

A SONG OF JOY: SEXUAL INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE

C. J. Mahaney

It was his magnum opus, the best and most important work he had ever conceived. In his lifetime, this prolific and gifted composer would write more than a thousand songs and hymns. Raised a prince, the son of a legendary king, and now a great king himself, he would be esteemed—by no less an authority than the very Word of God—as the wisest man who had ever lived. Now, this man of unsurpassed wisdom and exceptional creativity had completed his greatest song, a song above every song he had ever written or ever would write. King Solomon finished the final manuscript, set down his pen, and reviewed with satisfaction the fitting title: “Song of Songs.”

It was about sex.

It was, more specifically, an explicit and unblushing celebration of sexual relations under the covenant of marriage, of unbridled, uninhibited, joyous immersion in passionate acts of physical love between a husband and wife. And one day, the lyrics to this song would be counted among the perfect and infallible words of Scripture, inerrantly inspired by the Holy Spirit and intended by God as a primary source of guidance for mankind until the return of the Son.

INTERPRETING THE SONG

Sincere Christians, many of them far more mature and knowledgeable than I, may hold a different interpretation of this book. They may understand it to be primarily, if not exclusively, an allegory or typology of the relationship between Christ and the church, or of Christ and the soul of the individual believer. Before proceeding, it seems appropriate for me to clarify my perspective and its rationale.

As may already be apparent, I take the Song of Songs at face value. A plain reading of the book indicates to me that it is about two human beings: a man and a woman. I believe that, in the inspiration of this book, the Holy Spirit had in view the relationship between a husband and wife. This book celebrates and teaches about romance and the gift of sex. At no point does Scripture suggest to me that an alternative interpretation of Solomon's Song is necessary or preferable. I do insist, of course, on limiting the application of this celebration of human sexuality to heterosexual marriage, but that is simply to observe the full and clear counsel of Scripture on the subject.

Perhaps the allegorical view is adopted by some because of the explicit content of Solomon's Song. Such a reaction may be rooted in the belief that sex, even in the context of marriage, has been influenced by the Fall and is thus to be merely tolerated rather than celebrated. I don't see that position in the Bible. Indeed, several passages elsewhere in Scripture plainly celebrate marital relations as a source of legitimate godly joy and satisfaction.

Moreover, the Song of Songs is suffused with erotic content between this man and woman, but there is no suggestion in Scripture that the relationship between God and humans is ever to be understood as having an erotic component. ("God is Spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" [John 4:24, NIV].) Although the marriage between Christ and His Bride will be many unimaginably wonderful things, it will not be sexual as we understand the term. Extraordinarily and supernaturally intimate. Infinitely rewarding and fulfilling. But not physically erotic. Physical eroticism, while a wonderful gift from God when rightly enjoyed, is a gift of lim-

ited duration. It is a gift to married couples, to be enjoyed for as long as they both shall live.

I don't believe the Song of Solomon is allegory or typology. I don't believe it is drama. I do not believe it is history, or a description of Solomon's experience. I agree with Tom Gledhill's perspective: "The two lovers are Everyman and Everywoman and have nothing to do with Solomon."¹

The Song of Songs is unique: an entire book of the Bible devoted to the celebration of romance and sexual love within marriage. Lloyd Carr has written, "It comes to us in this world of sin, where lust and passion are on every hand, where fierce temptations assail us and try to turn us aside from the God-given standard of marriage. And it reminds us, in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble true love is."² Elsewhere he notes, "The lover and the beloved are just ordinary people."³ That's encouraging. The Song is about us, about every husband and wife. It can speak to us, and in doing so make a dramatic difference in our lives. Let's look now, honestly and joyfully, at how God chose to elaborate in His holy Word on the gift of sexual relations.

BEYOND SWEET NOTHINGS: A DUET IN THE KEY OF ROMANCE

Even a casual reader of the Song of Songs is struck by the words and deeds of pure and passionate romance that adorn nearly every verse. I believe genuine romance, such as we find modeled here, is meant to be a growing reality within marriage, not a dimming memory. Husbands, it is our privilege, joy, and God-given responsibility to romance our wives—really romance our wives. As we look to this Song for guidance, we see that romance involves, at a minimum, communication and creativity.

Husbands: Verse One. This book is filled with verbal expressions of love between the lovers. The communication described in the Song of Songs is, quite simply, erotic from start to finish. This is neither idle chit-chat nor talking about daily practicalities like kids, carpools, and church. This is highly intentional, provocative language, whose purpose is to arouse romantic passion, to inflame, slowly and purposefully, all the while honoring and blessing one's spouse. It's hot stuff!

This approach, which would be divinely forbidden, scandalous, and deeply shameful in any other context, is encouraged and esteemed within marriage by Holy Scripture.

Duane Garrett writes of the lovers in the Song:

They relish their pleasure in each other not only with physical action, but with carefully composed words. Love is, above all, a matter of the mind and heart and should be declared. The lesson for the reader is that he or she needs to speak often and openly of his or her joy in the beloved, the spouse. This is, for many lovers, a far more embarrassing revelation of the self than anything that is done with the body. But it is precisely here that the biblical ideal of love is present—in the uniting of the bodies and hearts of the husband and wife in a bond that is as strong as death. Many homes would be happier if men and women would simply speak of their love for one another a little more often.⁴

Indeed, articulate and carefully composed words of passion are modeled throughout the Song of Songs. Much of it, of course, is couched in the language of Near Eastern poetry, the idioms of which can seem foreign to us, even grotesque. But behind those decidedly non-Western turns of phrase there is wisdom and beauty.

“Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim. Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus” (7:4, NIV). Now, gentlemen, by all means do try this sort of thing at home—just don’t use these exact phrases. Your wife is not likely to interpret direct quotes of this passage as complimentary, much less arousing of the kind of passions you had in mind. But what’s being expressed here is, in fact, very positive. He is telling her that her nose is lovely and perfectly suited to her, that it ideally complements the rest of her face. In the cultural context in which Solomon wrote, these architectural allusions were, without question, tender and heartfelt expressions of deep admiration for her physical beauty. And that is how they would have been received.

But note this well. Throughout the passages in which one lover describes the body of the other—for, as we shall see, the woman also

compliments her man in no uncertain terms—there is both beauty and brilliance. In these phrases, the most private emotions are expressed regarding the most intimate parts of a spouse’s body. Above all, they are expressed appropriately, romantically, tastefully, and descriptively. There is in the Song of Songs the complete absence of any medical language, crudeness, or profanity. Every word is tender and sensual, and carefully composed to produce appropriate and passionate arousal.

The man speaks to his beloved: “I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh. Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with strings of jewels. We will make you earrings of gold, studded with silver” (1:9-11, NIV). Notice how he begins: “My darling.” He then moves on to an analogy that Westerners can thoroughly misconstrue. In commenting on the word “mare,” one writer suggests that the woman must have had very large hips, suitable for childbearing. Another indicates she is no doubt a fast runner! But more accomplished scholarship reveals the beauty and the vibrant sexual overtones of this high compliment. It seems that mares were never employed to draw the king’s chariot. Only stallions were, and they were always hitched in pairs. But in this picture, a mare has been harnessed to the chariot alongside a stallion. The predictable result is a stallion in a frenzy of galloping desire. When this man, then, speaks of his beloved using this analogy, it is not to suggest that she possesses equine characteristics but to declare the overwhelming sensual impact she makes upon him by her very presence. He then speaks of how her jewelry enhances the beauty of her face; together they will further complement her natural attractions with additional jewelry. (Christians will want to balance such passages with the teachings of 1 Peter 3, but clearly there is a place for the appropriate enhancement of physical beauty.)

Do you see the qualitative difference between such carefully composed words of romance and something like, “That dress looks nice on you, dear”? By all means, tell her that she looks nice in the dress, but recognize the world of difference between a simple compliment (however sincere) and phrases describing a passion that can barely be contained.

Let's look at one more passage of carefully composed words spoken by the man:

How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are doves. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing. Each has its twin; not one of them is alone. Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon; your mouth is lovely. Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate. Your neck is like the tower of David, built with elegance; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors. Your two breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, I will go to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of incense. All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you

—4:1-7, NIV

This magnificent passage begins with a declaration of the beauty of his beloved. But generalities are not enough for him, nor should they be for us. So, he extols her eyes, her hair, and her teeth, using clear and complimentary analogies. What creativity his words reveal! “Your eyes behind your veil are doves” speaks of her gentleness and tenderness. In describing her hair as a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead, he evokes the image of a distant hill, completely covered with black-wooled goats moving toward its base, so the entire hill seems alive. Her teeth are white and fresh, like newly shorn and bathed sheep that glisten in the sun.

He then praises in specific, compelling, and poetic terms, her lips, mouth, and temples. He compares her lips to a precious, beautiful fabric. The Aramaic word he uses for her mouth makes clear that he finds her very speech a thing of beauty; her mouth reveals her heart, and her mouth is beautiful in no small part because of what she communicates. These compliments are not merely physical. They are mental and moral as well.

Gazing lower, he speaks in tender and radiant language of her neck and breasts, and with breathtaking delicacy and understatement he declares his unmistakably erotic intentions. He ends this love

poem where he began, assuring her that, in his eyes, she is “all beautiful”—perfection itself.

“All beautiful,” “no flaw in you”—how are we to interpret such phrases? No one need class these among those statements in the Old Testament which the apostle Paul found “hard to understand”! What’s going on here is very clear. The man is lavishing high praises upon his beloved in an effort to communicate how he feels about her. These are expressions of his heartfelt emotion. Others may not share his assessment of her beauty. No matter. This is his view of her, and together they rejoice in it.

Wives: Verse Two. Wives, you too can find a wealth of example in Solomon’s Song:

My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand. His head is purest gold; his hair is wavy and black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by the water streams, washed in milk, mounted like jewels. His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume. His lips are like lilies dripping with myrrh. His arms are rods of gold. . . . His body is like polished ivory. . . . His legs are pillars of marble. . . . His appearance is like Lebanon. . . . His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.

—5:10-16, NIV

Here is an evaluation that few men could ever hope genuinely to warrant. So what is God saying in such passages? Is He setting impossibly narrow standards, such as the advertising and fashion industries would impose on us? Certainly not. Again, what’s being communicated here is primarily the effect of the beloved on the lover. An objective description is clearly not the point at all! These are carefully composed words that convey her estimation of his value.

He is radiant: There is a joy and an inner contentment that shines through his face. He is ruddy: manly and masculine. He is outstanding: Place him in the midst of ten thousand others, and she can pick him out, for in her eyes he has no rival. His entire appearance is solid and firm, impressive like a mountain range. His mouth—that is, his speech—is lovely, and it also seems that she greatly enjoys his kisses.

Finally, she ends her praise with, “He is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.” With this triumphant declaration she invites the daughters of Jerusalem and all who read her words to agree with her. She is unconcerned that any might dare to dissent, for who would argue? This is how she feels! Nay-sayers may criticize her objectivity or precision, but even as they do they will envy the depth of love she enjoys and will find themselves, by contrast, far poorer than this blessed woman and her lover.

How my wife describes me bears little or no resemblance to how my male friends describe me. (Just one example: After teaching on this material in the church recently, a fellow pastor walked up to me after the message, glanced at my bald pate, and said, “Your head reminds me of the Jefferson Memorial.”) And of course, it would be highly inappropriate for anyone but me to describe my wife using the kind of terms I would employ when declaring my love for her and reminding her of the effect she has on me.

The Song of Songs is a book about romance, and romance begins with carefully composed words of an emotional and erotic nature. How often in the past month has communication such as we find in Solomon’s Song taken place between you and your spouse? What are the hindrances? What are the heart issues? What changes can you make this week to begin cultivating and expressing your passion for your spouse?

CREATIVE HARMONY: THE CONTEXT FOR ROMANCE

Last year, Carolyn and I celebrated our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and for that quarter-century it has been rare for us not to have a weekly date night. But I can assure you that the consistent cultivation of romance in our marriage has been far from an effortless process.

Romance must be diligently cultivated, lest it become routine. The wonderful security that comes from a context of covenant commitment is no excuse for the absence of romance. We should consistently express our passion for our spouse in a variety of creative ways. Date nights and other creative forms of romancing don’t happen by themselves. They require regular, diligent, creative attention.

Where to begin? Husbands, study your wives. (Although husbands and wives need to understand this material equally well, this section will be directed primarily to the husband in his role as head of the wife.) Discover specific things that will most effectively communicate your romantic passion for her. Locations, activities, settings, restaurants, vacation spots, romantic overnight getaways. Learn what she loves, and make the sacrifices necessary to bless and romance her. This involves work, gentlemen, even extended effort. It involves planning and budgeting. It is not spontaneous. Even the simplest things require some degree of forethought.

This does not have to be expensive, but it should not be merely practical, either. Giving your wife a DustBuster or a waffle iron might serve or bless her, but it does not qualify as romancing her. We must be quite clear that romancing our wives includes behaviors and activities that are distinctly different from everything else we do in life. As you carefully study your wife, you will be able to move beyond such generalities. You will learn how to romance your wife in ways that are especially meaningful to you as a couple. Those more specific things surely exist, and the sovereign, loving God who joined you to your wife will surely show you what they are.

Romance can be built through phone calls during the workday. I often call Carolyn briefly to say, "I just wanted to hear your voice." It's a small thing that's meaningful to us both. Romance can involve sending letters and notes and, if you are so gifted, even poetry. These should contain carefully composed words that communicate romantic passions. My wife is excellent at this, and I treasure it. In regard to notes, I want to become as thoughtful and forward-thinking as a husband I read about recently:

When the new car was side-swiped on a trip to the supermarket, Mary Branson stopped and tearfully fumbled in the glove compartment for the insurance papers. Attached to them she found an envelope with her name on it in her husband's handwriting. "Dear Mary," the note said, "When you need these papers, remember it's you I love, not the car."

Romance can be communicated through small gifts. Buying perfume, flowers, and clothing for Carolyn has been a joy for me. As a rule, I despise malls. Shopping is not something I enjoy. But I keep a record of Carolyn's clothing sizes, and I know the three stores in our local mall whose clothing she finds most appealing. Over the years, I have bought her many items from these stores, and what a difference this has made. When I present these gifts to her, I remind her that she is not obligated to keep or wear them, and she knows I mean this. I am thankful that romancing my wife has little to do with my fashion sense, and everything to do with the effort I make to express my feelings for her.

Our date night is my joy, privilege, and responsibility to plan. I maintain a list of fresh ideas by studying the area in which we live, by reviewing magazines and newspapers, and by talking to friends. That way, when Carolyn and I get in the car, I don't have to turn to her and say, "So, uh, where'd you like to eat?" What a joy and what a difference our date night has made in our marriage. It has a definite romantic effect.

Finally, let there be surprises, surprises, surprises. Carolyn lives with a measured anticipation, for she knows that I'm always in the process of creating some sort of romantic surprise for her.

Husbands, there was a time when it was obvious to everyone that you were uniquely passionate about the woman who is now your wife. You couldn't stop thinking about her. You couldn't stop talking about her, or talking to her. You went out of your way to serve and bless her. You spent serious money on her. Is your passion still obvious to those around you? Most importantly, is it still obvious to her?

THE RHYTHM OF LOVE: GOD'S GIFT OF SEX

Where does sexual desire, and the proper means of its fulfillment, come from? We all know the answer: from the mind of God, as part of His plan for man. God created sexual intercourse, as well as the covenant institution that is its proper context. In the beginning, God looked upon the sexual union of husband and wife and saw that it was good. His opinion has not changed in the slightest.

Yet there is within secular culture a perception (which Christianity has largely brought upon itself) that our faith is primarily about sexual prohibitions. Of course, sin has horribly corrupted God's good gift of sex by divorcing it from the covenant of marriage. Accordingly, the misuse of sexuality is flatly condemned in Scripture; the Bible's warnings against immorality and the power of lust must never be denied or ignored. Indeed, even in the Song's unblushing celebration of marriage we find repeated admonitions regarding the proper circumstances of sexual activity (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). But how easy and how common it is to emphasize such biblical prohibitions to the exclusion of the fully God-honoring role of sexuality within marriage. As Duane Garrett has written, "The Bible itself would be incomplete if it only spoke of sexuality in terms of prohibitions and did not give positive instruction to enable the reader to discover the joy of healthy love."⁵

Christians reject all sexual behavior outside of heterosexual marriage, because of God's wise command and because there is indeed something better that lies beyond the wedding reception: a life of sexual intimacy blessed by God, sexual relations within marriage for the purposes of union, pleasure, and procreation. We have thus far seen how the Song of Songs models for us the kind of passionate communication that can and should take place between lovers joined by God in marriage. Of course, there comes a time when the couple must move beyond mere verbal foreplay, as the lovers in Solomon's Song do indeed move.

As this archetypal man and woman enter into lovemaking, they do not hold back, nor does Scripture shrink from recording quite intimate details of their mutually delightful encounter. Indeed, the Song does not limit itself to "who touched who where." Instead, we read of the extravagant indulgence of all five senses. Touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing are put to full use. Solomon's Song teaches us that lovemaking is intended by God to be an elaborate and pleasurable feast of the senses.

"Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like

that of Lebanon” (4:11, NIV). “His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely” (5:16, NIV). These two love to kiss one another. They revel in the touch, tastes, and scents associated with their kissing. I would appeal to you to ask your spouse for his or her estimation of your kissing. How does it compare with what is described here?

“Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, ‘I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit.’ May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine” (7:7-8, NIV). Sexual touching and caressing of the richest kind are found throughout the Song.

At 4:16, we begin to approach the consummation of this couple’s passion on their wedding night. It begins with the woman inviting the man to come and enjoy her love. “Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread abroad. Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits” (NIV).

In 5:1, the man eagerly responds. Again, the poetry is discreet and restrained, yet bursting with passion and completely devoid of vulgarity. “I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk” (NIV). Then, at the end of verse 1, we find this ringing affirmation of sexual indulgence within marriage: “Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers” (NIV). Here, the chorus encourages them both to enjoy lovemaking to the fullest, to be intoxicated with one another in their love. With God as author of Scripture, can there be a clearer expression of the divine approval and encouragement of sexuality within marriage?

Solomon on Setting the Tempo. “He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love” (2:4, NIV). Here is a statement about the intention of the woman’s lover, her husband, to make love to her. (See also 4:8 and, in the NASB, 1:4.) In my counseling and pastoring experience, it seems that the husband is more likely than the wife to initiate sexual relations. But in the Song we see that sexual initiative by the wife can in fact be highly appropriate (not to mention, wives, most welcomed by your husband—trust me on that one). The woman portrayed in the Song is not the least hesitant about taking the

initiative. In fact, the Song begins with her desiring her lover's kisses and asking him to take her to his bed; and the Song ends with another open request for lovemaking. Her desires are exclusively for her husband, but in the expression of those desires she is, in private, quite uninhibited.

When she says to her man, "Come, my lover, and let us go to the countryside, and let us spend the night in the villages" (7:11), she is not suggesting a shopping trip! She wants him to take her away to a creative location in order to make love to her. This may be the earliest recorded instance of a romantic getaway at a cozy little Bed and Breakfast!

Paul on Picking Up the Beat. In the context of sexual initiative, we must broaden our focus to a portion of the New Testament that speaks to matters of sexual responsiveness. In 1 Corinthians 7:2-4 (NIV), Paul teaches that, no matter which spouse in a marriage takes the sexual initiative, the other partner must be responsive:

Since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Paul's point is clear. The weight is on each spouse's responsibilities and duties, not his or her rights. Most marriages have a history of lovemaking opportunities that have been inappropriately declined. Many of these "No, thank yous" are communicated non-verbally. When they do take verbal form, they often come out something like, "Not tonight, honey. I'm so tired," or, "I'm just not in the mood."

Do such responses violate 1 Corinthians 7:3-4? Surely, many reasons given for depriving a spouse are not biblically acceptable.

Please do not misunderstand. I am not endorsing the imposition

of selfish desires on one's spouse under false cover of 1 Corinthians 7. However, while being tired or fatigued are not sinful in themselves, in light of this passage, they cannot be seen as legitimate reasons for depriving a spouse of sexual relations.

What would your response be, ladies, if your husband suggested, "Let's study the Bible together," or "Let's pray together"? Would you reply, "I'm not in the mood"? If he said, "I want to take you to a restaurant this evening," would you say, "I'm sorry, I just don't feel like it"? What if he said, "Can we talk about the children tonight? I'm concerned about some of the behavior I've seen in them lately." Would your first impulse be to reply, "Thanks, honey, but I'm kind of preoccupied right now"?

In other words, ought lovemaking within marriage to be considered a fundamentally spiritual activity (albeit one with potent physical manifestations)? I believe the answer is an unqualified yes.

Proverbs 5:18-19 commands the husband to rejoice with the wife of his youth. Ladies, you must assist your husband in obeying this command. The sexual relationship between husband and wife is to be characterized by rejoicing! Is your sexual relationship joyful? Is it characterized by joy? If not, let me encourage you to discover why not, and don't be satisfied until you do.

Effective lovemaking is not instinctive. If I am living in obedience to 1 Corinthians 7:3-4, I will take my thoughts captive and discipline my body in order to focus primarily on giving to my wife sexually, rather than receiving from her. Indeed, any married person who rightly sees these verses as a directive from God will bring to the marriage bed a servant's mindset that places primary emphasis on the sexual satisfaction of his or her spouse. As one Christian author has wisely written, if you do what comes naturally in lovemaking, almost every time you'll be wrong.

Husbands, are you a skillful and unselfish lover? Don't assume that you know what your wife likes. Don't assume that you know what arouses your wife. Your wife is aroused differently than you are. You must discover what arouses her—and what does not—by engag-

ing her in extended conversation. Gentlemen, we can improve. As lovers, many of us have plateaued, but none have arrived.

Before concluding this section, I want to make some brief points of application.

First, there is the matter of having children in the house. The more children you have, obviously, the more care and planning will be necessary to assure your privacy. Even then, have realistic expectations. Making love will not always be a dynamic experience of sweating and shouting—all the more so if the little ones are just a few feet away on the other side of a bedroom wall, tucked into their bunks but not fully asleep, and possibly wondering why it sounds like Mommy and Daddy are exercising.

Discretion, of course, is necessary. A couple with a sex life that honors God will, over the years, almost certainly be interrupted by children at various inconvenient moments. On many occasions, Carolyn and I have been in our bedroom, door locked, and in the advanced stages of celebrating the gift of sex, when someone knocks gently on the door. Your challenge at that time will be to project a calm tone of voice; it can be quite difficult to sound like you're simply reading a book! If my children were more perceptive, they would realize my vulnerability in those moments.

Knock, knock, knock. "Mom? Dad?"

"Um . . . [clearing of throat, stalling for time]. . . . Yes?"

"Dad, can I have a new car?"

"Uh, sure. . . . Let's talk later."

"Okay, cool. Thanks!"

Second, let me encourage creativity of location in your lovemaking, something illustrated throughout the Song of Songs. On numerous occasions, when Carolyn has picked me up at the airport as I'm coming home from a trip, I've said to her, "Love, I cannot wait to make love to you. See that motel? You and I are paying them a visit." These impromptu times have been romantic and exciting episodes.

Making love is a gift from God, to be done for the glory of God. Husbands, you are not to deprive your wives for any selfish reason. Wives, you are not to deprive your husbands for any selfish reason. If

you disagree, please wrestle with 1 Corinthians 7. I believe you will find its teaching far too clear for argument. Even when you are tired and not in the mood, give yourselves to lovemaking that seeks above all to please your spouse, and allow this rich gift of God to unfold in your marriage.

CLOSING THEME: COVENANT LOVE

Of course Solomon's Song is about more than sex. These physical, emotional, and spiritual delights take place in an interpersonal context of covenant commitment. As Carr has noted, "The theme of sexual enjoyment and consummation runs through the book, and the theme of commitment is central to the whole relationship. This is no passing encounter, this is total dedication and permanent obligation."⁶

Look at verses 5-7 of chapter 8 (NIV):

Who is this coming up from the desert leaning on her lover? . . . Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned.

Here is a dramatic picture of the richness and strength of covenant love:

- She leans on her lover, unashamed to acknowledge publicly her union with him. She and her lover are in covenant, and she wants everyone to know it. It is a defining characteristic of who she and her lover have become: They are two made one, and marked with a seal.
- As death is final, irresistible, and irreversible, so is their covenant love. Their love is jealous with a single-minded passion that leaves room for no other attractions.
- Water in sufficient quantities can smother any flame, but not the flame of this love. Their burning passion is indestructible, of such power and intensity that no river can quench its zeal.
- Their love is beyond value. No price is sufficient to purchase that which is given freely when God joins a man and woman together.

Any attempt at such a purchase would be seen as an act of astonishing crassness, ignorance, and futility.

Such is the power and beauty inherent in every marriage in the Kingdom of God. But we also know that, in this fallen world, love will be tested. Trial and suffering are inevitable for every husband and wife. When you are tempted to consider the attractions of another . . . when a conflict seems difficult to resolve . . . when external challenges test your patience . . . when you have allowed tedium to creep into your life together . . . what will ultimately make the difference? Covenant love.

I close with an excerpt from an editorial published in *Christianity Today*:

While it comes with clear limits, sex is great. After all, God invented it. . . . The first editors of the King James Version tried to give it a “G” rating by their chapter headings, which suggested that the [Song of Solomon] was not about sex at all, but about Christ and the church. But only a healthy appreciation of sex could lead the biblical writer to remark, with evident pride, that when Moses died at the age of 120, both his eyesight and his “natural force” (which some scholars believe refers to sexual potency) were undiminished. . . . Christians, in other words, are not prudes. We like sex. We celebrate sex. We thank God for sex. But—and here we differ radically with our society—we do not see sex as a right or an end in itself, but as part of discipleship. When we say no to promiscuity or other substitutes for marriage, we do so in defense of good sex. It is not from prudery that the Bible advocates lifelong, faithful, heterosexual marriage, but out of a conviction that the freedom and loving abandon that are necessary for sexual ecstasy come only from a committed marital relationship. . . . Perhaps we ought to make long marriages our image—our “icon”—of sex. An icon is a picture we look to as a model. We study and meditate upon it because it reveals some aspect of God’s glory in the world. Our society has made sex its icon. That’s why it is found on every magazine stand, in every commercial, every movie aimed at teenagers. This icon portrays only well-curved women and well-muscled young men. It celebrates sex for individual satisfaction.

But look at a couple celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Let's make them our icon of sex. Their bodies may sag and creak. Their hair is thin or gone. But we see in them something that makes us want to cheer them on. Through them, and only through them and that kind of committed love, shines something of God's glory.⁷

As married couples, let's look forward to a long life together, as we continually learn more about the joys of sexual love within the covenant of marriage. Like the lover and his beloved, let's keep singing Solomon's Song. May we never cease from making that beautiful music, our two voices joined as one in divine harmony, testifying to the world and to one another of the goodness and glory of God.

NOTES

1. Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 23.
2. G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1984), 35.
3. *Ibid.*, 49.
4. Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 379.
5. *Ibid.*, 367.
6. Carr, *Song of Solomon*, 53.
7. William Frey, "Really Good Sex," *Christianity Today* (Aug. 19, 1991), 12.