

WHAT THE BIBLE
SAYS ABOUT

LOVE

MARRIAGE

& SEX

THE SONG OF
SOLOMON



DAVID
JEREMIAH



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Editorial and Design Services:
Mark Gilroy Creative, LLC with ThinkPen Design, Inc.

www.markgilroy.com
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Editors Rob Saggs, William Kruidenier

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*Turning
Point*[™]
with Dr. David Jeremiah

Contents

INTRODUCTION: THE BIBLE TELLS ME <i>WHAT?</i>	7
CHAPTER 1: DREAMING OF A PERFECT LOVE	17
CHAPTER 2: THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE	37
CHAPTER 3: LOVESICK AND LOVE-HEALTHY	59
CHAPTER 4: THE QUEST FOR THE PERFECT MATE	81
CHAPTER 5: DREAMING OF SECURITY	101
CHAPTER 6: THE WEDDING PLANNER	125
CHAPTER 7: WHAT GOD THINKS OF SEX	147
CHAPTER 8: LOVE AT LIFE SPEED	169
CHAPTER 9: REKINDLING THE FIRE	189
CHAPTER 10: THE ROMANTIC HUSBAND	213
CHAPTER 11: THE GREAT ESCAPE	235
CHAPTER 12: STAYING IN LOVE FOR LIFE	255
AFTERWORD	279

Introduction

The Bible Tells Me *What?*

While it seems no subject is off-limits in public conversation today, not that many years ago there were boundaries. Sex, religion, and politics were the big three that were reserved for private discussions—but not always for the right reasons. The Bible doesn't shy away from any topic that is common to human experience and neither should we. The difference between the Bible and our cultural communication is one word: context. The Bible puts every topic in its appropriate context, providing reasons and results from God's perspective.

Can you remember the first time you discovered there was sex in the Bible? More than one young or new Christian has been shocked while perusing the pages of the Old Testament book called Song of Solomon. It says next to nothing about God and seems way too racy to be included in a book about Him. And that shock points out a problem: We've allowed the world to hijack something beautiful and God-given and to turn it into something tawdry. In our reaction to what the world has done with sex and love, we have forgotten a

biblical truth: Sex and passionate, romantic love are God's ideas! And in the right setting (there's the context thing), romantic love between a husband and wife is highly charged, amazingly beautiful, and unapologetically physical.

In today's world, you or I might be embarrassed to have a love story like Solomon's—if we had written it about our own love life and broadcast it to the whole world in the Bible. But Solomon wasn't. There's not a thing in the Song of Solomon to be ashamed of. Indeed, you and I can learn a lot about human love and passion from the young king who not only knew how to romance his beloved but how to write about it as well.

That's why I love the Bible. It doesn't dress up for us; it wears the truth just the way we experience it in life. It deals with those topics we're afraid to talk about in public or put into prayer requests. I am so thankful that the Holy Spirit inspired the Bible rather than somebody's proper old great-great-great aunt who lived in Victorian England, as fine a soul as that great aunt might have been. If you or I had written the Bible, we might have taken great pains to make its characters look prim and proper—instead of human. The Bible pulls back the curtain in every area of life, whether sinful or graceful, and sets the stage for God's grace to come in and sanctify the act or correct it. And in Song of Solomon, we get the God-blessed record of marital love in all its glory. I'm glad the Bible is the original no-spin zone.

The fact is that people were created as sexual beings, and the Bible reveals that truth frankly. Throughout the Scriptures we are reminded that “male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). And in this short prose poem by Solomon, we get our most extended, gracious, and elegant discourse on how God views love, marriage, and sex between husband and wife.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

There are many common misconceptions about the biblical view of sex, love, and marriage. What God has wanted us to understand from the beginning is profoundly, breathtakingly beautiful. It was the apostle Paul, in the New Testament, who clearly delineated the relationship between earthly love and heavenly love. In Ephesians 5:22-23, he demonstrated that the bond between husband and wife is an earthly picture of a heavenly reality: the bond between Christ and His church. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loves His bride, the church. Can you imagine how lovely our marriages would be if every husband sought to love his wife as Christ loves His church? Can you imagine what a passionate, lovely place the church would be if we brought to it the devotion of a young married couple deeply committed to one another?

Marital love, then, is inherently spiritual, just as true Christian fellowship (and marriage is the pinnacle of Christian fellowship) is intensely passionate and committed. This book is based on Solomon's love poem to his betrothed. Therefore, it is about love, sex, and marriage—lovely gifts of God that bless us and glorify Him.

In teaching the Bible, we should try to say what God says without apology. But too often, as culture and tradition press their dictates upon us, we lose God's voice; we tone down or ramp up His words. For instance, the early church leaders took Paul's teaching about marriage from Ephesians to heart. They enshrined marriage as a spiritual sacrament that ennobles sexual intimacy between husband and wife, particularly for purposes of procreation. But during the later Protestant Reformation (sixteenth-century Europe) church leaders lost or misplaced the idea of marriage as a holy sacrament— though they saw its value for the procreation of families and as a hedge against immorality.

As a result, the church lost that elevated image of sex as a good gift of God, an ongoing symbol of the depth of joy reflecting Christ's powerful love for His church. People began to see marital sex as a matter of satisfying physical desires or procreation which were at best the simple baggage of being human. Sex in marriage became little more than a human means to an end; the notion of its divine heritage seemed to have been lost.

When our teaching about any subject loses its spiritual compass that means people begin to see that topic inadequately—as if there is *any* realm over which Christ is not Lord. Body, soul, mind, and spirit all have their proper place in His kingdom. But we've often treated sexuality so much as a challenge to overcome that many of those venerated as saints, or model Christians, have taken vows of celibacy. I don't point this out to denigrate the lives of those devoted men and women. It's simply to show how we've promoted the idea that sex is somehow an embarrassment to godliness rather than a reflection of it.

Sexuality has become a very confusing subject, laden with anxiety, for Christians today. Hebrews 13:4 captures the two-sided approach to the subject: "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge." In his powerful paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message*, Eugene Peterson puts that verse this way: "Honor marriage, and guard the sacredness of sexual intimacy between wife and husband. God draws a firm line against casual and illicit sex."¹

Here's our question: Have those two views (sacred and sinful) gotten equal time in church? Probably not. Most people I know would agree that it's the second part, the part about casual and illicit sex, with which we've been preoccupied. Preachers (myself included) have done our job proclaiming the dangers of misusing God's gift of sex, and rightfully so. But we've avoided saying all that should have been said about "the

sacredness of sexual intimacy between wife and husband.” You could say we have thrown out the baby of beautiful, marital sex with the bathwater of immoral, thoughtless sex. In our attempts to guard against the one, we have left people confused about the other.

Could it be that we’d have had to say less about part B if we had done a better job teaching part A? This book is my little effort to do a better job of teaching the sanctity of sexuality.

THE THOUSANDTH SONG

The passage you just read from Hebrews assures us that God blesses sexual love within marriage. And that’s not an isolated verse; this message is consistent throughout the Scriptures. Solomon himself wrote in Proverbs—again, in plain language that invites us to do likewise—about the basic goodness of sex:

*Let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice with the wife of your youth.
As a loving deer and a graceful doe,
Let her breasts satisfy you at all times;
And always be enraptured with her love.*
Proverbs 5:18-19

Lots of people who love the Book of Proverbs and have memorized many of its verses are surprised when they come across that passage. It’s so . . . well, plain! It’s how we might think, but never talk. Yet here’s the Bible saying out loud what we might only dare to dream about.

Let’s use basic common sense. God is the architect of everything, including sexual intimacy within marriage. It is at the very foundation of human design; where else could it have come from? He made it good, and He made it pleasing for us, and we should not try to cover up or

forget that fact. It's like looking at a sunset over the Rocky Mountains and trying to convince ourselves the view is ugly and unworthy. This is something God made, and to be frank about it, one of the most exciting gifts of all! Shame comes only in the misuse of the gift.

Why should we blush over this subject? God devoted a whole book of the Bible to present the context in which sexual love and romance find their fullest expression. That book is the one under our consideration, the Song of Solomon. And the first reason I'm writing this book is that I decided it was high time to add another voice to the few who have spoken out plainly and respectfully about this wonderful book. The Song of Solomon is part of the Bible—the same Bible that houses the Gospels, the Epistles of Paul, the Psalms, and every other inspired portion that we dearly love. It's time to stop the blushing and find the blessing.

The second reason for this book is that our institution of marriage, though endorsed by heaven, is being destroyed by society. You can see it as well as I can; just look around your neighborhood, your community. A 2008 Barna poll revealed that marriages within the church are faring no better than marriages outside it. One-third of the nearly four thousand adult Americans polled have been married and subsequently divorced. When evangelical Christians are grouped with non-evangelical Born Again Christians, their divorce rates mirror those in the general findings of the poll: thirty-two percent.² Both the public at large and committed Christians have the same divorce rate.

There's an intriguing little reference in 1 Kings 4:32. It tells us that Solomon wrote a total of one thousand and five songs. From that large field, he selected his chart-topper, his all-time greatest hit. This is why, in Song of Solomon 1:1, Solomon himself refers to this song as "Solomon's Song of Songs." Whatever he found to write about in those other one thousand and four, this love ballad is the one he felt to be his ultimate. More importantly, the Holy Spirit inspired it for all of eternity, intending for

hundreds of generations before you, and many yet to be born, to read its words. That makes it a number-one hit on my personal charts.

You might have noticed the variation in title. Is this the Song of Solomon or the Song of Songs? Truthfully, it's both. The Hebrew text of the first verse of the book reads, "The song of songs, which is Solomon's." "Song of Songs" was a Hebrew figure of speech (like Holy of Holies, King of Kings, or Lord of Lords found elsewhere in the Bible) which could also mean "the best of songs." So some English Bible translations take their cue from verse one and call the book Song of Songs. But others call it Song of Solomon because it is, after all, Solomon's song. Either title is justified.

In a previous book I pointed out how Solomon gathered his accumulated wisdom and distilled the best lessons he had learned about the meaning of life.³ Those lessons he wrote down near the end of his life in the book we know as Ecclesiastes. Song of Solomon, I believe, was written in his younger years when the passion of youth and the desire for love washed over his soul. Completing his literary trilogy is Proverbs—reflective of the most productive period of his life, his middle years as the wisest man on earth.

Readers of world literature have acknowledged Proverbs and Ecclesiastes to be classics on their subjects—practical wisdom and the meaning of life, respectively. And there is no reason for not reading Song of Solomon with the same expectation. All of Solomon's writings pay the diligent reader in spades. I hope that is your expectation as you get to know the world's most beautiful ode to the delights of love and marriage. It is surely the "best of songs" in that regard.

BUT ISN'T IT ALL A METAPHOR?

"Yes, yes," say some. "There is no doubt this is beautiful and inspired poetry. But you're missing the point. It's all symbolism! This isn't really

about sex, but an Old Testament prophetic poem about the relationship of Christ with His church.”

I understand that is what some say—that Song of Solomon is an Old Testament, metaphorical version of Ephesians 5:22-33, that it’s not about human love and marriage but about divine love and the union of Christ and His “bride,” the church. Various commentators have espoused this view of the book through the centuries. They’ve had a field day going over the imagery in all these verses and matching it up to New Testament principles. There’s something to be said for that, and I’ve read some wonderful suggestions about the nature of Christ’s love for His church based on Solomon’s love for his bride.

But I’m not prepared to embrace that view of the book myself—to de-sexualize the Song of Solomon. Our Scriptures work on many levels, but the presence of symbolism doesn’t overrule literal meaning. In other words, we *can* read the book as a symbolic poem about Christ, but we *should* primarily read it at face value: as a song of love—romantic and emotional and sexual—between husband and wife. We can read it as God’s benediction and blessing upon marital love—upon the joy we feel in finding and passionately nurturing the love of a lifetime.

Eugene Peterson has pointed out the two observations we all make as we read Solomon’s book. First, there is beautiful love poetry. Second, there is explicit sexual detail. It is critical that we see how love and sex are intertwined. We are tempted to “sanctify” love by speaking of it as if sex does not exist. Or we make the opposite mistake of stripping sex of its context of true love. We can no more do either than we can divide body and soul. Peterson concludes, “The Song proclaims an integrated wholeness that is at the center of Christian teaching on committed, wedded love for a world that seems to specialize in loveless sex. The Song is a convincing witness that men and women were created physically, emotionally, and spiritually to live in love.”⁴ (By the way, for this

volume I'm borrowing Peterson's convention of referring to Solomon's book as *The Song*. It's a convenient and pleasing shorthand.)

As always, I entirely place my trust in the Holy Spirit's power to apply these words to the specifics of your life. I must write for as many kinds of readers as possible. You could be at any stage on the love journey. It may be you're eagerly anticipating that ecstatic experience of first love. Or you could be dating, engaged, or a newlywed. You might be thriving in spite of, or merely surviving in the midst of, the tests of marital endurance. You could be in crisis or sitting amidst the rubble of a shattered relationship, praying for God's comfort and guidance. I cannot write to one specific experience, of course, but I know God's Spirit will apply *The Song* to your life and your heart in a way that is tailor-made for you.

So whether you are 19 or 91, male or female, curious or cultivated in love, let us all look to the same Lord, the one Source of all love and all wisdom, for growth through these stages and in these pages. My prayer is that you'll be as blessed in this reading as I've been in the writing. Once more, I lay down my pen in the realization that we serve a God whose love for us is so powerful, so profound that we can't even capture a glimmer of its totality for an instant. But in the vast array of His many gifts—marital, physical love among them—we grasp tangible signs of His infinite, depthless, and matchless affection for us.

By the time you've finished this study of *The Song*, I hope you'll be thinking, "If love on earth is this wonderful, what must God have planned for eternity?" May you get glimpses of His eternal love through knowing the gift of His love on earth.

- 1 Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 2198.
- 2 “New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released,” *The Barna Update*, 31 March 2008. www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=295, (accessed 31 March 2008.)
- 3 David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004).
- 4 Ibid, Peterson; 1182.

1

DREAMING OF A PERFECT LOVE

Song of Solomon 1:1-8

Here's how it works with love stories: Getting to know the characters makes all the difference.

Take the classic film *Gone With the Wind*. Much of that movie is about Scarlett O'Hara and the men in her life. But her love story wouldn't make much sense apart from its background, which happens to be the Deep South at the time of the American Civil War. Just as in the real world, even in the movies everyday life has a great impact on one's love life.

The Song of Solomon works along those lines. If we plunge right in and read the fervent words of devotion, we're initially taken aback. But when we know who these people are, the words begin to come to life. So let's meet the two protagonists in this romance.

First, of course, is Solomon, the lover. He is the second son of David and Bathsheba, the king of a nation at its historic peak of power. As a young man he asked God for wisdom, and His wish was granted. We also remember that it was Solomon who fulfilled his father's dream by

directing the building of Israel's first temple. He was the biblical author of one book of wise sayings, one book of wry reflections, and one passionate song of love. Solomon was a man of terrific wisdom and accomplishment, as well as one with significant flaws that, in the end, brought misfortune to his kingdom.

And the object of his Song? Let's go with tradition and give her the name of Shulamith. Over the years, Bible commentators have latched onto that name for her, based on her identification as "the Shulamite" in Chapter 1. The root word means "the perfect, the peaceful." Compared to Solomon, a dynamic historical figure, Shulamith remains in the shadows. We only know about her what we can gather from the meager scattering of clues in *The Song*.

We do know that she came from the village of Shunem, located in northeastern Israel, in the territory given to Issachar. She lived and worked among the vineyards there, her skin richly tanned in the manner of those who toil in the sun. We learn that she is Solomon's beloved. This book is a kind of poetic celebration of the couple's courtship, wedding, and even wedding night. It culminates in the later years of their marriage.

Our love story is set ten centuries before Christ. Solomon has already attained tremendous wealth and power, owning vineyards all over Israel. One day the young king happens to be in the vicinity of the Lebanon Mountains, the setting for one of his vineyards. He is there inspecting the vines when a young lady catches his eye. Against the backdrop of the green grapes and the blue sky she is a vision of loveliness, and Solomon is captivated. He knows he will return to these vines more frequently courting this beautiful girl who outshines all the women of Israel.

Inevitably the marriage proposal is made. Considering this is the Son of David offering his love, few women would hesitate a fraction of a

second before accepting. Shulamith shows herself to be thoughtful and virtuous by giving the matter some thought. Does she really love him? Can she, a country girl, be happy in the elevated palace of bustling Jerusalem? She concludes that the answer to both questions is yes, though the changes to her simple life will be staggering. Soon the happy couple is traveling to the holy city in an elegant wedding processional.

In the first chapter of the Song, Shulamith is in the midst of her wedding plans, but her heart is already longing for her groom. In lyric poetry, we read about her desire for Solomon, then the wedding, and its night of love. The details are there, captured elegantly rather than crassly. This comprises the first half—we might say the first act—of the Song of Solomon. Act II is all about the joy and tribulation of marriage itself.

Isn't that just the way love is for you and me? Love is terrific, but love is always tested.

INSIDE THE SONG

I don't know how much lyric poetry you've read lately. You might have noticed that genre of writing isn't usually found on the bestseller list. So for most of us, it is necessary to become acclimated to the style of the Song of Solomon. It's not like reading Old Testament history, a Gospel, or an epistle of Paul. It's not even quite like reading a psalm penned by Solomon's father.

The Song of Solomon is a unique hybrid—it combines the elements of a play, a poem, and a song. It is written to be sung, but there is a story being told—something like “John Brown's Body” or some other narrative ballad from our early American heritage. There are different characters who sing their parts—something like a Broadway musical, really. There is figurative and symbolic language, as in the poetry of Shakespeare or Robert Frost. Since the original language was Hebrew,

you won't find the rhyme or rhythm you might expect in our own native poetry.

Poetry, play, and song are fused in the Spirit-inspired creativity of Solomon. We also need to get acclimated to the chronology of the story—or the lack thereof. Just as the four Gospels often arrange the stories of Jesus in slightly different order, the action here is not necessarily presented in strict order of occurrence. Think of it as something like a movie with flashbacks as a character recalls the past. At times we may be a little impatient to know what happened when, but that's part of the charm of the Song of Solomon. The lovers are walking a meandering garden path through the history of their relationship, and it is left for us to slowly piece together the picture.

The lovers are not quite alone on that path. The “Daughters of Jerusalem” function in a tradition we often refer to as a “Greek chorus.” That is, they're not the principle characters, but they come to the forefront to comment on the action at transitional moments. Sometimes we have to guess who is speaking. Imagine that Solomon and Shulamith are recalling what others have said, and have sprinkled these lines throughout their reminiscences. Don't we all do this when we talk to our spouses? “Solomon, listen to what the other women are saying about us.”

To help readers determine who is speaking in *The Song*, the editors of some Bibles have added headings in the text to identify the speaker. These can be helpful, but keep in mind that they were appended by modern Bible translators, not the Holy Spirit. It's the words of the original text that are inspired, not the headings on which all may not agree.

The Song of Solomon contains eight chapters in our English Bible. Those eight chapters contain fifteen reflections that make up the Song of Solomon. Think of these as fifteen pages from the scrapbook of a woman's love journey, fifteen short movements of a romantic symphony.

I have combined several of the shorter movements, resulting in twelve chapters for this book.

This is a book about love, romance, marriage, and sexual intimacy. The dialogue between Solomon and the Shulamith and the mutual love they express for one another provides a lesson for us all; and it is by absorbing the spirit of their loving relationship that our lives can be changed.

THE TRUTH ABOUT SOLOMON

What should every couple do when they become “serious” about a future together? They should sit down and be honest about their individual pasts. We need to do that with Solomon, whose biography we have already looked at in a general way.

Let’s not whitewash Solomon’s track record, particularly since this is a book about marital love. If you know much about Solomon, you know that marital fidelity wasn’t his strong suit. He is a man who began his career in sheer brilliance. He took on the family business, so to speak, and made it a world leader. David had been a wildly popular king, and under Solomon the nation became an empire.

If Solomon exceeded his father’s accomplishments, he also exceeded his mistakes. We are told that “when Solomon was old . . . his heart was not loyal to the LORD His God” (1 Kings 11:4). Like his father David, he had a wandering eye and a strong appetite for pleasure. Solomon was especially attracted to foreign women, a vice against which God had warned him. Why? In a time of unprecedented commercial traffic with other nations, the great danger was in the ideas that might drift in along with goods, services, and relationships. False gods were (and are) the greatest danger for God’s people. Very gradually, Solomon’s vices overcame his virtues and he disobeyed his Lord’s commandment about spiritual purity as he built

a household of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. He pursued not only the women but the gods they served.

Knowing these things, it's reasonable to ask: What can Solomon teach us about the sanctity of the marriage bond; about purity and fidelity? Hasn't he disqualified himself from that discussion? Are we to listen to lessons on monogamy from a man with a thousand women?

Think about the Solomon we meet in Ecclesiastes, the older and sadder, but wiser, man who looks ruefully on the vanity of his mistakes. If we could interview him today, I believe he would come clean about his terrible disobedience, particularly in the way his nation suffered for it. He strayed from the path, but it remains true that he once walked that path with sincere devotion. He walked it with a heart of genuine, selfless commitment. His eventual fall remains as a cautionary lesson for us, but in his best moments he remains a worthy teacher. We also have this divine perspective from the Book of Nehemiah: "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God" (Nehemiah 13:26).

Let's remember that David committed a tragic sin with Bathsheba—which doesn't blacken the faith and courage of his earlier confrontation with Goliath. Then there is Moses, whose late act of spiritual arrogance was a disappointment to God; yet his body of work stands, too. I could go on to add your name and mine—none of us perfect, all of us capable of living as a model of obedience if we only submit to walk in the Spirit. In His grace, our Lord bears with our weaknesses. Let us learn from Solomon, in his humanity—negative and positive alike.

DREAM LOVER

What is the key word in the first chapter of *The Song*? It is *love*. Some form of that four-letter word recurs ten times. And why not? These first words are about first love.

It happens to the best of us, doesn't it? Usually in the age of adolescence we "fall in love" for the first time and it brings the giddiest of life's emotions. We do and say things we might not consider at any other time. For those of us who observe first-time lovers, it can be a bit amusing and delightful to behold. (But we shouldn't forget we were once those starry-eyed lovers ourselves, and maybe still are.)

Look at the first words of Shulamith: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is better than wine" (1:1). The curtain has barely opened and already the passion is pouring forth. Welcome to the Song of Solomon!

The bride-in-waiting doesn't shyly request a polite peck on the cheek. She desires plural kisses right on the mouth. Have you ever thought about a kiss? It's the blending of two senses, taste and touch; stimulating stuff. For Shulamith, the thought of Solomon's kisses is more intoxicating than wine.

One of those landmarks that everyone remembers is the first romantic kiss. For each it is a different experience, but if you and I compared notes we would use words like *awkward*, *tentative*, *clumsy*, and *thrilling*—but always *unforgettable*. What we lack in skill, we make up for in sheer emotional electricity.

Little brothers, of course, always seem to be lurking somewhere to spy on the big moment. I heard about a boy who overheard his big sister's cell phone conversation with a friend. Sis said she was expecting her boyfriend to kiss her for the first time on that night's date. At the proper time, little brother climbed the branches of an oak tree near the front door. When the boyfriend walked his sister to the door, he awkwardly asked for a good night kiss. The girl, coming from a devout family, said she wanted to pray first. With just a tad too much drama, she looked into the sky and said, "Father, Father up above, should I kiss the one I love?" To which an answer seemed to come from the branches:

“Sister, sister down below, pucker up and let it go!” Strange and memorable things happen in such moments.

Marriage counselors tell us that kissing is highly underrated. It’s the sign of a healthy, romantic marriage. Even more than sex, tender, meaningful kisses are one of the first things to disappear when spouses aren’t getting along. Remember this: A kiss is still a kiss, and it still says, “I love you.”

Shulamith dreams about expressing love, but she also dreams of experiencing love. The kiss is only the appetizer to the meal of a lifetime. Real love is more than a moment of passion; it is the most comprehensive and inclusive emotion known to man. It may be expressed in a kiss, but Shulamith suggests that love is expressed in several other ways. Let’s look at some of them.

THE NOSE KNOWS

Shulamith loves Solomon for his self-respect. Doesn’t that always make people more attractive? In verse 3, Shulamith begins her sentence, “Because of the fragrance of your good ointments.” She simply refers to Solomon’s care in personal grooming. We take that for granted in our culture, but in other places and times the issue has been more significant. In the Israel of three thousand years ago, water and washing weren’t readily available. Fresh water was not always accessible and there was no indoor plumbing. Your daily bath or shower would have been far less than daily in Solomon’s time. Fragrance came through perfumed ointments (often used to camouflage body odor between bathing). Shulamith is telling us that Solomon’s sweet fragrance stays with her.

There will be many lessons in *The Song* that are difficult to apply in modern terms but this matter of fragrance is not one of them. Men generally think of women as investing “too much time” in their hair,

clothes, fragrance—the whole appearance thing. But if Solomon was here, he would tell us men that we ought to pay a bit more attention to sensory things like fragrance. As I counsel with grieving spouses, I often hear about how the lingering fragrance of the absent partner is a poignant reminder of their loved one. A man will encounter her scent among the clothing she has left behind. A woman will climb into his car and it will feel as if he were there not five minutes ago.

When my wife is away from home on a trip, I struggle with her absence. I feel it most when I roll over in bed at night and sniff the fragrance of her hair on her pillow. The scent, of course, is a very pleasant one to me, but it underlines her absence. A man's favorite cologne, worn through the years, can become a powerful stimulus, evoking instant memories in the mind of the one who loves him—just as it did for Shulamith.

THE NAME ENNOBLES

But there is another fragrance that has captured her senses—this time, a figurative one. Shulamith continues, “Your name is ointment poured forth; therefore the virgins love you” (verse 3).

Solomon's grooming was evidence of self-respect; the fragrance of his good name was evidence of others' respect. His fiancée heard the deference and honor with which others treated his name, and it made the word *Solomon* even sweeter to her ear. We've spoken of the senses of taste and touch in the kiss, and of smell in the fragrance. This is the delight of the ear simply to hear her beloved's name and to notice its nobility among others.

Interestingly, it was another young lover who we recall asking, “What's in a name?”—Juliet, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The two star-crossed lovers agreed that there was nothing of importance in their families' names. But in the Bible, there is much in a name. Names had

important meanings, given at birth and maintained through thoughtful living. *Shulamith* had connotations of peace and perfection—goals for which to strive. *Solomon* comes from a similar root and has the same associations. (Note that both *Solomon* and *Shulamith* have the same first three consonants, *s-l-m*, as Hebrew *shalom*, the word for peace.)

We all have literal names and often figurative names that become how we are known to others—our reputation, if you will. Think of names that represent *carte blanche* in American society, such as Rockefeller, Kennedy, or Vanderbilt. Names can be polished or blackened by the behavior of those who bear them. In Solomon's case, his father David brought a royal pedigree to what was already a good tribal reputation throughout Israel. Jesus Himself would come to bear the honor of the "House of David"—even being known as "Son of David." Names can therefore reach even toward eternity.

Shulamith realized that the sound of *Solomon* was poetry in her hearing, but its ultimate credibility came from the honor it earned more objectively in society. The bride observed that even the young women loved Solomon, increasing her joy that Jerusalem's most eligible bachelor would select her.

Out of deep respect flowed deep love. Throughout this opening of The Song we see how love is built upon this crucial building block of respect. It begins with a man's self-respect, in as small a detail as his grooming; it continues through the evidence of his good name. Respect remains at the very center of a marriage, and it must always be a street that runs two ways. It comes as no surprise that the apostle Paul's admonition to wives is that they "respect" their husband (Ephesians 5:33).

Paige Patterson, President of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, is a faithful student of the Word of God. He observes that a key theme of the Song of Solomon is introduced here: that sexual

intimacy does not emerge from a vacuum. It is bound up in several other factors, the first of which is admiration. Shulamith's adoration of Solomon is reflected in the way she cherishes his name for its sound and its social esteem. These help to flame her love into passion.¹

Again we realize the foolishness of our world's attempts to separate sex from love as if there can be true and genuine passion apart from soulful intimacy in God's blueprint. Sex doesn't begin in the bedroom or even with a dozen roses. It begins in quiet observations of things like respect, integrity, and character. A wisely observant young lady watches to see how her date treats: the server at a restaurant, or the salesman at the door—or most importantly, his own mother. She watches how he behaves in traffic and what kind of person he is when he thinks no one is looking. Most of all, she looks for his respectful regard of herself. And it works the other way, too.

THE NEED NOURISHES

“Draw me away!” whispers Shulamith in her reverie. “We will run after you. The king has brought me into his chambers. We will be glad and rejoice in you. We will remember your love more than wine. Rightly do they love you” (1:4). Thinking of all these things, including how Solomon is admired by other young women, she can only sigh and wish he would come riding up in a golden chariot to whisk her away forever.

Romantic love expresses itself as an aching need for the beloved. No one else in all the world will do. We glory in who the person is and enjoy the world's shared admiration for him or her. But most of all, we adore what the two of us are together. We *need* to be with one another, to be nourished by one another.

These are the dreams from a young woman's heart, the beginning of the greatest romantic love song ever written. Shulamith dreams of a man whose self-esteem shows in his self-care, whose good name is

fragrant among people of repute, and in whose presence life simply feels the best it can possibly feel. If you're reading this book as a single adult, I hope the wisdom of this young woman speaks to you across three thousand years of time. Contemporary television and checkout-lane magazines will never give you this kind of sound advice. Heed the truth of *The Song* only if you want to build a marriage to last.

And yet these are dreams. In good time, love has a way of bringing us into the real world, doesn't it? Reveries are nice, because we can create our own perfect world within them. The challenge is to make those dreams come true. Beginning in verse five of this first chapter, Shulamith steps out of her dream and begins to contemplate reality.

REAL WORLD LOOKS

The heart's infatuation focuses on the beloved. Then, of course, comes the moment of self-doubt, usually involving a rueful glance in a mirror.

Have you noticed how people who seem to have it all find ways to devalue their "Perfect 10" score? We can be quite certain Shulamith was no wallflower, but notice the way she frets over her reflection in verses 5-6: "I am dark, but lovely, O Daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not look upon me, because I am dark, because the sun has tanned me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept."

Don't you understand her timidity about moving into a new sphere with different standards? Solomon represents life in the fast lane compared to a simple country village. She compares her ruddy complexion to the young women of Jerusalem and wonders again how Solomon could have chosen her. Pale skin was highly valued, a sign of wealth and luxury protected from the sun that vineyards require. She can imagine the other women whispering about her deep tan. How can she

fit in when her coloring is so different? She regrets the way her brothers have pushed her out to the fields where her skin was exposed to the Middle Eastern sun.

Yes, Solomon has already spoken. Yes, it was in the fields that he first noticed and loved her. But self-doubt can be irrational. *Will his heart stay constant to someone whose appearance is so different from the usual?* This is a young woman in love, desperately in love. We have all felt as she does.

Even so, hear the words offered almost defiantly to the women of Jerusalem in her imagination: “I am dark, *but I am lovely.*” At the rim of self-doubt, Shulamith reaches back for the assurance of rational reassurance. Dark skin and beauty are in no way incompatible. *I am lovely.* There is no conceit, no vanity in appreciating God’s good work in making us. As a matter of fact, we should all see His beauty in ourselves. There is nothing quite so clearly insincere as false modesty. This isn’t to say we should be boastful or obsessive about our appearance, but we should regard it as God’s work and take pleasure in it.

Just as Solomon has a strong self-regard, we see the same in Shulamith. If she were to give in to poor self-esteem here, it would have negative repercussions on this new relationship. We need to learn to love ourselves before we can fully love each other. Shulamith is comfortable in her own skin. The question is: Are we?

REAL WORLD RESPONSIBILITY

Real world appearance, of course, comes from real world responsibility. It’s important for us to care for our health and our personal presentation. At the end of verse six, Shulamith says: “They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept.” What exactly is she talking about?

You’ll remember that vineyards are a crucial point of reference in Shulamith’s world. She will use them as metaphors frequently in The

Song, and the meanings will shift according to her subject. The context always gives the clue. Here she refers to her own body. Paraphrase: “I cared for my workplace, but I didn’t care for me.”

The vineyard in which she labored was a beautiful place, a sunny place, one that required a good bit of maintenance, one that produced fine fruit in the way that a young woman would look forward to giving birth. The analogy is an apt one. Yet even with her God-given beauty, she hadn’t the luxury of the “maintenance” her own body needed. She would have realized it as she looked upon the women of Solomon’s palatial world: immaculately clothed, perfumed with the most exotic fragrances, their hair gloriously arranged, their skin not bronzed by the sun. Shulamith sees it all, yet no pity parties are in order. We realize from the tone of this passage that she is the kind who steps up to personal responsibility. She will adapt to the new expectations of a princess.

This issue of physical appearance is another confused one for Christians. Early in my ministry, many evangelical churches could be astonishingly legalistic about what women should or should not wear to church. Some were vigilant to make sure that if any lipstick was worn, it wasn’t brighter than modern lip gloss—it had a shine but no real color. And rouge? We would have to squint to see it. Conservative churchgoers tolerated “painted women” as well as they did the idea of drums in church. Times change, and as long as we can reasonably see that we’re not violating scriptural standards, we have some room to change with the times. Our bodies are like a tasteful frame surrounding a beautiful painting. The frame can detract from the painting by being either shabby or gaudy. And we can draw attention to ourselves and away from Christ by being unkempt or unattractive on the one hand, or too extravagant on the other. Based on the principles in 1 Peter 3:1-6, I believe the apostle would have us to be “appropriate” in appearance—without setting rules which long to be broken. Both Peter and the Old

Testament prophet Samuel call us to give the most attention to the hidden person of the heart (1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Peter 3:4).

Appearance counts. Shulamith knows it, and she wants to be all that she can be for the sake of pleasing her man. The Bible never counsels us to accept mediocrity in anything, but to do everything as to the Lord, including caring for our physical appearance. And it warns us against the folly of comparing ourselves with others (2 Corinthians 10:2). If God is satisfied with our appearance—both physical and in terms of adornment—then we should be as well.

REAL WORLD MATURITY

But there will be other demands on Shulamith. She and Solomon must make their relationship work in a real world with real people—many of whom will stake their own claims on the time of Solomon, who is an important national figure. Shulamith will care for her looks. She will attempt to be all that she can be for the good of the marriage. But sometimes her husband simply won't be present. Like many young wives, she will have to adapt to a lifestyle that often finds her beloved out of reach.

In the seventh verse she confronts this fact. She says: "Tell me, O you whom I love, where you feed your flock, where you make it rest at noon. For why should I be as one who veils herself by the flocks of your companions?"

We'll get to that strange "veil" reference shortly. But let's notice what is really under discussion. As these words are spoken, Solomon is away. He could be involved in any number of royal activities; he isn't free to wander the vineyards of Israel at leisure. Solomon is a type of shepherd, guiding a nation of "sheep." Shulamith wonders why she must wander alongside his flocks, craving a little attention. I need not point out that these thoughts have a very contemporary ring for us. In any

time, any place, it is a high-wire balancing act to keep work and family in their proper ratios. Spouses and children are asked to understand, but employers should not abuse the power of being the check-signer: If our families suffer, our society suffers.

Now about that veil: In ancient times, brides wore a veil until the bridegroom removed it in the bridal chamber. In public, veils were worn only by women of ill repute—loose women, prostitutes. They wandered alongside the “shepherds” who might be walking along the avenue going about their work. Shulamith is saying, “You are my man. There is no one else for me but you. Come and remove this veil, free me from following on the heels of your office entourage, and let’s be man and wife.” It’s a touching, plaintive sigh of a woman in love who knows she must make a sacrifice.

This section closes with a very interesting comment from the supporting chorus—the women of the court. As they take the stage of our ancient Broadway musical they hit a sour note. In verse eight, they answer the question Shulamith has just asked, namely, “My love, where do you feed your flocks? Where are you right now?”

No one asked them, but the ladies answer anyway: “If you do not know O fairest among women, follow in the footsteps of the flock, and feed your little goats beside the shepherds’ tents” (verse 8). Did you know there was cattiness in the Bible? This may be the first instance of it that I’ve yet found. Do we detect a note of jealousy? They’re saying, “Have you happened to notice that you’re marrying a world leader, girlfriend? Get used to the sheep or stay out of the pasture. I think I hear your goats calling you!” Or as they might say in small town America, “If you can’t run with the big dogs, stay under the porch.”

Even a love story has these petty moments, serving the purpose of showing Shulamith’s virtue by contrast. Sadly, there are always those who can’t tolerate the supreme happiness and good fortune of others.

SMART LOVE

Let's close this chapter with five observations on love and marriage. If we can get these facts straight, we will be smart about love instead of smarting from it.

You and I Are Wired for Love and Marriage. It's simply in our DNA. Why is it that members of the human race, in all countries, all eras, and all situations reach a certain age and begin to seek a mate? Why is that such a given that we take it completely for granted? Easy. It is because God made us that way. It's a kind of pleasant wake-up call deep inside us, designed to ring at the right time. On the second page of your Bible you'll find these words: "And the LORD God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him'" (Genesis 2:18). The desire for love and marriage is God-given. He set it lovingly within our hearts amidst many other thoughtful gifts.

Love Is a Full Body Experience. Intimacy is carefully crafted by God to take in the spiritual, emotional, and physical realms of the human experience. In most cases it begins as a physical attraction for us. Time proves to us that this initial bodily impulse is a very small part of the total package. Solomon's Song is going to teach us that everything about us is bound up in our love—and love will change everything about us. That's why it is so powerful in our lives. Intimacy includes sexuality, but it is so much more. Shulamith noticed the fragrance of Solomon's grooming, and then she noticed the fragrance of his popularity. She loved her man with heart, mind, and soul. Love begins with the obvious, physical things and continues to plumb greater depths as long as we share and nurture our relationship. It remains a delightful, profound mystery, but one that educates us in so many ways.

The Marriage Decision Requires Solid Thinking. If you happen to be an unmarried reader, be prepared for that moment when you fall head over heels and want to elope overnight after your first date. Emotions can cloud the intellect. This is one of life's most urgent decisions, one which can bring you incredible joy or unendurable misery. You want to give it some thought, my friend. Shulamith, in these early verses, is doing that. She is still gathering information, pondering, sending her mind into the future and the distance of Jerusalem, considering all the changes that this decision will bring. It is not wrong to be coolly realistic about the secondary considerations that come with hitching one's wagon to that of another. Are you willing to travel where that other wagon takes you?

In premarital counseling, I'm always startled by how many critical issues have not been broached by engaged couples. Will there be children? How many? Who will handle the money? The bride and groom have often had more discussion about the china pattern than they have about the issues that will in large part determine the quality of their relationship.

Looks Shouldn't Be Ignored or Obsessed Over. Like most things, the issue of physical appearance must take its proper place. Some attempt to keep it as the central issue of a relationship, and this is wrong. Others behave just as wrongly, as if they can let themselves go the moment the honeymoon is over. We've seen some mention of physical attributes in *The Song*, and we'll see more and more graphic ones. Some Christians have the misperception that it's somehow "unspiritual" to attend to the body rather than merely to the soul. The man in his fine suit, the woman with fashionable cosmetics—these must be shallow believers, or so goes the myth.

Yes, it's true that in great marriages we see each other through loving eyes, and we're compassionate about the aging process that impacts us both. But when we make little or no effort to "keep up appearances," what message is being sent to the mate? "I don't care how I look for you." By extension, "I don't care very deeply for you."

I don't particularly enjoy the extra effort of rising early in the morning to go to the gym. But I also don't enjoy the thought of my wife being married to an unattractive old man. I'm working out to keep her husband as well-preserved as possible. I'm working hard on that guy. My personal battles with cancer helped me understand the sheer, often unappreciated gift of optimal physical health. My body is His temple, and it will receive care in accordance with that. Time will take its toll, but that doesn't mean I have to surrender and contribute to the damage.

I am living to maintain the perspective of Job 5:26: "You shall come to the grave at a full age, as a sheaf of grain ripens in its season."

The Fundamental Things Apply. This book is about The Song of Solomon, but you and I realize the real goal is to help Christian couples build strong marriages. It's worth mentioning the basics—God's essentials—before we move on.

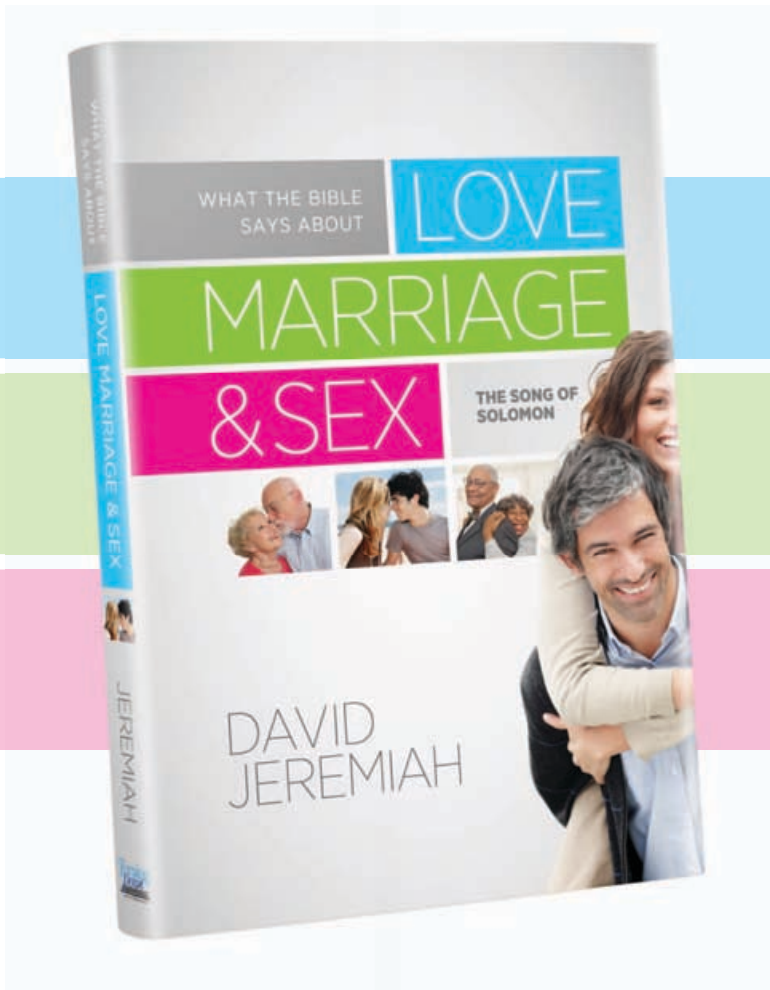
First, if you are considering marriage, realize that the Bible forbids Christians from uniting with non-believers (2 Corinthians 6:14). Both God's Word and good common sense give you all the reason you need. But what if you're already married to a non-believing spouse? Philippians 4:11 tells you to stay right where you are, and pray for your spouse. Be the very best mate that you can be, and with God's grace and power your partner may yet come to faith. (See 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.)

And what about you, my friend? If this book has fallen into your hands, you could be realizing just about now that you don't possess the faith we're discussing. The greatest gift you could give yourself, your

mate, and your little piece of the world is to find a love deeper than all others: a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. You'll never be a true soul-mate with another human being until your soul finds its home in Him. No, you won't find every human problem solved. It won't immediately cure a bad marriage or the problem of loneliness. But you will begin the process of being transformed toward the destination of an entirely new creature. All the resources of heaven will be available to you, and you will know that the rest of this life, and the one beyond, is a joyful road toward ultimate love, peace, and purpose.

Human love is better than anything in this world with one exception: God's love. His love is outrageously wonderful—precious beyond value, yet totally free. No other words in this book will be more important for you to understand. ◆

1 Paige Patterson, *Song of Solomon* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), 34.



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