different vacations. Each time we broke down on a weekend in an unfamiliar place, making it difficult to find a mechanic.

A lot of thoughts go through your mind when you're waiting for a tow truck alongside the highway. Why did this have to happen now? Everyone said this was a

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reliable car. I should have bought a different one. I never see those cars broken down. I wonder if we could get by without a car. I may just need to scrap this car and get a new one.

If we are honest, we must admit that the same kinds of thoughts go through our minds when conflicts arise in marriage. Why did this have to happen now? Everyone said we were the perfect match. I should have married someone else. That couple never has problems. I may just need to end this relationship and get a new one.

The truth of the matter is that every car breaks down and every relationship has conflict. We are fallen, sinful people, but being married is not like owning a car. You cannot just scrap it and get a new one. Marriage is a one flesh relationship between two people made in the image of God. Tearing it apart leaves deep and lasting scars. We must learn to handle conflict.

The last passage we looked at in the Song of Solomon described the couple's wedding day. We learned how they found joy in commitment, beauty and desire. Everything seemed perfect. What could

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possibly go wrong? We don't know how much time had elapsed, but the Song moves directly from the wedding night to the couple's first conflict. Though the Song is poetic, it describes reality not fantasy. There is much to learn from this part of the couple's story.

Song of Solomon 5:2-6:13 highlights four keys to handling conflict. These principles apply to any relationship, but particularly to marriage. As we walk through this passage, I encourage you to reflect on how you have personally handled conflict. Come to God's Word with a willingness to change.



## *Key 1: Don't Drop Your Guard*

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery has been guarded twenty-four hours a day for over eighty years. The sentinels march a precise, perfectly timed pattern. No matter how bad the weather may be, they maintain their watch, insuring that guests remain silent and respectful. If that kind of effort is invested in honoring the dead, shouldn't we be equally vigilant in guarding our relationships with the living, particularly in marriage?

Most couples are extremely careful about how they treat one another before marriage. But after the wedding day, they become careless. The

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thoughtfulness and patience of love begin to falter, and a sinful selfishness begins to ooze out.

For Solomon and his bride, we see the first indications of this carelessness in Song of Solomon 5:2-3. The woman says,

I slept, but my heart was awake. A sound! My beloved is knocking. "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one, for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night." I had put off my garment; how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them?

Since she mentions sleeping, this whole passage may describe a bad dream. Whether dream or reality, we must ask, "Who is being selfish here, the man or the woman?" Men say it's the woman, and women say it's the man, but it's probably both. Why is the man banging on her door at such a late hour? Was this a sudden thoughtless impulse? Did he allow other activities to delay him from time they planned to spend together? Whatever his reason may have been, she responds with weak excuses. Neither of them was showing selfless love in this situation. They were acting carelessly.

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The story continues in verses 4-5, but interpretations of it differ. The woman says,

My beloved put his hand to the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the bolt.

The word translated *thrilled* in the ESV is a generic term for strong emotion. Some say that the emotion is *sexual desire* and that the imagery of the door and the myrrh is a euphemistic description of sexual activity. Others say that the emotion is *compassion* and that the woman could not open the door because her hands were slippery with perfume. But her attitude in verse 3 makes it more likely that the emotion is *anger*. Now that he had woken her up, she was going to give him a piece of her mind. The slippery myrrh may be a figurative description of how she felt as she fumbled with the door while being so upset.

The man then expresses his emotions like a lot of men would. In verse 6 she says,

I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. My soul failed me when he

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spoke. I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer.

He may have been angry or hurt, but he does not offer any explanation. He simply gives her the silent treatment and leaves. This whole situation started with careless insensitive actions that could have been overlooked. Proverbs 19:11 says, “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.” But instead of being reasonable, their emotional responses were creating a serious division in their relationship.

The woman continues the story in verses 7-8 by saying,

The watchmen found me as they went about in the city; they beat me, they bruised me, they took away my veil, those watchmen of the walls. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love.

Was she really beaten by watchmen? It’s possible, but it seems unlikely, since she is the bride of Solomon. Her description of this beating is one of the reasons for reading this whole scenario as a bad dream. These

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watchmen may represent the pangs of conscience. The whole situation has left her feeling sick.

So, what can we do to avoid conflicts like this one? Matthew 26:41 tells us that when Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane with his disciples, he said, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” The sinful desires of our flesh are strong. We need to recognize those areas where we are often tempted. Then we need to pray urgently for God’s help to resist.

God gives us the power to resist temptation through the Holy Spirit. Everyone who believes in Jesus receives the Spirit, but we must allow him to fill our lives with his fruit. In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul said,

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,  
patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,  
gentleness, self-control; against such things  
there is no law.

Even when someone else is being selfish, these spiritual attitudes will defuse the conflict before it starts. Don’t drop your guard. Watch and pray.



## *Key 2: Don't Dwell on the Negative*

With their powerful sense of smell, dogs are excellent trackers. But what do they track down when they are not trained to use that ability for a good purpose? They find some disgusting things, and we have the same problem with our minds. Without training and intentional effort, we are drawn to sinful, critical, negative thoughts. When faced with conflict, you must choose to not dwell on the negative.

In Song of Solomon 5:9, the woman's friends ask her a question. They say,

What is your beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful among women?

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What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us?

Their reason for asking is not clear. Some Bible teachers think that they were tempting the woman to criticize her husband. Gossip conversations like that are all too common, but I think that in this case her friends raised the question as a wise way to remind her of her love for her him.

Whatever their intent may have been, she responded positively. She could have fixated on her own hurt feelings. She could have griped and complained about all his faults, but she does not do that. In verses 10-16, she says,

My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven. His eyes are like doves beside streams of water, bathed in milk, sitting beside a full pool. His cheeks are like beds of spices, mounds of sweet-smelling herbs. His lips are lilies, dripping liquid myrrh. His arms are rods of gold, set with jewels. His body is polished ivory, bedecked with sapphires. His legs are alabaster columns, set on bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars. His mouth is

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most sweet, and he is altogether desirable.  
This is my beloved and this is my friend, O  
daughters of Jerusalem.

She lists the characteristics that attracted her to her husband. His description of her beauty back in chapter 4 seemed awkward, but we do not find that same problem in her words. She compares him to costly materials to express how much she treasures him. Interestingly, she does not share these thoughts with him, but with her friends. More importantly, she was telling herself. She was rekindling her love and desire for her husband by thinking positively about him.

This ability to direct our thoughts is vital to our spiritual lives. In 2 Corinthians 10 Paul spoke of taking every thought captive. He gave us a helpful list of how to direct our thoughts in Philippians 4:8. He said,

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Directing our thoughts is essential to overcoming every temptation: anger, lust, fear, greed, despair. The

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woman in the Song shows how controlling your thoughts is essential to handling conflict. Don't dwell on the negative.



### *Key 3: Don't Wait to Reconcile*

If you were sinking in mud, would you wait to see how deep you would get? Of course not, but sometimes we choose to wait it out. We tell ourselves that we did nothing wrong. We may want to see whether the other person will come crawling back. We may tell ourselves that time will fix things, but that's seldom true. In most cases, we just sink deeper and deeper in the muck. Someone must be first. Don't wait to reconcile.

In the Song of Solomon, the woman's friends give her this encouragement in the first verse of chapter 6. They say, "Where has your beloved gone, O most

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beautiful among women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you?” She responds in verses 2-3 by saying,

My beloved has gone down to his garden to  
the beds of spices, to graze in the gardens and  
to gather lilies. I am my beloved's and my  
beloved is mine; he grazes among the lilies.

Since her husband spoke of her as a garden at the end of chapter 4, some commentators think that she is using the same picture as a euphemistic description of sex. But I don't think that fits the flow of the song. She used similar words back in Song of Solomon 2:16, and in both places, I think she is speaking in literal terms. Her husband was hard at work taking care of his garden and tending to his flock. The work was probably needed, but it was also his way of escaping the conflict.

The woman's course is clear. She is heading to the garden to reconcile. Some might say that the man won, but that way of thinking misses the point. James 4:6 speaks of God and says, “But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’” God is pleased when we humble ourselves.

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Reconciliation is a priority. Jesus even spoke of reconciliation as a more immediate priority than formal worship. Matthew 5:23-24 tells us that he said,

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

In Ephesians 4:26-27, Paul even put a time limit on conflicts. He wrote, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” Do you have some unresolved conflict? Don’t delay. Rush to be humble.



### *Key 4: Don't Stay Bitter*

No one likes to take out the trash. It's one of those chores that everyone would rather avoid. But what is the alternative? An overflowing trash can in the kitchen can cause an unbearable odor. A refusal to forgive has the same effect in a person's life. Everyone can smell the stench. Don't stay bitter. Take out the trash.

As the woman in the Song comes to her husband to be reconciled, he receives her just like he did on their wedding day. In Song of Solomon 6:4-10 he says,

You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners. Turn away your eyes from me, for

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they overwhelm me-- Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of ewes that have come up from the washing; all of them bear twins; not one among them has lost its young. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her. "Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?"

There is some debate over how to understand these references to queens and concubines. If this is later in his life and Solomon is comparing her to his other wives, his commitment seems suspect. Some use this comparison to say that the man speaking is not Solomon. Another possibility is that Solomon was speaking of the multiple wives his father, King David, had married. Though he later succumbed to the same temptation, at this point in his life Solomon was committed to the wife of his youth. His relationship

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with her was far too valuable to hold onto some silly grudge.

She describes how he received her in verses 11-12.

I went down to the nut orchard to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom. Before I was aware, my desire set me among the chariots of my kinsman, a prince.

Verse 12 is particularly difficult to understand, but I think the idea is simply that her husband received her with honor.

In verse 13 the woman's friends are probably speaking again. They say, "Return, return, O Shulammitte, return, return, that we may look upon you." Some say that they call her Shulammitte as a way of identifying her hometown or family heritage. But since Shulammitte comes from the same root as the name Solomon, this could be their way of calling her "Mrs. Solomon." They want to know the result of her trip to the garden.

Her husband responds by saying, "Why should you look upon the Shulammitte, as upon a dance before two

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armies?” The fight is over. The tension is gone. They are happily reconciled and heading home together.

Christians have an extra incentive to let go of bitterness. In Ephesians 4:31-32, Paul wrote,

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Because God is holy and perfectly good, our sins against him are far worse than any of the ways that people have sinned against us. So, since he forgives us, we have no right whatsoever to be unforgiving. Don't stay bitter. Show the forgiveness of Christ.

## *Conclusion*

So, this portion of the Song gives us a great example of how to handle conflict. Don't drop your guard. Don't dwell on the negative. Don't wait to reconcile. Don't stay bitter. Have you been handling conflict this way?

The foundation for strong relationships with people is a strong relationship with God. We have all sinned against him, but he reached out to us by sending his

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Son to pay for our sins. Have you turned to God to be forgiven of your sins? If not, I encourage you to do so today.

As we have seen in some of the Scripture passages I have shared, Paul explained the connection between relating to God and relating to people in Ephesians 4. Wherever you are at in your spiritual life, that chapter is worthy of study and careful consideration. You may want to set aside time to do that this week.

Of course, the main application of this portion of the Song of Solomon is to pursue reconciliation when there is a problem in your marriage or any other relationship. Is there someone you need to pursue? Don't wait. Be humble. Reconcile that relationship today.

Another important response to this study is learning to control your thoughts. You may want to commit Philippians 4:8 to memory. As we learned, that verse gives us the criteria we need to direct our thoughts in positive ways that help us resist temptation and overcome conflict.

May God help us reflect his great forgiveness.

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### *Questions for Further Reflection*

1. On which of these “keys” do you most need to focus?  
Why?
2. What unique resources and incentives do Christians have for handling conflict?
3. What are some practical ways to control your thoughts in times of conflict?





## Chapter 5

# *Serving Your Spouse*

Greek mythology tells the story of a handsome young man named Narcissus. Though many maidens tried to love him, he arrogantly rejected them. A goddess decided to punish him for his cruelty. In a remote location, she prepared a mountain spring that flowed into a perfectly still pool. As Narcissus became thirsty while hunting, she guided him to the spring. When he knelt to drink, he saw himself in the pool and did not realize that it was a reflection. He was so enamored with himself, that he could not tear himself

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away. He spent the rest of his life gazing at his own reflection.

As ridiculous as this story is, it illustrates an aspect of our sinful nature as fallen human beings. To some degree we are all like Narcissus. We may not push everyone away, but selfishness seeps into all our relationships. In fact, our best attempts at love are often self-serving, particularly in marriage. We do what needs to be done to get the response that we want.

The Bible calls us to a radically different kind of love. In Galatians 5:13, Paul said, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Though it goes against our nature, we should approach every relationship with the mindset of a servant.

Why? Because followers of Jesus, must relate to people as he did. Mark 10:45 tells us that he said, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Since he gave his life to save us, we must die to self in our relationships.

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People often talk about marriage as a 50-50 relationship. Though a husband and a wife have different desires, the world says that they should meet halfway. Bend a little bit, but don't overdo it. "Be your own person," they say. But the Bible calls us to go farther. In a Christ-like spirit of self-sacrifice, a husband and a wife must serve each other by giving 100 percent unconditionally.

To truly serve your spouse, you must understand your spouse. As challenging as it may be, you must become an expert in knowing their thoughts and desires. Countless books have been written about the different ways that men and women view love and romance. Some of them are helpful, but the best source of wisdom is the Word of God. Our next passage in our study of the Song of Solomon helps us understand some of these male-female differences.

Song of Solomon 7:1-8:4 reveals six romantic desires, three from the man and three from the woman. This passage leads us to some generic conclusions about men and women. Their desires are different, and most couples experience the same difference we find in this part of the Song. The man's desires here may not

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be shared by every man, and the woman's desires may not be shared by every woman. There may even be some crossover. Nevertheless, this passage can serve as a starting point to help married couples learn to serve one another better.

For those who hope to marry at some point in the future, this passage can give you a more realistic understanding of the challenge of serving your spouse. It may also help you determine what is appropriate in a godly dating relationship.

If you do not intend to marry in the future, use this study as an opportunity to think about serving other people in a more general sense.



## *Desire 1: Seeing*

It's safe to say that most men like watching television. You might even say that they are obsessed with it, not necessarily with particular shows. They don't need a meaningful storyline. They just need a remote to bounce from image to image. Men are visual, so when it comes to romance, they have a desire to see.

In Song of Solomon 7:1-6, the man responds to what he sees—the woman's body. He has spoken of her body previously, but this is his most thorough description, covering from her feet to her head and hair. As we learned earlier in the Song, his comparisons can seem awkward. But we need to recognize that he is

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not making a visual comparison. When he sees her, he is reminded of other sights that prompted similar feelings.

In verse 1, he says, “How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O noble daughter! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand.” To him seeing her curves was like seeing a priceless, exquisite work of art. They took his breath away.

In verse 2, he says, “Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies.” Some scholars make the point here that other cultures were not obsessed with being slender as many people are today. But again, the man was not making a visual comparison. His point was that seeing her midsection made him feel blessed with abundance.

In verse 3, he says, “Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.” It would be a rare privilege to see twin fawns in the wilderness. He felt the same excitement about her.

In verse 4, he says, “Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, which

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looks toward Damascus.” As a visual comparison, his words here would be ridiculously insulting. But for him, a tower was something stately and strong. Heshbon was one of the first cities captured by the Israelites. As the royal city of the Amorites, the pools by its gates must have been spectacular. So, in this man’s eyes, his wife had a noble bearing and a regal beauty that was awe-inspiring.

In verse 5 he continues the theme of royalty by saying, “Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses.” Her hair was not dyed. Purple was the color of royalty. His point was that her beauty held power over him. He sums up the experience of seeing her in verse 6 by saying, “How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights!”

I suspect that most women do not understand how strong this desire is for men. Matthew 5:28 tells us that Jesus confronted men by saying, “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The desire to gaze upon a woman’s body must be reserved for marriage.

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But the world says something different. It encourages women to wear clothing in public that entices men's desire. It bombards men with revealing images of women, yet God's standard has not changed. God wants the married men to save his eyes for his wife. He wants the single man to save his eyes, in case he marries a woman at some point in the future.

In a general sense, women can encourage men to maintain this commitment by dressing modestly in public. But the specific application here is to married women. You can serve your husband by fulfilling his desire to see.



## *Desire 2: Touching*

Over the past few decades, society has moved toward using gender neutral terms for most professions. Instead of policeman, we say police officer. Instead of fireman, we say fire fighter. Instead of postman, we say letter carrier. But I have never heard a gender-neutral version of handyman. Women could do that sort of work, but a lot of men have a strong inclination to work with their hands. That inclination carries over into romance, in that men have a desire to touch.

In Song of Solomon 7:7-9, the man expresses this desire by saying,

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Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine.

Dates have long been one of the staple foods in the Middle East, but harvesting them is not easy. They grow on palm trees that reach as high as 70 feet. But dates are a sugary sweet delight, so they are worth the effort. The man feels the same satisfaction when he touches and kisses his wife.

Solomon made the same point in Proverbs 5:19 in his instruction about how a man should relate to his wife. He said, “A lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.” Then in verse 20 he added, “Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?” These verses correct a mistake that Christians couples often make in dating. They assume that anything short of sex is permissible. But just like the desire to see, a man’s desire to touch a woman’s body should only be

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fulfilled in marriage. Wives, you can serve your husband by fulfilling his desire to touch.



### *Desire 3: Affirmation*

Have you ever had one of those days when you get stuck at every red light? Your drive home gets delayed, and your frustration level keeps building. Sometimes everything in life begins to feel that way. We all feel discouraged sometimes, but no one can encourage a man like his wife. He may not ever admit it, but one of his deepest desires is to be affirmed by his wife.

When Paul talked about marriage in Ephesians 5:33, he said, “However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” Husbands are commanded to show love, but wives are commanded to show respect. Earlier in

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that chapter, Paul called wives to submit, following their husband's leadership. The idea of submission sounds oppressive to our ears, but this submission is not forced. It should flow from an attitude of respect.

That attitude of respect and affirmation applies to romance as well. The woman in the Song relates to her husband this way in the second part of verse 9. Her husband has spoken about the experience of seeing and touching her. He has likened her mouth to the best wine, and she responds by saying, "It goes down smoothly for my beloved, gliding over lips and teeth." She uses his figure of speech to affirm his desire for her. She welcomes his love.

She gives him the green light, just like she did on their wedding night. There he spoke of her as a garden, and she responded in Song 4:16 by saying, "Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits." She was not just begrudgingly letting him do whatever he wanted. On both occasions, she responded to him in a way that showed respect and affirmation for his sexual desire.

Wives, you can serve your husband by fulfilling his desire for affirmation.



### *Desire 4: Security*

Before a storm hits, everything on board a ship's deck needs to be lashed down. In married life, a couple encounters all sorts of storms that threaten to pull them apart. But every good, positive, affirming interaction in a marriage is like another rope to hold the couple together. That sense of security is particularly important for women.

The man in the song has spoken of his desire to see and touch, and through her response she has fulfilled his desire for affirmation. Their time together meets her desire also, but in a different way. In Song of Solomon 7:10 she says, "I am my beloved's, and his

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desire is for me.” For her this encounter had an emotional effect. She was not abandoned by her husband. He was not pursuing some other woman. Their relationship was secure.

She has spoken this way two other times in the Song. In 2:16 she used a similar phrase to celebrate their growing commitment to each other before their wedding. Then in 6:3 she spoke of their commitment as they reconciled with one another after a conflict. Her husband’s unwavering commitment to her fulfilled her deep desire for a secure and stable relationship.

Of course, the ultimate source of security is God himself. Paul described the security of our relationship with God in Romans 8:38-39 by saying,

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A woman should never expect her husband to give her the security that only God can provide. Yet a husband is called to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He should do all that he can to help his wife feel

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secure in their relationship. Husband, serve your wife by fulfilling her desire for security.



## *Desire 5: Experience*

There are two ways to travel. Some people focus exclusively on the destination, and they want to take the shortest, fastest route to get there. Others want to take their time and enjoy the journey. With romance, men typically focus on the destination, but women are thinking about the journey. They desire an all-encompassing experience.

In Song of Solomon 7:11-13, the woman expresses this desire. She says,

Come, my beloved, let us go out into the fields and lodge in the villages; let us go out early to the vineyards and see whether the

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vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love. The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and beside our doors are all choice fruits, new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.

She wants to travel and get away to the countryside. She wants to see the scenery together and smell the flowers. She wants to enjoy the taste of fruit. She promises to give him her love as he desires, but those moments are just part of the overall experience for her.

In a way, this desire is similar to what God had in mind when he established the Sabbath for Israel. In Exodus 20:8-11, he commanded,

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the

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LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

God wanted his people to step away from their work day routine. He wanted them to rest and enjoy his creation. He wanted them to have unhurried time to reflect on him and to worship. We may not be under the Old Covenant, but we still need to make that kind of time to rest and reflect on the Lord.

If you're married, you also need that kind of time for your marriage. It does not have to be a trip. It could be a few hours. It does not have to be expensive. Husband, serve your wife by fulfilling her desire for experience.



## *Desire 6: Closeness*

When you think about things that belong together, several pairs come to mind: bread and butter, peanut butter and jelly, milk and cookies. Some of our favorite characters have that kind of connection: Batman and Robin, Ernie and Bert, or Mickey and Minnie. You cannot think of one without the other.

In Song of Solomon 8:1-2, the woman expresses her desire to have the closest of connections with her husband. She says,

Oh that you were like a brother to me who nursed at my mother's breasts! If I found you outside, I would kiss you, and none would

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despise me. I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother—she who used to teach me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, the juice of my pomegranate.

Now it is her turn to sound awkward. What is she getting at? She does not want to go back and live at the home of her parents. She wants her husband to know everything about her. She wants him to understand what it was like to grow up in her home. She wants him to know what her mother taught her and share all the things they enjoyed in their home.

Plus, in their society public displays of affection were inappropriate for couples but not for siblings. She wants to have the kind of closeness where no one would question a hug or a kiss out in the open. She wants every barrier to be removed.

What she really desires is the closeness that Adam and Eve experienced in the garden before they fell into sin. Genesis 2:24-25 says,

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

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Nothing stood between them, not even clothing. There was no sin or shame or secrets of any kind. But the sad truth is that we live in a fallen world, and relationships are difficult.

Though the woman in the Song expresses her desire for closeness, she recognizes the limitations. In verses 3 and 4 she says,

His left hand is under my head, and his right  
hand embraces me! I adjure you, O  
daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up  
or awaken love until it pleases.

She and her husband enjoyed times of physical intimacy, but she wanted something deeper. When she speaks to the daughters of Jerusalem here, I think she is asking them to remind her to be patient and realistic with her desire for closeness.

Husband, serve your wife by listening to her and opening up to her. Your marriage will never be as open as Adam and Eve were in Eden, but you can keep growing closer.

## *Conclusion*

The Song of Solomon has shown us these six desires. The man desired to see, to touch, and to be affirmed. The woman desired security, experience, and closeness. This list is not intended to be a definitive picture of gender differences. It simply serves as a starting point for thought and discussion about how a husband and a wife can serve each other. Every person is unique.

Marriage is not easy in a fallen world. Our natural inclination is not to serve, but to be selfish. In a selfish marriage, these differing desires become a source of deep frustration. But with the saving power of Christ at work in your life, you can follow his example of service. You can serve your spouse's desires, even if he or she ignores yours.

Are you following Jesus?" He came to save us both for eternity and for life here and now. But you will not experience his work in your life, until you begin to follow him as your Lord and Savior? If you have never done so, I invite you to begin that journey today. If you

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want to learn more about following him, I would encourage you to read Mark 10.

Whether married or not, if you are following Christ, then you are called to serve people. I challenge you to focus on serving this week. Think about the people you interact with. What can you do to help them and encourage them? If you're married, what could you do to serve your spouse?

May God help us serve with the mind of Christ.

### *Questions for Further Reflection*

1. What are some of the excuses we make for not having a servant mindset?
2. How does Jesus' example of service undermine our excuses?
3. What practical steps can you take to stay focused on serving?



## Chapter 6

# *Persevering in Marriage*

In 2016, people in the United States spent almost 16 billion dollars on bottled water. Of course, the water does not cost that much. We are paying for the disposable bottle. Most of us have access to clean tap water that is far cheaper. You can use a refillable bottle, but that seems like too much work. We like convenience.

I fear that attitude may influence how we think about marriage. Most couples go through good times and hard times. In those hard times, our culture of

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convenience tells us to give up. Pour all your time into work or some hobby, escape to some fantasy world, or go find some other relationship. A lot of people act like marriage is disposable. We know that we should persevere, but we often lack the motivation.

Why should we put forth the effort? The Song of Solomon helps us answer that question. Through the Song, the bride of Solomon has described how their relationship developed. Their passion for one another grew into a deep love. They experienced the joy of their wedding day and the challenge of learning to handle conflict and serve one another. As the Song concludes in verses 5-14, of chapter 8, it encourages us with five reasons to persevere in marriage. If you hope to marry someday, then these are also good reasons to be patient and not foolishly rush into a relationship.



## *Reason 1: Providence*

Every elementary school student learns the difference between a pencil and a pen. Ink is permanent, but with pencil you can erase your mistakes and write something different.

When a relationship is going well, couples are quick to acknowledge that they were brought together by divine providence, the sovereign plan of God. But when they encounter difficulties, they may be tempted to say that God has made a mistake. They want to erase the past and write a different story, but God does not use pencil. His providence gives us a reason to persevere.

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In Song of Solomon 8:5, the woman may be thinking along these lines. The daughters of Jerusalem speak first. They ask, “Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?” The woman identifies herself by speaking to her husband. She says, “Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in labor with you; there she who bore you was in labor.” She is the one who awakened her beloved.

Some take the woman’s words literally, saying that her husband was taking a nap. Others claim that she is speaking of arousing him sexually in the same place where he had been conceived. In that case, she might be alluding to having children of their own (another good reason for persevering in marriage!). But I think she is reflecting upon how their relationship began. She awakened his love. This apple tree may have been the spot where they first met, and she ties that life-shaping event into the whole direction of his life from birth. They were destined to be together.

Solomon often acknowledged divine providence in the Proverbs. In Proverbs 16:9, for instance, he said, “The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD

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establishes his steps.” Nothing happens outside of the sovereign will of God, and his plan includes our relationships. So, Proverbs 19:14 says, “House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.” God is involved in writing the details of our lives including who we marry.

So, how does the idea of providence encourage us? If you are married, it is not by mistake. Even if times are tough, trust that God is working to accomplish his good purpose in your life. If you are hoping to be married in the future, don't be impatient. Trust that God will lead you to the right person in his time.



## *Reason 2: Promise*

A strong fire consumes everything in its path. It can be destructive, but it can also give warmth and light. Romantic love has the same potential. When a couple pledges themselves to one another in a biblical marriage, they are promising a total commitment to a one flesh relationship. That promise encourages us to persevere.

In the first part of Song of Solomon 8:6, the woman urges her husband to remember this promise. She says, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm.” A seal was a sign of ownership. She wanted her

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ownership over him to influence all the thoughts of his heart, and all the actions of his arm.

The total commitment promised in marriage is inherent romantic love. In verses 6 and 7 she says,

for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.

Like death, love does not let go. It consumes like fire, but it also burns bright and warm. It is unquenchable and worth more than any fortune.

Her words here are profound and poetic, but is she making too much of love? Some translations of 1 Corinthians 13:4 specifically say that love is not jealous. But in that context, Paul was rebuking Christians for envying one another. Since marriage is the complete union of two lives, there is a legitimate kind of jealousy.

We find this jealousy reflected in the character of God himself. Deuteronomy 4:23-24 tells us that Moses taught the people of Israel,

Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you,

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and make a carved image, the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

God deserves all glory and honor, and the people of Israel pledged themselves to worship him in the Mosaic covenant. So, God's jealousy is entirely justified if his covenant people violate their relationship with him.

God specifically designed marriage to reflect his covenant relationship with his people. So, if we're tempted to be disinterested or unfaithful in any way, we need to remind ourselves of the full scope of the promise we have made. Couples should not be jealous in any paranoid, controlling sense. But they should think and act in ways that reflect their ownership of one another. If you are not married, then live your life in such a way that your actions now would not provoke someone to jealousy if you marry in the future. Persevere because of the promise.



### *Reason 3: Purity*

For some people, a fence is too confining. They want to remove all boundaries. They want to be able to go everywhere and see everything. But from another perspective, the same fence can provide protection and safety. We find the same disagreement in how people respond to biblical standards of sexual purity, but purity is another important reason to persevere in marriage.

In Song of Solomon 8:8-9, we hear from a new group of people. The woman recalls words that her brothers said when she was young. They said,

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We have a little sister, and she has no breasts.  
What shall we do for our sister on the day  
when she is spoken for? If she is a wall, we  
will build on her a battlement of silver, but if  
she is a door, we will enclose her with boards  
of cedar.

Their comparison of a wall to a door illustrates two ways she could have responded to the boundaries of sexual purity. She could have stood firm like a wall in her convictions, or she could easily open the door to temptation. If she stood her ground, they planned to adorn her in a way that would display her great worth and attract a fitting husband. But if she was too flirty, they planned to protect her and keep her from doing anything foolish.

The woman describes the outcome of her brothers' care for her in verse 10. She says, "I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers; then I was in his eyes as one who finds peace." With their encouragement, she stood firm in her convictions. When she reached physical maturity, she gave herself to her husband. There was no guilt or shame over past indiscretions. There was no fear that she might be unfaithful in the future. She had

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proven herself, so they experienced peace and wholeness in their marriage as God designed it to be.

The application of her example for those who are single is obvious. Be a wall. Persevere in standing firm and save yourself in case God gives you a spouse at some point in the future. If you have made poor choices, then seek God's forgiveness and resolve to follow his standards from this day forward.

But what about those who are married? God has designed marriage to preserve your purity. In 1 Corinthians 7:2, Paul said, "But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." Then in verse 5 he added,

Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

The ongoing pursuit of purity encourages couples to devote themselves to an active sexual relationship. Persevere for the sake of purity.



### *Reason 4: Power*

I grew up in a suburb of Los Angeles, so the closest agricultural areas were quite a distance from where I lived. I did not know anyone who was involved in farming. But in Michigan, I have come to know several people who own farmland. Even if agriculture is not their primary source of income, they have a personal connection to the land. There's a certain power that comes with that connection. They find satisfaction in being able to cultivate it and enjoy its produce.

The woman in the Song of Solomon knew something of that power. She speaks of it in verses 11-12 of chapter 8. She says,

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Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he let out the vineyard to keepers; each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver. My vineyard, my very own, is before me; you, O Solomon, may have the thousand, and the keepers of the fruit two hundred.

As I have mentioned previously in our study of this book, some people claim that the Song was written to rebuke Solomon for how he disobeyed God's commands and took hundreds of wives. Those who take that view claim that these verses use the picture of vineyards to compare Solomon's complicated harem to the simple devotion between the woman and her beloved. But the details given here make more sense if we take verse 11 as referring to a literal vineyard.

Solomon owned a vineyard, but he was not personally connected to it. The keepers paid him rent and kept some of the profit for themselves, but none of the parties involved enjoyed the power of that personal connection. The woman had a different connection with her vineyard. She calls it her very own.

The vineyard of the woman is probably a reference to her body. She made a similar connection back in chapter 1, verse 6. She said,

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Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because  
the sun has looked upon me. My mother's  
sons were angry with me; they made me  
keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard  
I have not kept!

She was concerned that her hard work in keeping a real vineyard, meant that she was not able to pamper herself like other women who had a more sheltered upbringing. In fact, she and her brothers may have been the keepers who managed Solomon's vineyard.

The point of her analogy here in chapter 8 is to assert that she is not a slave, or a hired worker. Solomon may be king, but she willingly shares her body with him by the power of her own choice. In that culture, her marriage would have been arranged by her family. She was also expected to submit to her husband, but she did not consider those circumstances burdensome. Her love for her husband was an expression of her own power and choice, and she would persevere by that same power.

From a larger theological perspective, however, we run into a problem with our power of choice. We are fallen people, prone to make sinful choices. We need an even greater power at work in our vineyards. Jesus

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used a similar picture to make this point in John 15:5. He said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” We need the life-giving power that comes through Jesus not just for marriage, but for everything in life. Only he can enable us to overcome our selfishness to show genuine love. Persevere because you have the power to do so in Christ.



### *Reason 5: Passion*

When you look at some creatures, you can tell that they were built to run. Dorcas gazelles in Israel have been clocked at speeds over 50 miles per hour. It would be sad to lock an animal like that away in a cage. In the same way, God created us to have deep, meaningful relationships. He did not design marriage to be a cage. It is not supposed to be boring and constraining. He created us to love passionately.

When God created the first man, Genesis 2:18 tells us, “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” But first, God gave the man the responsibility to

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name all the other creatures. He was showing the man that none of the creatures could fill that special role. The man must have begun to sense his aloneness, but finally God caused him to sleep, took one of his ribs, and fashioned it into the woman. Genesis 2:23 tells us that when God brought her to him, “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’” I cannot imagine that the man lacked any enthusiasm when he said those words. God created them and brought them together in a dramatic way to stir up a deep passion for one another.

The Song of Solomon fittingly concludes with the same passion that the couple showed early in their relationship. In verse 13 of chapter 8, the man says, “O you who dwell in the gardens, with companions listening for your voice; let me hear it.” He expressed the same desire back in chapter 2, verse 14. He wanted to hear her sweet voice.

The woman responds in verse 14 by saying, “Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices.” This was what she said in

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chapter 2, verse 17. She didn't want to be apart from him. She wanted him to hurry back.

Nothing more is said after this expression of the couple's passionate desire for one another. The Song of Solomon is like a piece of music that does not resolve, but leaves you hanging. It does not really end, because it is supposed to keep going. The couple is not supposed to give up or settle into a sterile relationship. The Song encourages couples to persevere in the pursuit of passion.

### *Conclusion*

Other reasons could be added to this list, but the Song of Solomon encourages us with these five reasons to persevere in marriage. Persevere because of providence. Couples are brought together in marriage by the will of God. Persevere because of promise. Marriage is a commitment of everything you are. Persevere because of purity. Couples can protect each other from temptation. Persevere because of power. With God's help, you have the power to choose to love through good and bad. Persevere because of passion. God created you to live in loving relationships.

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As we learned, the only way that we can rise above our sinful selfishness to persevere is by abiding in Christ. Do you have his power at work in your life? He is the source of strength you need for a fruitful marriage. If you do not have a vital connection with him, I encourage you to start abiding in him. Let his word abide in you. Read it. Believe it. Obey it. Ask him for the strength to show true selfless love. If you want to learn more about this kind of relationship with him, I would encourage you spend some time reflecting on John 15.

Our world is filled with temptation, so we all need to pursue purity. Are you guarding your thoughts? If you are single, are you saving your heart and body in case God gives you a spouse at some point? If you are married, are you doing all that you can to fulfill your spouse's desires? If you know someone who is struggling, would you pray and encourage them to persevere?

May God strengthen us with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.

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### *Questions for Further Reflection*

1. With what sorts of things have you demonstrated strong perseverance? What motivated you?
2. What are the biggest challenges you face in following God's design for marriage?
3. Which of these reasons are most encouraging to you? Why?



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Calvary Bible Church East is an independent, non-denominational, Bible church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, guided by a three-part vision. First, we seek to understand the Bible in order to live out its teaching as Spirit-filled worshippers of God and followers of Jesus Christ. Next, we seek to deepen our love for one another as the family of God. Finally, we seek to be actively engaged in our community in order to shine Christ's light through meeting pressing needs and communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ. For more information, visit us online at [CalvaryEast.com](http://CalvaryEast.com).



