

Real Romance

SEX IN THE SONG OF SONGS



MARK & GRACE

DRISCOLL

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Romance*

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Real Romance: Sex in the Song of Songs

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ISBN: 978-1-950113-93-4 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-950113-94-1 (eBook)

ISBN: 978-1-950113-95-8 (Audiobook)

23 24 25 26 27—5 4 3 2 1

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Preface



WHAT SCRIPTURE REALLY SAYS ABOUT SEX

God used the Bible to save our marriage.

We met when we were 17 and in high school. We had both been in unhealthy dating relationships previously that were sexual and sinful. When we met, we had little to no clue about how to have a healthy romantic relationship. So we did what most people do—we rushed into a deep, emotional connection too quickly, started sleeping together, and did not seek wise counsel or anything that would resemble godly help. We cared for one another but were clueless about how to take care of one another.

I (Mark) was a non-Christian; raised a Catholic, but I had no personal relationship with God. The only Bible I can remember was our giant family Bible that sat on the coffee table in our living room covered in enough dust to write “fornication” on it with your finger. Grace was a pastor’s daughter who knew the Lord but was in a prodigal daughter season and was not walking with Him (which explains why she was walking with me). As we headed off to different universities, we

were headed for the same misery. Thankfully, the Lord not only saved us from going to hell, but He also saved us from ourselves and from making hell of our lives.

The Bible Saved Our Marriage

I (Grace) had enough conviction left to know God's plan for me was *not* to be dating a non-Christian. I should have broken up with Mark, but instead I bought him a Bible as a gift. I wasn't spending much time reading my own Bible, but hypocritically, I thought *he* needed one. I knew the Bible would tell us what we should do. Despite my lack of wisdom, God showed incredible grace to Mark and me. We feel very humbled to be able to teach what we learned the hard way so that others don't have to go through the same experience. The Bible has been a foundational part of anything good in our marriage. We are excited to help you learn from a book of the Bible, as we study Song of Songs.

I (Mark) became a Christian reading the Bible that Grace gave me. I quickly found a wonderful, Bible-teaching church and became excited about learning from God's Word, which has led me to preach through books of the Bible as a senior pastor since 1996. Today, we are both teaching the Bible most weeks to the men and women at Trinity Church, which we founded as a family ministry in Scottsdale, Arizona, along with our five children (the two oldest of whom are now married). We give our Bible teaching away to help people in their relationships with God and others through RealFaith Ministries.

Without the Bible, we would not be married. Either we would have so badly ruined our romantic relationship while

dating that we would never have made it to marriage, or if we did marry, it would have ended badly. We have sought to build our life, marriage, family, ministry, and legacy on the Bible, and God's Word has never failed us. We want to be honest with you so that you can be honest with God and each other. If God can take a lost guy who was sleeping with a pastor's daughter and give us a good marriage and a godly family along with a Bible teaching ministry, then there is certainly hope for you!

The most popular Bible book we have ever taught—and the one that got us into the most trouble—is the Song of Songs, which is also called the Song of Solomon. We started by teaching it in small groups to couples, then larger classes, and eventually large conferences around the nation. Out of this teaching came our most popular and *controversial* sermon series ever.

In *Real Romance*, our goal is to help you build your marriage on the Song of Songs. It is the only book of the Bible devoted exclusively to marriage. If you have made mistakes, committed sins, and done things wrong in your life and relationship, we can relate. We got our personal and sexual relationship wrong before God made it right by renewing our minds and reworking our desires by His Spirit through His Word. The reason we are calling this Bible study project *Real Romance* is simple: we will be real with you about our faults, flaws, and failures as well as about how God's hope, help, and healing have allowed us to work through the pain and get to the pleasure of now 30 years of faithful Christian marriage. We love you, we are excited for you, and we know that the same God who has blessed us will bless you if you live under the authority of His Word. Why? Because God does not just bless people—He also blesses people who place themselves under His Word. Thank you for the great

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honor of allowing us to be on this double date as, together, we enjoy real romance by studying the Song of Songs. We will start by looking at sex in the Scripture generally, then sex in the Song of Songs specifically.

Sex in Scripture

In the days of the Old Testament, when the poetic Hebrew love story of the Song of Songs was written, God's people were surrounded and seduced by all sorts of sexual sin, much like we face today. There were fertility cults in which business, spirituality, and sex were integrated into one demonic, worldly system, not unlike the porn and adult entertainment industry of our day.

The Canaanite demon gods were believed to be naked sexual beings who were to be worshipped through sex and erotic, pornographic poetry. Their vile blend of debased sexuality and demonic spirituality included large Ashtoreth poles. These were male phallic symbols used as advertisements to draw people from miles around to enjoy sex without boundaries as part of worship. It was common for ancient worship to include temples that were the equivalent of a brothel and strip club, complete with male and female prostitutes. Other world religions such as Hinduism historically have also had prostitutes as part of their demonic worship and sensual discipleship guides like the Kama Sutra.

In the days of the New Testament, things were not any better. Greek culture, which predominated the Roman Empire, encouraged older men to groom young boys for sex. The cities in which Christianity spread were filled with perverted sexuality married to demonic spirituality. This included temples

in cities like Corinth where the demonic fertility goddess Aphrodite had over a thousand male and female prostitutes waiting to have sex without limits. This explains why Paul's letter to the Corinthians instructs Christians not to have sex with a close relative or a person of the same sex, engage in orgies, fornicate by living and sleeping together before marriage, commit adulterous sex outside of marriage, abandon their God-given sex and gender by cross-dressing, or return to having sex at the pagan temples. These new Christians in Paul's day were exposed to the same kind of gender spectrum tolerance and diversity sex education in the name of pride that inundates people in our own day. The demons at work in the past continue their work in the present. Thankfully, the Bible is not old but timeless and, therefore, always timely.

A wealth of scientific research has established the brain as our most important sex organ. In the developing field of brain science, we are learning that our brains not only house our thoughts about sex but also send signals to our bodies that will help or harm our sexual freedom and frequency. For this reason, it is vital for us to begin understanding why God made sex, how God sees sex and guidelines God gives for sex so we can have our minds renewed and our marriages redeemed. Broadly speaking, there are *three ways to view sex: gross, god, or gift.*

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Sex as Gross

While our bodies and the sexual pleasure they enjoy were custom designed by God, some people sadly see sex as gross or disgusting. This perspective most commonly happens in one of two ways.

One, some bad religious teaching focuses almost entirely on what is sinful and forbidden with little teaching on what the Bible promotes for healthy marital sexuality. At its worst, bad religious teaching presents sex, even within marriage, as a sort of necessary evil for human procreation, or solely to keep the husband from straying out of the marriage and into adultery. This erroneous teaching is often rooted in ancient, non-biblical Greek thought that considered the human body basically evil and the pleasures derived in it as undesirable. Many early Christian teachers were raised with Greek thought and sadly kept some of this faulty mindset long after their conversions. Examples include Tertullian and Ambrose, who preferred human extinction to sex; Origen, who allegorized the Song of Songs and castrated himself; Gregory of Nyssa and Chrysostom, who taught that sex was a result of sin and the fall and not part of God's design; and Jerome, who threw himself into brambles or beat his chest with a rock when sexually tempted and considered too much fun with his wife to be a sin against God. Not only were Catholic priests forbidden to marry, but by the Middle Ages, priests were also encouraged to regulate the frequency, positions, and sensations of married couples so that roughly half the year was filled with days married couples were forbidden from intercourse, which contributed to the Protestant Reformation. The former monk Martin Luther married the nun Katherine. In his teaching, he brought about a complete transformation of marital love and

babies as part of a godly life for God’s people. The Victorian Age was marked by extreme modesty and a bit of an obsession with eliminating virtually any opportunity for sexuality to be seen publicly. Women were nearly silent in public and covered themselves down to their ankles with long dresses. One debated observation from a traveling British Navy captain in that day was that table and piano legs were even covered to prevent men who saw a naked table leg from being tempted to lustful thoughts. To state the obvious, if a man is sexually aroused by a table leg, then the problem is in his heart and not his furniture.

Two, because of sexual sin they have committed (e.g., fornication, pornography, adultery, etc.), or sexual sin committed against them (e.g., molestation as a child, assault as a teen or adult, rape, adultery, etc.), some people associate the pain of sin with the pleasure of sex and need a renewed mind, as Paul says. These kinds of trauma cause harm to the totality of a person, and if you have had any of these evil experiences, we are deeply sorry for that horrific pain. The best thing you can do is find a godly professional to meet with for wise counsel. There is healing and hope on the other side of abuse, and we want that for you and your marriage.

I (Grace) experienced sexual and emotional abuse in high school that was covered with shame until over 10 years (and five kids) into marriage. The enemy had convinced me I deserved how I had been treated in a relationship before I met Mark, so I didn’t consider it “abuse.” I was folding laundry when Mark asked a specific question about my past one seemingly normal evening. When I answered about how I was controlled and forced to do things against my will for over two years, I looked over and saw Mark crying (not something that happens regularly). In that moment, we realized

I had experienced abuse in my past and needed healing. I started to understand it had affected our marriage and kept us from the closeness we desired. I won't lie and say the healing process was easy or quick, but I sought Christian trauma counseling and ultimately grew closer to Jesus and Mark in ways I didn't know were possible. I was a victim of abuse, but I had to ultimately take responsibility for some of the decisions I made out of that pain. I'm thankful God brought all of this into the light so I could be free in Him rather than in bondage to the enemy's condemnation. If trauma is part of your story, I want to encourage you that God has healing for you too. The enemy has a plan to destroy you and your marriage, but God has a plan to restore you and bless your marriage. A godly professional filled with the Spirit and the latest insights from trauma therapy could be a great part of your healing journey.

**THE ENEMY HAS A PLAN TO DESTROY YOU AND
YOUR MARRIAGE, BUT GOD HAS A PLAN TO
RESTORE YOU AND BLESS YOUR MARRIAGE.**

When both people see sex as gross, the result is what is commonly referred to as a sexless marriage. According to a landmark Pew Survey, a satisfying sexual relationship was the second most important factor of marital satisfaction. No less than 70 percent of adults consider it a “very important” element of marital satisfaction, right behind “faithfulness” which in large part pertains to not straying outside of the marriage for sexual enjoyment.¹ In a study by the Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture, 12 percent of

all married couples had not had sex for at least three months. Another survey found that within the previous year, 20 percent of couples had not had sex.ⁱⁱ

No one knows the exact rate of divorce for sexless marriages, but we can assume it is high since sexual problems in marriage is the third most prevalent reason couples name in divorce surveys. The prevalence of sexless marriages is likely even higher than the statistics indicate. In addition to sexless marriages, there are many marriages that simply have far less sex than would be healthy. Sadly, we have seen this even among pastors and their spouses. We personally know pastors who are in sexless, or less than enough sex, marriages, but they are still preaching and teaching on marriage, conducting premarital and marital counseling, and officiating weddings. It is hard to imagine that their pastoral care of marriages is the best it could be considering their personal lack of healthy marital intimacy. Some years ago, we spoke at a large Valentine's event hosted in a major city by the local Christian radio station. Thousands of people came to hear us teach from the Song of Songs, and in the line where we met people who wanted to say hello, we met multiple young couples from the same well-known conservative local church. These men and women had been married up to a year and had still not consummated their marriage out of fear from bad Christian teaching about sex. Basically, their parents and pastors told them that sex was dirty, nasty, vile, and wrong and to be saved for marriage, which only confused and scared the young couples. Since biblical marriage is being in a covenant that is consummated, it could be argued that they were not even technically married but instead awkward and fearful roommates.

Sex as God

Who or what sets your identity, demands your allegiance, floods your mind, and takes priority in your life is your functional “god.” If this is anyone or anything other than the God of the Bible, it is idolatry. What often happens is that we take a good thing, like sex, and make it a “god” thing, thereby making it a bad thing. The result is sexual sin and addiction of any and every sort. This explains why people keep having parades about sexual sin, for which they should be having funerals.

WHAT OFTEN HAPPENS IS THAT WE TAKE A GOOD THING, LIKE SEX, AND MAKE IT A “GOD” THING, THEREBY MAKING IT A BAD THING.

Being married to someone who sees sex as god is difficult because you feel that they don’t care as much about your soul, heart, or mind; what matters most to them is your body. This can lead to feeling neglected outside the bedroom and used inside the bedroom. The relationship sadly takes a back seat as the orgasm is almost always in the driver’s seat.

When both people see sex as god, the marital relationship is quickly rolling down a steep hill toward the cliff of sexual sin. When both the husband and wife have too liberal sexual boundaries and out-of-order sexual priorities, and they do not help one another avoid temptation, any perversion is possible. The passions of sex are like a fire, and marriage is the hearth that God created to contain it. Whenever it is taken out of the hearth of marriage, sex starts burning down our relationship with God, marriage, family, health, and culture. This explains why there is

gender confusion, sexual experimentation, pornography, friends with benefits, sex trafficking, prostitution, strip clubs, robotic sex dolls, sexual addiction, pedophilia, bestiality, fornication, adultery, swinging, sexual assault, and tragically much more.

I (Mark) entered our dating and marriage years seeing sex as god. My parents were clear on healthy sexual boundaries growing up, and I saw enough young girls in my neighborhood get pregnant and be in abusive relationships that I generally stayed out of trouble while I was living at home with my parents. I avoided alcohol and carousing, not out of godly conviction but out of the fear of being trapped in some bad and broken relationship. I believe I would have gotten into a lot of trouble sexually, however, if God had not saved me at the age of 19 early in my freshman year in college. A pivotal life moment came when the fraternity I had recently joined threw its first big, drunken party of the year. I was about to walk into a dark basement room filled with music, girls, and beer when God spoke to me and told me I did not belong there. I was not a Christian, and I was about to walk into a new life that was death. I was startled and unsure what was happening, but I did as I was told and left the party to spend the night sitting in the library alone. The next day the house smelled like beer, and girls awoke hung over and embarrassed. Some were crying as they looked for their shoes and clothes. I moved out of that fraternity right away, and my pledge class ended up getting arrested and spending evenings doing community service and weekends in jail. Like Lot, God literally pulled me out of Sodom and Gomorrah before destruction.

Now, I loved Grace, so I was faithful to her and avoided the typical single years in my 20s, which would have been spent getting in a lot of trouble had God not intervened before I was living on my own. As soon as I started learning what the

Bible taught about sex as a new Christian, I realized I needed to get married young because I knew I would not make it into my early 30s (the age the average guy gets married today) chaste, holy, and healthy. Not knowing about Grace's abuse prior to our meeting, I now see how my view of sex as god put pressure on her in our marriage as she saw sex more as gross. We both needed to heal up and learn a lot to come to a healthy place under the Word of God together.

When one person sees sex as gross and the other sees sex as god, there is a lot of pain, conflict, and lonely frustration felt by both. The person who sees sex as god lives in the despair that their many desires will never be realized in their

“WHEN ONE PERSON SEES SEX AS GROSS AND THE OTHER SEES SEX AS GOD, THERE IS A LOT OF PAIN, CONFLICT, AND LONELY FRUSTRATION FELT BY BOTH.”

marriage, which can lead to bitterness and wandering outside of the marriage into the sexual sins that consume our culture and constantly pull us toward hell like gravity. The person who sees sex as gross feels inordinate pressure from their spouse, wonders if or when they will commit adultery in some form, and feels devalued and pursued only for sex instead of loved for relationship.

If either of you sees sex as god or gross, you have a very real problem in your marriage. In this case, sex is a broken place that needs healing, which only happens by you both understanding that sex is a gift given from God for you to share with each other to strengthen your marriage.

Sex as Gift

God uniquely and intentionally created our bodies for sex and sexual pleasure. God made us male and female and brought us together for marriage, and our marriage covenant was consummated with the passion and pleasure of sex. God was not shocked that our naked first parents had sex, and He did not send an angel to put a wing between them and shut it down. Sex was His divine will and design—perfect, holy, and before sin and the Fall. God called all this married sexuality “very good” as our first parents were “not ashamed” before sin entered the world. This gift of heterosexual, married sex was given by God for six reasons:

1. Pleasure (Song of Songs)
2. Children (Genesis 1:28)
3. Oneness (Genesis 2:24)
4. Knowledge (Genesis 4:1)
5. Protection (1 Corinthians 7:2–5)
6. Comfort (2 Samuel 12:24).

**SEX WAS HIS DIVINE WILL AND DESIGN—PERFECT,
HOLY, AND BEFORE SIN AND THE FALL.**

It is common for one or both people in a marriage to have an erroneous view of sex that needs to be worked through, healed, and moved on from. This was our case. When we married at the age of 21, I (Mark) was a new Christian who saw sex more as god. I grew up within walking distance of strip clubs, hourly rate motels, and open prostitution on a nearby highway

close to a major airport. Thankfully, I didn't participate in any of them, but they were the norm in my neighborhood.

Grace grew up in a Christian home and had abuse that caused her to see sex more as gross. We had a lot of healing and learning to do, and God was gracious to bring us into agreement with the Scriptures that teach sex as a gift from God. What was most helpful to us was learning about sex in the Song of Songs. There, we learned that it's old-school, red-hot monogamy that is seriously sexy.

Sex in the Song of Songs

How does a godly and poor young woman working long hours in the hot sun to help support her single mother and brothers become the wife of a king and one of the most renowned, passionate, and sexually free women the world has ever celebrated?

The answer is found in the biblical book of the Song of Songs, where we meet this glorious peasant princess. She speaks first, is spoken of last, and speaks most frequently throughout this sacred love story. We also meet her friends, brothers, and mother as we see snapshots of her life including childhood, the teen years, engagement, and marriage.

As we study the Song of Songs, our primary focus will be the intimate marital relationship she shares with her husband, Solomon. Through her example, God has much to teach us regarding His plan for sex and marriage. While the Song of Songs is not entirely about sex, the book does contain some especially important lessons on the subject. In fact, this 3,000-year-old collection of love letters is extraordinary in its timeliness.

There are at least three curious facts regarding the Song of Songs. One, depending upon which English translation you

read, God is mentioned either zero times or just one time in the entire book.¹ Two, the Song of Songs is never quoted in the New Testament. Three, the Song of Songs never mentions children despite talking a lot about sex, as this book is entirely about the passions and pleasures of marital sex but not the blessing of children.

Before the Greeks, the first philosophers were the Hebrew writers of Old Testament wisdom literature. Job probes suffering and evil, Ecclesiastes explores the meaning of life, and Song of Songs plumbs the depths of love, sex, and marriage in a poetic way that is neither clinical nor crass. It does not read like an awkward high school health class depiction of sex or the inappropriate version more common in the locker room. Interestingly, Jewish tradition is to read the Song of Songs every year on Shabbat during Passover.ⁱⁱⁱ

**SONG OF SONGS PLUMBS THE DEPTHS OF LOVE,
SEX, AND MARRIAGE IN A POETIC WAY THAT IS
NEITHER CLINICAL NOR CRASS.**

In every age, especially our own, people devote an extraordinary amount of time, money, and energy in pursuit of sex, making it the most popular counterfeit religion in the world. In Romans 1:24–25, the apostle Paul says people either worship God their Creator and enjoy His creation—including our bodies—or they worship creation as God and, in sexual sin, offer their bodies as living sacrifices (which is the definition of worship in Romans 12:1). Paul goes on to explain that those who worship creation invariably worship the human body,

¹ 8:6

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because it is the apex of God's creation. Nothing in creation is as beautiful, wonderful, and enjoyable as the human body. In this upending of rightful worship, sex becomes a false religion and the sex act a perverse sacrament.

In sum, the greatest threat to Christianity is sex. Everyone who settles for the worship of sex as a god is truly seeking an intimacy, joy, and connection that can only be found through faith and relationship with the real God. As G. K. Chesterton said, "Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God." Today, sex is a religion, and the various gender and sexual interest groups are denominations in that religion. Like traditional churches, cults, and religions, the religion of sex is now moving into children's ministry, seeking to disciple kids everywhere from the classroom to entertainment and social media. Perhaps no time in Western history has been as needy for solid Bible teaching on sex, gender, marriage, and sexuality.

In Scripture, we see that God is our Creator. He created us not on a gender spectrum of our choosing but rather in binary and fixed male and female categories chosen by Him. Our male and female bodies were created for pleasure and marital oneness.² God's original intent was chastity and fidelity in heterosexual marriage; we worship God in part by obeying Him in pure pleasure. A fictitious demon in *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis admits the origins of sex: "Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's [God's] ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures."^{iv}

Through the story of the Song of Songs, we learn how to have sex that is free—free from sin, idolatry, guilt, shame, condemnation, death, and separation from God—by having free

2 See Genesis 1–2.

and frequent marital intimacy. We will study the Song of Songs to learn how to worship God the Creator, enjoy His creation, and not worship His creation (our bodies and their pleasures) as a false god.

Christians throughout history have struggled to determine how to have a healthy and balanced sexuality. Some people have chosen to essentially kill their sexual desires out of a fear of temptation to sin. Other people lead destructive lives of secret sin that are eventually exposed, causing much pain. Still others are simply confused, uncertain of how to speak to their spouse and children about sex, unsure of what is compatible and incompatible with the teaching of Scripture.

Our study of the Song of Songs is meant neither to kill our desires nor permit them to drive us into deadly sin. We will invite the Holy Spirit to cultivate our desires and drive them toward our spouse according to the wisdom God gives us in His Word. We will learn about gender, dating, marriage, and sex as God intends. This Bible study will have insight for young and old, parents and grandparents, singles and engaged, and of course, husbands and wives. As the book title suggests, the Song of Songs is perhaps the greatest lyric ever composed—a warm dialogue between two lovers, a conversation of the heart that crescendos into a beautiful duet. This poetic exchange reflects the very heart of our Trinitarian God from whom love, intimacy, and musical expression flow.

Song of Songs is rather shocking, especially when we consider it was written 3,000 years ago to a highly religious, very conservative Eastern culture. While it is frank, it is not crass, which serves as a good distinction for God's people. People who are a bit more conservative than God, and therefore religious when it comes to sex, have tended to try avoiding or explaining the book away. In the world of ancient Judaism, you were not

supposed to read the book until you were 30 years of age or married.^v Throughout history, some Bible interpreters have tried to encourage the book to be written metaphorically as poetic imagery about our relationship with God. To be sure, we are to have a loving relationship with God, but the Song of Songs is firstly about the passions and pleasures of married love life.

The book is far freer and franker than many Christian scholars who have tried to teach it. Not used to blushing while teaching the Bible, it has been common to overlook the obvious and straightforward literal meaning of the poetic book—that God delights in husbands and wives who enjoy the sexual freedom He gives them within the limits of Scripture. To interpret the Song of Songs otherwise results in some of the strangest Bible teaching in the history of the Christian church. Jewish Bible

**GOD DELIGHTS IN HUSBANDS AND WIVES WHO
ENJOY THE SEXUAL FREEDOM HE GIVES THEM
WITHIN THE LIMITS OF SCRIPTURE.**

scholars have generally interpreted it as an allegory about the loving relationship between God and the nation of Israel, with Christian scholars saying it is primarily about Jesus Christ and His loving relationship with His bride, the Church. There may be some lessons to learn from this, or any other healthy marriage, about the Christian life, but that is not the main point.

Origen (185–253) is the heavyweight champion of interpreting the Song of Songs allegorically instead of literally. In addition to preaching a series of sermons on the book, he also published a 10-volume commentary using such liberty and creativity with connecting every concept to something spiritual

and nothing physical so that in the end an entire book of the Bible is as clear as mud. In an effort to remove any sense of “carnal lust” from the book, Bernard of Clairvaux (1009–1153) preached 86 sermons on just the first two chapters of the Song of Songs, trying to remove anything that was remotely sexual in his interpretation. Others following in this wake of being more conservative than God include church father Augustine, Methodist John Wesley, Puritan Matthew Henry, and many others. In case you were uncertain, 80 concubines (6:8) are not the 80 heresies prophesied to attack the church. Also, the two breasts (4:5; 7:8) are not the Old and New Testaments that provide us the milk of God’s Word. These kinds of interpretations reveal more about what is wrong with the scholars than what is written in the Scriptures.

Throughout our study together of this ancient Hebrew love song, you will notice three primary characters in the poetic story. One, the wife, speaks first and most. Contrary to some religious stereotypes, she is a passionate, strong, and vocal woman who may have been the young Abishag who cared for Solomon’s dying father, David, as she fits the profile of a poor working-class woman from the same region of Shulammite (6:13). One Bible dictionary says that Shulammite is the “Name or title of Solomon’s lover in his Song (Sg 6:13). Her identity is not certain. Some suggest that Shulammite refers to a woman from the city of Shunem. Her designation as Shunammite was perhaps changed to Shulammite for its similarity in sound to Solomon’s Hebrew name. Shunem was situated in the land of Issachar near Mt. Gilboa (1 Samuel 28:4). It was from this city that Abishag, the beautiful Shunammite woman, was called to nurse King David in his later years (1 Kgs 1:1–4, 15; 2:17–22). It is possible that Abishag became the beloved Shulammite maiden of Solomon’s song.”^{vi}

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Another Bible Dictionary describes “Abishag the Shunamite” as “A beautiful woman from Shunem who became David’s nurse in the last days of his life. After David’s death, Adonijah wanted to marry Abishag. He persuaded Bathsheba to advocate for him before the king. Solomon suspected this request to be an aspiration for the throne and put Adonijah to death (1 Kgs 2:17–25).”^{vii}

Although we cannot be entirely sure about who Solomon’s wonderful wife is in the Song of Songs, Abishag is the most likely candidate. To keep things simple, we will refer to her by the more western version of her name—“Abbi”—most of the time.

Two, the husband, is Solomon, who is named six times³ and referred to as “the king” three times.⁴ He was the product of adultery between Bathsheba and David, who planned the murder of her first husband. Despite having great wisdom and the fact that he should have learned about the evils of sexual sin from his parents, Solomon nonetheless fell into great sin with 700 wives and 300 concubines—something we will study in more detail later in this book.

Third, their friends speak throughout the book, giving wise counsel and support for their relationship. God often speaks and works through people who are filled with the Spirit to help us see and walk in His will for our life and marriage. Healthy, godly, and confidential people are hard to find, but having a few of these people in your life is a tremendous blessing.

Lastly, as we study Song of Songs together, there is one interpretive issue to note. Some commentators see the book as written in chronological order. It starts with free and frank discussions as the couple moves toward marriage, including abstaining from sexual activity until they are wed. Next, the book focuses

3 1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11–12

4 1:4, 12; 7:6

on the ups and downs of married life and concludes with a chapter devoted to looking back at each partner's upbringing and family of origin, all of which helped shaped them as adults. I (Mark) tend to lean toward this chronological view.

Other commentators view the book more like a photo album with various thematic snapshots throughout their life together as a couple. There are pictures from their dating life and their married years, but not necessarily in chronological order. This view is largely driven by the very frank and personal discussions early in the book. If the book is written in chronological order, then the intimate discussions early on could cause the awakening of sexual discussion before they should happen, which would violate one of the recurring themes of the book. Grace tends toward this interpretive approach.

Either way, the Song of Songs is filled with helpful healing and wisdom for your sex life and marriage. We like to say that there are closed-handed and open-handed issues in Christianity. The closed-handed issues are primary matters that are essential to knowing Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and living according to the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. The open-handed issues are secondary matters that are important but less so than primary matters. We agree on the essential and primary open-handed issues, and even after decades of marriage and ministry teaching the Bible, we still have some open-handed secondary issues we disagree on that we discuss but would never divide over because our marriage matters more than our differences. We encourage you to pursue this same unity and diversity in your own marriage and are honored that you would welcome us to help your marriage flourish. With that said, we have elected to make the study of Song of Songs in this book based on themes rather than taking the chronological approach. Regardless of

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the approach you personally take, the principles for your marriage are the same with either interpretive view.

The odds are high that after reading this section there are some things in your past or present that you are feeling some conviction about. Don't let that condemn you or cause you to stop pressing forward in your healing and learning. The fact that God is allowing us to help you learn about sex from the Bible shows His gracious irony. As a new Christian, I (Mark) heard a talk at my first church about something called "fornication" that was for us college students. I had never really heard about fornication, but from what the pastor said it seemed obvious that Grace and I were fornicating. So I called the pastor and told him I had a friend who I feared was fornicating (though I declined to tell him it was Grace). I tried everything I could to find a way to get him to say that the Bible did have some sort of loophole for a dating couple to be sleeping together, and he was adamant that there wasn't one. So I did what I think was my first topical Bible study, trying my best to find a loophole that would allow fornication in God's eyes. I could not find a loophole, so I called Grace to tell her we had been fornicating. She informed me that she *already* knew because she grew up in church. So we stopped fornicating. The point is this: if God can take our story and patiently and graciously renew our minds and restore our relationship by the Holy Spirit working through the Bible, there is every hope that He can and will do the same for you.

To prepare for the next chapter and the rest of this Bible study, please set aside some time with your phones off to hold hands, pray for one another, look each other in the eye, and have a respectful and loving conversation initiated by the following questions. We love you and are praying for you as you start this first step of your journey toward a more sacred romance!

IF GOD CAN TAKE OUR STORY AND PATIENTLY AND GRACIOUSLY RENEW OUR MINDS AND RESTORE OUR RELATIONSHIP BY THE HOLY SPIRIT WORKING THROUGH THE BIBLE, THERE IS EVERY HOPE THAT HE CAN AND WILL DO THE SAME FOR YOU.

FACE-TO-FACE QUESTIONS *for Couple Discussion*

- 1. When you first met, did you see sex more as gross, god, or gift?**
- 2. Today, do you see sex more as gross, god, or gift?**
- 3. What experiences and teachings were most helpful and unhelpful in your view of sex?**
- 4. What are some of your favorite sexual memories with your spouse?**
- 5. As you read the chapter, did the Holy Spirit convict you of anything you need to apologize to your spouse about regarding your view of sex and how it has affected your marriage relationship?**
- 6. What are you hoping God does in your marriage relationship as you study the Song of Songs together?**
- 7. How can you pray for one another as you study the Song of Songs together?**

Chapter 1



LET HIM KISS ME

1:1–7

1:1 Solomon's Song of Songs.

She

- 2** Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
for your love is more delightful than wine.
- 3** Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;
your name is like perfume poured out.
No wonder the young women love you!
- 4** Take me away with you—let us hurry!
Let the king bring me into his chambers.

Friends

We rejoice and delight in you;
we will praise your love more than wine.

She

How right they are to adore you!

- 5** Dark am I, yet lovely,
daughters of Jerusalem,
dark like the tents of Kedar,

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- like the tent curtains of Solomon.
- 6 Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because I am darkened by the sun.
My mother's sons were angry with me
and made me take care of the vineyards;
my own vineyard I had to neglect.
- 7 Tell me, you whom I love,
where you graze your flock
and where you rest your sheep at midday.
Why should I be like a veiled woman
beside the flocks of your friends?
-

In every romantic relationship, there comes a time when it transitions from a friendship, where you are getting to know one another, to the butterflies in your stomach, can't stop thinking about one another phase, and the eventual walk down the aisle to do the kind of stuff Marvin Gaye sings about.

When did this pivot from friendship to romantic relationship happen for you and your beloved? As we settle into our marriage and years or even decades pass, it's good to remind ourselves of how and why we fell in love. What was this like for you? For your beloved?

**IT'S GOOD TO REMIND OURSELVES
OF HOW AND WHY WE FELL IN LOVE.**

Grace and I met at the age of 17 at a large public high school. Although she was only five weeks older than me, she was a senior when I (Mark) was a junior. Her lifelong friend sat in front of me in a class, told me all about Grace, and introduced us. I knew about Grace but did not really get to know her until we had our first phone call and went out on our first date. Driving in my first car (a 1956 Chevy), I was so nervous to meet her pastor father and mother that I drove around their block a few times, mustering up the courage to face whatever awkwardness was required to spend time with her. Within a couple of weeks or months of spending time together, I knew that she was my dream girl. So I bought her a jewelry box as a gift and told her my plan was to put an engagement ring in it one day. Grace has been the girl I cannot live without since the day we met, and after Jesus Christ she is the greatest blessing in my life. If she were not in my life, everything would be different, and nothing would be better.

Mark was popular in high school, but I (Grace) was shy. When I heard he wanted to talk to me, I couldn't believe it. I was nervous, but he had a reputation of being nice to girls and protective, so I was interested in what that was like after being in a harmful relationship. He called me, and we talked very naturally for three hours on a phone that had a cord (back in the 80s)! From there we spent our dates getting to know each other, laughing, and building a friendship. I didn't believe him when he told me "I was the one," because I thought he was too good for me, but it all eventually came together as God planned.

The Genesis of Marriage

The first marriage in history is how the Bible begins in the opening chapters of Genesis. God made the world “good” but said one thing was “not good”—that man was alone. So God made woman and brought her to the man like a father walking his daughter down the aisle and like the pastor officiating the first marriage. Adam sang a poetic love song to his bride as the first words we have recorded from any human being in history. Adam and Eve then consummated their marriage, and they were naked without shame and “one flesh” (see Genesis 2:24). Since there were only two people alive, both Adam and Eve saw their spouse as their standard of beauty, and their sex life was a beautiful and godly part of their marriage covenant. This principle cannot be overstated in the midst of a pornified planet: we do not have a standard of beauty to which we compare our spouses, because God gifted them to us as *our* standard of beauty!

Admittedly, this means our standard of beauty changes as our spouse changes. If your marriage begins with a husband who has a full head of hair and six pack abs, but some decades later his bangs have gone home to be with the Lord and he now has cooler abs, then you need to adjust your mindset. It is helpful to try and look your best as you age for your spouse, but in the end, gravity remains undefeated, and we must give our spouse some grace just as we hope for some ourselves.

Marriage and sex started really wonderful but have become really awful. Since sin entered the world, pain, problems, and perils have invaded sex and marriage. The good news is that God can and does heal, restore, and bless people who live under the authority of His Word. We like to say that many couples need a new marriage, but they don't need a new spouse.

God can give you a *new* marriage with the *same* spouse! When both the husband and wife are filled with the Spirit and living in obedience to God's Word, they have a guaranteed success rate in marriage. This brings us to the Song of Songs, the most frank and passionate book in the Bible about sex and marriage.

WE LIKE TO SAY THAT MANY COUPLES NEED A NEW MARRIAGE, BUT THEY DON'T NEED A NEW SPOUSE.

The Song of Songs is part of an enormous body of work from Solomon that includes 3,005 proverbs and 1,005 songs. In calling it the *Song of Songs*, the point is that these are his greatest songs, much like calling Jesus Christ "King of kings" and "Lord of lords" points to His preeminence. In this chapter, we will study the first sensual song between the man and his beloved. We begin by seeing a female who is very free.

Covenant vs. Contract

The days leading up to marriage can be incredible times for learning and growing. This was our case. Between our junior and senior years of college, we were married in our hometown, which was hundreds of miles away from college. The night before our wedding, I (Mark) needed a place to sleep before we headed from our honeymoon to the rental house at our college. Grace's great-uncle John kindly invited me to spend the night at his condo. Uncle John and his wife, Aunt Gladys, did not have any children, and they loved Grace and treated her like a granddaughter. Aunt Gladys had Alzheimer's, so

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Uncle John placed her in a care facility for her own safety, as she was continually wandering and becoming lost. Uncle John remained devoted to his wife, visiting her multiple times every day even though she tragically did not remember him anymore. At every visit she would ask him who he was, and he would patiently and kindly remind her that he was her husband and had devoted his entire adult life to her.

The night before our wedding, Uncle John sat down with me in his home to make sure that I was fully devoted to Grace. He asked me if I would love her and be faithful to her, even if she forgot who I was. Uncle John was asking me to have a covenant marriage with Grace and not a contract. The Bible speaks of marriage in terms of a covenant,⁵ and it speaks of covenant relationships hundreds of times with numerous words. The heart of covenant is lovingkindness—the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, one-way love of God. Various English Bible translations use words such as love, lovingkindness, mercy, steadfast love, loyal love, devotion, commitment, and reliability to translate the concept of covenant into English. When our children were little, we would often read to them from the Jesus Storybook Bible, which calls covenant love the “Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always & Forever Love.”^{viii}

For Christians, our relationship with our spouse is supposed to follow the grace-based covenantal relationship God has with His people, whom He refers to as a beloved bride.

Marriage is a principal image in the Scriptures for describing the binding covenantal relationship between YHWH and

⁵ Proverbs 2:17; Malachi 2:14

Israel⁶ and again between Christ and the church.⁷ The foremost idea conveyed through this image is not sexual union but complete steadfastness, fidelity, and loyalty.^{ix}

Some Christian traditions consider the marriage covenant as a sacrament or means of grace. The big idea is that God is so committed to marriage that a couple who seeks to live faithfully for God and one another in covenant is blessed by God with an outpouring of His grace through the Holy Spirit to help them live in love.

The reason many marriages struggle (and even fail) is that they are more of a contract than a covenant. Contracts are needed for professional relationships at work. However, when we bring contractual thinking into marriage, it can result in tense negotiations, demands, pressure to perform, performance reviews, and punishment for failure to meet demands. Some examples might help you see this in your own marriage. In a counseling session, a husband admitted to committing adultery, and when confronted, he defended himself by blaming his wife for not giving him as much sex as he wanted. He told her, “You owed me, and now we are even.” Another couple explained during a counseling session that the root of their marriage problems was continual selfishness as every time one of them asked the other for help or a favor, the response was always, “What’s in it for me?” The most dysfunctional example was a couple who literally made job descriptions for each other and gave each other performance reviews at the end of each week. If the husband did what the wife demanded, then he got sex, and if she did what he demanded, then she got paid an allowance to spend as she pleased. They wrongly took

6 Jeremiah 3; 31:31-33; Isaiah 54:5; 62:5; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 2

7 Ephesians 5:22-32; Galatians 4:26-28; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7-10; 21:9-21; 22:17

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their work life and brought it home, treating one another like employees instead of spouses.

To win at home and at work, God’s people need to learn about both covenants and contracts. People who only have covenant relationships tend to win at home but lose at work. People who only have contractual relationships tend to win at work but lose at home. People who have contractual relationships at work and covenantal relationships at home tend to win at both. The following table is a summary of the differences between contractual and covenantal relationships:

CONTRACT	vs	COVENANT
Between 2 people		Between 3 people (God, husband, wife)
I seek my will		We seek God’s will
You serve me		We serve each other
Performance is recorded		No record of wrongs is kept
Failure is punished		Failure was punished at the cross
Win-lose		Win-win
A professional relationship		A personal relationship

As Hebrews, the couple in the Song of Songs would have been well-aware of the covenant of marriage as they had been taught from the Old Testament. We can use their marriage as a case study from which to learn positive and negative lessons for our own marriage. It is vitally important that we think covenantally about how we can love and serve our spouse, not contractually about what they can do for us. If either the husband or wife reads Song of Songs while putting together a job description for their spouse, then the entire point of marriage and this book of the Bible will be missed. Our goal is not to help you negotiate your contract but to nurture your covenant.

**IT IS VITALLY IMPORTANT THAT WE THINK
COVENANTALLY ABOUT HOW WE CAN LOVE AND
SERVE OUR SPOUSE, NOT CONTRACTUALLY ABOUT
WHAT THEY CAN DO FOR US.**

Liberating the Ladies

To open the book, the wife (Abbi) speaks first. She is the more passionate communicator in their relationship, contrary to much bad Bible teaching, religious tradition, and cultures that are more modest than God. She speaks firstly, she speaks frequently, and she speaks sensually. Throughout the book, she knows what she wants and says what she likes. It may shock religious folks, but the Bible records the flirtatious invitation of a woman to be kissed for reasons beyond the health benefits that include boosting the immune system and burning two calories. Her flirtation continues, as she says that being with her man is intoxicating like wine and as erotic as the fragrant cologne that surrounds him. She is very obviously excited about being married and going to bed with her husband. In this, we see that while men are genitally aroused, women are generally aroused—everything from his appearance to his character draws her toward him.

To begin, Abbi says she is drawn to Solomon both internally and externally. Internally, she is drawn to the strength of his character. He's a good man with a reputation or "name" that she finds pleasing and fragrant. He is the kind of man with whom all sensible "young women love" to be in a romantic relationship.

Externally, Abbi likes the way his breath and body smell, and throughout the book she is very clear to communicate that

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she finds him “handsome.” For the guys, it’s always a good idea to keep up with grooming. Most women prefer two eyebrows instead of one, a man who does not look like he snorted a cat because of all the fur coming out of his nose and ears, breath that does not smell like a garbage can, and a body that has a healthy relationship with soap and water. In addition, wearing pants instead of pajamas to the store, owning at least one shirt with buttons, and clipping your fingernails so you do not feel like the son of Wolverine in the bedroom are also recommended.

Many men complain that their wives are not this forward or free in the bedroom, but they overlook their own character outside the bedroom. The guy who is harsh, rarely home, grumpy, distant, and selfish may not see his role in his wife’s lack of desire for physical intimacy. When he spends too much money on his hobbies, refuses emotional and spiritual connection, and won’t lead each member of the family, then he has forgotten the simple fact that most of the problems *in* the bedroom are caused by problems *outside* the bedroom. Oftentimes, the solution is not for the husband to improve his sexual techniques, as if he were competing for scores from Olympic judges, but instead to cultivate better character. Your wife wants to be proud of you, and if she’s proud of you, then she’s more likely to want to be with you. Many men fixate on what their wives will do in the bedroom, but most women are focused first on who he is outside the bedroom. Think about it this way: foreplay includes reading your Bible, praying, raising your hands during worship in church, doing the dishes, apologizing when you are wrong, putting the toilet seat down so she is not routinely baptized in the middle of the night, and not having the emotional disposition of an active volcano. To state it plainly, the reason Abbi wants to sleep in the same bed with her man is because she feels safe with his character and

served by his effort to look and smell different than the guy in the middle of the evolutionary chart they had on the wall in our public school.

As Abbi contemplates their special night of sizzling sex, most English translations say she was looking forward to their lovemaking because he had worked hard to “draw” her to himself. Like gravity, his character drew her in.

There are four ways to move a person:

- We can *push* them. This happens in domineering, abusive, threatening, and punishing relationships.
- We can *carry* them. This happens in enabling, co-dependent, and unhealthy relationships.
- We can *drag* them. This happens in inconsiderate, controlling, and selfish relationships.
- We can *draw* them. This happens in loving, healthy, safe, and fun relationships.

Solomon’s character draws Abbi to him. Although she is attracted to her man, excited to be with him, and overt and honest with him, there is still one big problem she talks through with her friends. She is feeling self-conscious and unattractive, so she names her insecurities. Like Cinderella, she does not fit her culture’s stereotypical definition of beauty.

Abbi’s mother and brothers are mentioned in the book but not her father. In addition, she was poor. Apparently, Abbi had no dad, and she worked outside in the hot sun, which left her dirty, sweaty, and sunburned. Abbi’s dark hair (like goat hair tents, we read) was probably in a ponytail or tied up in some other way most days while she worked. To help provide for her family, this young woman spent her days with dirt under her fingernails and callouses on her hands.

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Various cultures have differing standards of beauty. In Abbi's culture, the wealthy women stayed home to keep their skin pale while being tended to by their servants, not working away from home sweating in the sun and getting a farmer's tan.

As we have learned, God does not give us a standard of beauty; rather, He gives us our spouse as our standard for beauty not to be compared to anyone else. Job 31:1 echoes this idea by saying, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully."

We live in the most difficult period of human history to keep our eyes from seeing what is not good for our souls or marriages. We now have screens in our homes, cars, offices, and phones that are constantly bombarding us with lustful images luring us to covet. Additionally, our over-sexualized culture encourages people to adorn themselves with underwear as outerwear. There is a constant battle for our eyes, which is really a spiritual war for the health of our marriages. The world's system continually and aggressively tries to make us insecure about our own appearances, dissatisfied with our spouses, and lustful after anyone other than the one person with whom God permits our sexual activity.

In the Song of Songs, this passionate young woman was transitioning from being a peasant to a princess, and she was insecure about her appearance. Imagine how much more difficult this is in our day with photoshop and social media? Everyone has imperfections, of which they are likely well aware. To serve our spouses, it's a good idea for us to be careful stewards of our health with things like a wholesome diet and lifestyle, including exercise, grooming, and dressing in ways that prepare and present our bodies for our spouses.

I (Grace) know that as women, we see all our flaws, so our husbands don't need to point them out. Rather, compliments and encouragement make us want to keep presenting

ourselves as feminine and desirable. It is easy for us to get discouraged with the many life and body changes we go through with pregnancy, aging, and hormonal imbalances, but if a wife is the standard of beauty for her husband, then she will still feel free and safe in his arms.

Healthy Family and Friends

Notice the inclusion of close family and friends who care for the woman throughout the book. In any romantic relationship, a good guy will get to know the people who love the woman he is falling in love with early in their relationship.

He will be overt, not hiding who he is or avoiding getting to know them, as is illustrated throughout the Song of Songs. Conversely, a bad guy will avoid the people who care for the woman, isolate her, and make their relationship covert, which leaves her in harm's way. In the Song of Songs, the people who know Abbi also know Solomon, and the people who love her also love him; they give their approval and advice throughout their relationship. This puts her in a safe place with a safe man.

The "friends" who speak approvingly of their relationship are the couple's wise counsel. In the wisdom book of Proverbs, which Solomon also wrote, much is said about wisdom and seeking wise counsel. Every couple needs wise counsel, including family or friends, rather than venting to the people around us, dragging our immediate family into our marriages and sex lives, or betraying privacy and posting our private matters publicly online. Since many couples do not have wise, godly, and healthy extended family members, God's family in a local church is the best place to find spiritual family and friends who share your values and can walk

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with you wisely and discreetly. We cannot stress this enough. We love the local church, and while every church family has its problems (just like any family), the Bible is clear that it's not good to be alone. God's people must not forsake regularly gathering together (see Hebrews 10:25).

Knowing that Solomon is busy shepherding the nation as Israel's king, Abbi laments having to share so much of her man's time and energy with his job. So she meets him for lunch but is careful not to do so in a way that resembles the prostitutes, who also pursued men working away from home. She is persistent and passionate in a way that is godly and not like the godless women of the pagan people surround Israel. She is creating sacred time together and speaking honestly about her desires and fears for their relationship.

Protecting Priorities

One perennially popular myth regarding romance is that it happens naturally and without effort. People often think of this effortless romance as finding their "soul mate"—that one person with whom they will connect and fit without even trying. This powerful myth began in ungodly ancient Greek mythology and was popularized by Plato. It also has expressions in Hinduism and Buddhism but not in Judaism or Christianity. It was said that two married people were conjoined at the rear, and contained within each couple was an entire gender spectrum of three sexes, genders, and genitalia—male, female, and androgynous. The Greek god Zeus became angry and cut humans in half, sending them to live lonely, disconnected, and separated lives. Ever since, people have been seeking their "soul mate"—literally the one person

who has the other half of their shared soul. Hinduism teaches that you might not find that person in this life, but through multiple incarnations, you may finally get it right.

Nothing could be further from the Christian faith or the truth. We do not have a “soul mate.” People no more “fall in love” than they fall into health or wisdom. It takes work to have a good marriage and overcome the obstacles that are always working against us. In this section of the Song of Songs, the couple is dealing with the realities of life. Solomon is busy at work, and Abbi’s life is full of responsibilities that are crowding out their time and energy. Their romantic discussion includes the very practical matter of when and where to meet. In other words, they are scheduling time together. Abbi says she does not want to be like an immoral woman who is chasing a man around, so she invites Solomon to make their relationship a priority by letting her know what his schedule is and when and where they can get time together.

We were not great at this early in our marriage, and it cost us dearly. Between a lot of work in planting a church, starting a church in our living room (that God grew and led to almost 10,000 baptisms!), adding five kids, plus extended family, friends, and everyone and everything else, our lives felt like an avalanche we were buried under, spending every waking moment seeking to shovel out to no avail.

We were so busy working *in* our marriage that we did not work *on* our marriage. We would never have lived in a home that was not designed by an architect for health and safety, but somehow, we had moved our family into a life that was not intentionally architected. That needed to change, and *four little things made an enormous difference.*

First, we got a *shared digital calendar* so that our lives and schedules were organized and together as one. It’s hard to be

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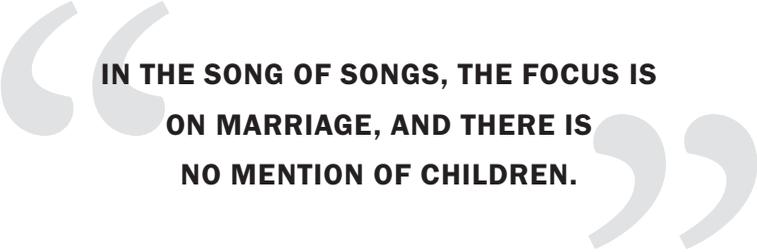
“one” as God says if you do not intentionally and practically schedule your life together.

Second, we scheduled *a weekly sync meeting* to discuss the practical details of life that need to be talked through, prayed about, planned for, and put in the budget and on the calendar. This was different than our weekly date night, where we planned something fun and romantic to build our friendship. We learned the hard way that when we did not have a sync meeting, our date night would turn into a sync meeting, which was as romantic as a staff meeting at work. The benefits of the sync meeting include knowing how to pray for each other every day, knowing that certain days will be more exhausting or stressful so we can serve and give grace to one another, and being able to check in throughout the day with a call or text to see how things are going because we know what is going on. The sync meeting is especially helpful to get a unified plan for Sabbath days, holidays, vacations, and busy seasons, such as when our three boys played as many combined baseball games as a Major League team (and needed to be driven to every game and practice).

Third, we started spending time each year on *a vision retreat*. During this special time, we prayed together and planned out our year as best we could according to our priorities, which are:

1. Healthy relationship with God as Christians
2. Healthy relationship with each other as a married couple
3. Healthy relationship with each of our children as parents
4. Healthy work-life balance as employees at work
5. Healthy relationship with extended family members and close Christian friends

After decades of pastoral ministry, one of the most frequent mistakes we see Christian couples make is collapsing priorities 2 and 3 into a general category called “family.” To be sure, children are a blessing, and God cares greatly for our families. We fully believe this as the parents of five children. However, we were married before we had children in our home, and we want to remain married after our children leave our home. In the Song of Songs, the focus is on marriage, and there is no mention of children.



**IN THE SONG OF SONGS, THE FOCUS IS
ON MARRIAGE, AND THERE IS
NO MENTION OF CHILDREN.**

When children overtake a marriage as the constant priority, at least two painful things occur. First, the spouses feel neglected and even jealous of the children because the marriage is not the priority it should be. Second, when the children leave home, the glue that held the marriage together loses its connectivity. The couple will often fall apart or start demanding that their grown children give them grandchildren, because their marriage cannot function with just the two of them. We are of the age where we see many Christian marriages implode as children leave home. We love our children, but our marriage is our priority over them. One of the best things we can do for our grown children is model for them a healthy marriage and a secure set of parents they can depend on and not have to worry about. We want the same for you.

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If you have children, the goal is to raise and then launch them to build their own marriages, enjoy their own children, and look forward to their futures. If your marriage is broken, then your children will likely keep looking back in concern for *your* marriage, and their burden for you will hinder their ability to pour energy into their own marriages and families, which then risks extending your unhealthy marriage patterns into generations of your family's future legacy. The best thing you can do in every season of your marriage for you, your spouse, and your children is to make your relationship with God and your spouse your top two priorities so that you and your marriage are healthy and a blessing rather than a burden for your kids and grandkids.

Fourth, we learned to *put fun on the calendar*. I (Mark) tend to be more stressed than Grace. For me to change my pace, I need to change my place. To give my mind a break, I need to break away from our routine. Grace is different, and we've had to learn how to spend Sabbath and vacation together through trial and error. For me, always having fun on the calendar is a necessity even if it's simple. I need to know that in addition to at least one regular weekly date, we have future plans to do a romantic overnight together, go on a trip, and have a relaxing and romantic adventure. I'm also the party planner for the kids; arranging fun and making memories is what I love to do. Life will not automatically provide you breaks and memories, so you need to create these sacred windows of opportunity on the calendar and in the budget. In the Song of Songs, this is what Abbi is speaking about—inviting Solomon to take her away, which is the very thing that happens in the next chapter. Before we learn about En Gedi, though, we first have an intimate exercise for you.

The goal of our time together learning God's Word is not just information but also application that leads to transformation. Our goal is to encourage you both to connect with God and each other to deepen and strengthen those relationships.

When you sit down to discuss these questions face-to-face, please look each other in the eye. Much of marriage is shoulder-to-shoulder getting things done. When we are fighting, we are back-to-back, not looking at one another or drawing each other in. The key to a healthy, holy, and happy marriage is getting lots of face-to-face time, looking one another in the eye, and building an intimate friendship. The default we easily fall into is a shoulder-to-shoulder relationship, and when we are stuck there for too long, we slip into back-to-back. The only way out is to get time to discuss and pray kindly and lovingly face-to-face. Please make this your habit for these discussion times.

Lastly, please know we love you and are praying for you!

FACE-TO-FACE QUESTIONS *for Couple Discussion*

- 1. How are you doing at open and honest communication about your passionate desires and fearful insecurities in your relationship? What needs to be said in a kind, loving, and inviting way?**
- 2. What are your honest initial thoughts about the woman speaking first, speaking most, and being passionate and strongly vocal about her desires and concerns for their relationship?**
- 3. Who are the friends you want to be wise counsel in your life? What people have a voice into your relationship who are not wise and should not be invited into the details and decision-making of your marriage, such as unhealthy friends or extended family?**
- 4. Is there anything in your spouse's character that you can encourage and show gratitude for? Is there anything in your spouse's character that you can lovingly and kindly request improvement on, responding humbly and not defensively?**
- 5. When will you have a shared calendar, weekly sync meeting, and weekly date? How are you doing at making your relationship a priority in relation to work and other responsibilities?**
- 6. How can you pray for each other this week?**

Chapter 2



EN GEDI

1:8–2:7

Friends

1:8 If you do not know, most beautiful of women,
follow the tracks of the sheep
and graze your young goats
by the tents of the shepherds.

He

- 9** I liken you, my darling, to a mare
among Pharaoh's chariot horses.
- 10** Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,
your neck with strings of jewels.
- 11** We will make you earrings of gold,
studded with silver.

She

- 12** While the king was at his table,
my perfume spread its fragrance.
- 13** My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh
resting between my breasts.

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14 My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms
from the vineyards of En Gedi.

He

15 How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves.

She

16 How handsome you are, my beloved!
Oh, how charming!
And our bed is verdant.

He

17 The beams of our house are cedars;
our rafters are firs.

She

2:1 I am a rose of Sharon,
a lily of the valleys.

He

2 Like a lily among thorns
is my darling among the young women.

She

3 Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest
is my beloved among the young men.
I delight to sit in his shade,
and his fruit is sweet to my taste.

4 Let him lead me to the banquet hall,
and let his banner over me be love.

5 Strengthen me with raisins,
refresh me with apples,
for I am faint with love.

- 6 His left arm is under my head,
and his right arm embraces me.
- 7 Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and by the does of the field:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.
-

There once was a couple we were trying to help who was in real marital crisis. The husband was very overextended at work, and the wife was terribly busy at home with young children and helping to care for her aging parents. Their marriage was functional but not fun. They were roommates but not bonded together like a married couple should be. He was working hard to provide financially but was not providing much emotionally or spiritually. To make matters worse, the husband was so controlling of their finances that he thought spending money on fun and making memories was wasteful. His wife felt discouraged by his long hours at work and the fact that as their net-worth increased, her self-worth decreased.

Their story is common as finances are consistently listed as the biggest marital stressors. As we talked to this typical couple, it seemed obvious that they needed to spend some money to get time away together on romantic dates and trips and to invest not just in their retirement but also their romance. The problem was they had different money personalities.

While financial experts use various terms, there are seven general money personalities:

1. The Hoarder: "Money gives me security."
2. The Spender: "Money gives me rewards."
3. The Avoider: "Money and bills stress me out."

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4. The Hater: “Money is evil and dangerous.”
5. The Manipulator: “Money buys me influence/control.”
6. The Show-Off: “Money gives me status through possessions.”
7. The Giver: “Money is how I show God and people love.”^x

The husband was a hoarder and an avoider. Growing up extremely poor with a single mother, he did not learn about money, so he didn't like to talk about it. He was very tight with finances and put a lot of pressure on his wife to spend next to nothing. But she was a spender and a giver. She liked to give gifts to people and had no problem spending money on building their marriage relationship.

When we sat down to discuss different things that they could do to have fun, spend time together, and make memories, she was eager to share her list of ideas. At the top of her list were spa days, dinner dates, trips, updating the furniture in their bedroom to make it romantic, and getting some work done on their bathroom to give it a vacation feel. Some of her ideas had a big price tag, and others came with less expense. She did not care much how much was spent but rather that her husband showed he cared with some spending.

The wife's face sank when her husband said he could not afford the money for such “luxuries.” The truth is, he had a fantastic job and a good income, and because they were frugal, they had a lot of money in the bank and no debt beyond their mortgage. He was thinking about the pain of spending money, while she was thinking about joy of sharing memories.

Eventually, we asked him how much a good divorce attorney was and how much they would have to spend to get divorced. We had him sketch out on paper where they would be financially if their dying marriage did not survive. Once he

calculated the staggering amount, he looked up at his wife, apologized, said he loved her, and committed to spend the money on their current marriage and not a future divorce. That was a drastic exercise, but it made him realize his marriage was a wise investment. In that moment, something healed in their relationship. He told her he would love to go on adventures, have dates, take trips, and make memories with her. Then he apologized for having been too fixated on money. The husband promised he would set aside a percentage of the budget for his wife to help other people and spend on planning fun for them as well. Every month, he put money aside and trusted her do with it as she pleased. Grateful for his heart change, she stewarded the money well, gave to God, helped others, and made sure they always had fun on the calendar to look forward to as a way of building their marriage friendship.

As an aside, we would also warn you to be incredibly careful about accepting money from family or friends with any strings attached. If you've ever seen a puppet show, the strings on the puppet belong to the puppet master who uses them to control the puppet. Sadly, many people, especially parents and grandparents, offer money with strings so they can be the puppet masters in your marriage. As a married couple, God expects *you* to make the decisions for your family. Extended family and friends whom you respect and invite into your life as wise counsel can give you their advice to help you make your own decisions. However, some people want to make the decisions for your family, so they give money to control things such as where you live, how you vacation, where your children attend school, and which church you join. That kind of giving is not grace based but is manipulative and controlling. The couple we just examined had a relative who would give money to the husband with a lot of demands regarding how it

was to be spent, which ultimately contributed to his failure to be generous with his wife and their marriage.

Most couples fall in love by planning and enjoying fun adventures together. Sadly, the pain often comes when the planning stops, and we fall into the rut of our marital routine. We get so busy doing the dishes, walking the dog, and folding the laundry that we forget to make plans, have fun, and make the Song of Songs sing again.

MOST COUPLES FALL IN LOVE BY PLANNING AND ENJOYING FUN ADVENTURES TOGETHER. SADLY, THE PAIN OFTEN COMES WHEN THE PLANNING STOPS, AND WE FALL INTO THE RUT OF OUR MARITAL ROUTINE.

In this section of the Song of Songs, Solomon and Abbi get advice from wise counsel, flirt with one another, and plan an epic trip to their favorite romantic destination, En Gedi. He also spends some money to buy her nice jewelry to show her she is a priority in his heart, life, budget, and schedule. James 1:22 says, “Do not deceive yourselves by just listening to his word; instead, put it into practice” (GNT). Is that what you do? Where are some of the favorite places you have gone together? Where were your favorite memories made?

I (Mark) have a lot of amazing memories I share with Grace. Growing up in a working-class family with five kids, I did not travel much, because my dad was always working construction to feed our family. We lived next to an airport, and as the planes flew over our house, I often looked up, wondering where they were going and longing for the day when I could see the nation and world. As a pastor, I have been

blessed to visit much of America and somewhere around two dozen nations. Whenever possible, I have taken Grace and our five kids with me so that we could explore the world together. One of my favorite trips, however, did not involve the kids. To celebrate our 50th birthdays, we went to Germany to tour the historical sites of Martin and Katherine Luther and learn more about their marriage and ministry. We finished the trip on the romantic lower Rhine River. We stayed in an old inn overlooking the water and spent days traveling by ferry to visit small towns. We sat outside to eat meals, talked without interruption, explored museums, hiked to old churches, and popped into artisan shops. We had no children, no schedule, and no work. I loved having Grace all to myself, waking up whenever we wanted, going wherever we wanted, and doing whatever we wanted with the sun kissing our faces.

A favorite trip in the US for me (Grace) was a short flight to Montana. We stayed in a lodge on a lake, took walks in town, went boating, sat out at night by the bonfire, slept in, did a Vision Retreat (led by Jimmy Evans), explored towns and antique stores, had dinner with a pastor and his wife, ate at local eateries, and went to Glacier National Park (including rafting on the river). It was so fun being together as a couple and experiencing a variety of scenery and activities.

Wise Counsel

Throughout the Song of Songs, the “friends” continue to speak into the relationship. These friends are what Proverbs calls wise counsel. Any couple who does not have close relationships with godly people is not in a healthy place, because there is no one to speak into their life together. Worse still, welcoming your

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extended family, coworkers, or unhealthy people to know about or speak into your relationship is generally a bad thing to do. Even worse is inviting ungodly or unhealthy people to have a view and a voice into your marriage.

For someone to be wise counsel, you need to know they are wise, and they need to know they are counsel. A wise person lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, knows the Bible, embraces reality, has empathy for others, takes responsibility for themselves, is humble enough to learn and repent, and thinks in terms of legacy. Different people have wisdom in different areas, which is why your marriage is best served by a “multitude of counselors.”⁸

Who are the good people for you to seek wise counsel from in various areas such as Scripture, marriage, finances, parenting, scheduling, health, and work? Most of the time, these people are found in a good church as you get connected, serve, and make relationships with other couples. Who are the older couples walking ahead of you who could serve as wise counsel for you? Who are the couples in your life stage who can walk alongside you as friends and wise counsel? Who are the singles and couples younger than you and walking behind you for whom you can serve as wise counsel?

Once you have identified a small list of people to invite to be your wise counsel, then you should pray a lot as a couple about approaching them and both agree that you feel safe with them seeing and speaking into your marriage. Once that list is finished, you need to meet with the people you want to serve as your wise counsel and ask if you could learn from them because you respect them. As a general rule, you should not ask for a lot of their time; rather, ask if you can schedule time with them when you get stuck and need advice to get unstuck. When you meet with them,

⁸ Proverbs 11:4 NKJV

arrive on time, come prepared with a list of questions, be respectful, listen a lot, take notes, and then take action on what they tell you to do. You should also ask them for any other resources they would recommend, such as a class, book, podcast, or other help that you can take responsibility for and integrate into your life. Wise people do not want to waste their time, but they do want to invest it. If you do not burden them very much, and you act on their counsel with humility and gratitude, then wise people tend to be immensely helpful for a long time.

The people you welcome into your relationship as a couple will either help or hinder your marriage's health. This section begins with the couple's wise counsel giving good advice to help them build their intimacy by encouraging mutual pursuit between the man and woman.

Grace and I have wise counsel for us as individuals and as a couple. We do not confide in or seek counsel from people whom we do not agree should be invited to see and speak into our marriage. Only godly men should serve as wise counsel for a husband, and only godly women should serve as wise counsel for a wife. Only a mutually trusted and agreed upon couple in a good marriage should serve as wise counsel for your marriage. The recurrence of the "friends" throughout the Song of Songs shows the importance of godly, safe, and wise relationships with people who love God, love us, and help us walk together in God's will for our marriage.

Compliments and Nicknames

One of the first things we learn after opening a bank account is the difference between a deposit and a withdrawal. If you do not keep your deposits greater than your withdrawals, then

you will bankrupt your account, which can lead to the bank ultimately closing your account altogether. A marriage is a bit like a bank. Compliments are deposits, and criticisms are withdrawals. If we criticize more than we compliment, then we can bankrupt the marriage account, possibly even causing our spouse to close their heart to us. The key to keeping the marriage account full is being intentional about making frequent deposits in the form of sincere compliments.

A MARRIAGE IS A BIT LIKE A BANK. COMPLIMENTS ARE DEPOSITS, AND CRITICISMS ARE WITHDRAWALS.

We see the husband and wife compliment one another throughout the Song of Songs. In this section, the references to sheep and goats, along with mares and horses, may not immediately register in our imagination unless you grew up on a farm, but that's what is happening. The man gives specific compliments about what he finds beautiful and delightful about his beloved. Having 12,000 magnificent Egyptian horses and 1,400 chariots as King of Israel, he likens her to a beautiful mare that stands alone, meaning Abbi is the kind of woman that every man wishes they could be with forever. If you grew up in a city like us, then the only thing we know about horses is that we don't know much about horses. From what we can tell, a horse is a boy, and a mare is a girl. If you are a boy horse hanging out with 11,999 guy horses and one girl horse gallops in, then she is going to cause quite a stir, and that's the gist of this farm flirtation. If you think he's calling himself a stud that gets really excited around his mare, then you get the point of this ranching romance.

Nicknames are one of the most powerful ways we make deposits and withdrawals in our marriage accounts. We tend to give nicknames to the people we love or the ones we dislike the most, and sadly, people often have both kinds for their spouses. Negative, critical nicknames are curses used to trigger deep hurt in spouses and establish an identity for them that is unchanging, hopeless, and discouraging. Positive, complimentary nicknames lift our spouses up, encourage them, and bless them.

Over the years, we've heard of some fun nicknames with couples. We know husbands referred to as "hubby," "dude of dudes," "my man," "cowboy," "big sexy," the "stud," "stud muffin," "fuzzy buddy," "Mr. Dreamy," and "best friend." We also know wives referred to as "sweetie pie," "honey," the "curvy cutie," "hot momma," "princess," the "queen," and "beauty." Solomon gives Abbi the nicknames "my beloved" and "my darling" and promises to give her gifts of jewelry that he has picked out to remind her of his affection and devotion.

How we see ourselves is often through the eyes of our spouse. This viewpoint can be a wonderful or woeful reality depending upon how our spouse chooses to see us. When Abbi says, "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys" (2:1), she explains that she sees herself as unattractive and not unique, special, or valuable. She compares herself to the rose of Sharon, a common wildflower that grew like a weed. When Solomon says, "Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the young women" (2:2), he is inviting her to see herself through his eyes,

**HOW WE SEE OURSELVES IS OFTEN
THROUGH THE EYES OF OUR SPOUSE.**

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with other women as thorns and her as a lovely lily. Whether we are flirting with and complimenting our spouses or fighting with and criticizing our spouses, we are inviting them to see themselves through our eyes.

Here are some examples to get you started:

- I love you because _____.
- What I most appreciate about you is _____.
- The reason I fell in love with you was because _____.
- My favorite memories with you are _____.
- What makes you special is _____.
- What I look forward to most in our future together is _____.
- Thank you for _____.

The Bible talks a lot about sowing and reaping. In marriage, this principle is constantly at play. If you raise your voice to your spouse, then you will probably get a raised voice in return. If you sweetly hug your spouse, then you will probably get a hug in response. The principle of sowing and reaping appears throughout the Song of Songs as the man and woman take turns speaking to one another, complimenting one another, and flirting with one another.

This is especially true if either party was bullied or grew up in a verbally abusive home. Tragically, some negative nicknames, criticisms, and vicious voices ring so loud in our ears

throughout our lives that only a steady echo of encouraging blessings can drown out the discouraging curses.

For a woman to be free, she needs to feel safe. The freedom of this woman is in large part attributable to her trust in the character of her man. When Abbi says, “Let his banner over me be love” (2:4), it is a military term taken from the battlefield. When ancient nations would go to war in hand-to-hand combat, the soldiers would get scattered, so a large banner or flag of their nation would be lifted high above the battlefield. Vulnerable soldiers simply needed to look up to the flag or banner, and it pointed them to the place of safety from the raging war. Abbi is saying that Solomon loves her, and he’s tough for her but also tender with her. He will not fight *with* her, but he will fight *for* her. If she stays close to him, then he will lead her wisely, cherish her deeply, provide for her generously, and protect her fiercely. In this way, he is a bit like Jesus, who is both a Lion and a Lamb.⁹ As a Lion, Jesus goes to war with Satan and demons to defend us. As a Lamb, Jesus is tender and kind with us. In Hell, Jesus rules as Lion. In Heaven, Jesus rules as Lamb. As both a tough Lion for us and tender Lamb with us, His banner over His bride, the Church, is “love.” In this section of the Song of Songs, Abbi is saying her man reminds her of our God-Man.

The opposite of a good man is one who is harsh with his wife. Colossians 3:19 says, “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” First Peter 3:7 adds, “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered” (ESV). A husband can yell louder and push harder than his wife, and an evil man will use his strength to

⁹ See Revelation 5:5-6.

dominate his wife. A good man will use his power to defend his wife. That's the trust every woman needs in her man.

I (Mark) grew up in a neighborhood with gangs, drugs, and prostitution nearby. I had a knife pulled on me for the first time when I was in elementary school, so I learned to be constantly aware of my surroundings and safety. Grace grew up a bit more naïve, and not having any brothers, she did not really understand the common, messed up male mindset. As soon as we started hanging out as friends, I became protective of her. For example, one time we were holding hands on a walk, and I moved to the side closest to the road. She asked why I did that, and I told her I needed to be closest to the road so that if a car swerved, I would get hit instead of her. Another time, a hostess seated us at a restaurant, and I asked for the corner booth. I motioned for Grace to slide in so I could be on the edge closest to the door. She asked why I did that, and I explained I needed to see who was coming in and out so I could protect her from any potential danger. At first, Grace thought I was a little over the top, but through the years she's come to understand that her safety is my priority, which I later extended to our children once we were blessed to be parents.

A Sachet of Myrrh Resting Between My Breasts?

In response to her manly man, Abbi speaks in a very flirtatious and even erotic way by saying she wants him to rest his head between her breasts. God's Word is frank without being crass, but some religious people find it too honest, which has led to some odd and funny interpretations throughout church history. For example, some religious leaders have said this is a metaphorical reference to the Shekinah glory between the

two cherubim angels that stood over the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle, or that the two breasts are the Old and New Covenants that bring us the pure milk of the Word, and the satchet of myrrh is Christ between them. This part of the anatomy is mentioned multiple times in the Song of Songs and should remind religious folks that if they are more conservative than God, then it's a good idea to scoot to the left.

There are two ways God's people can err in relation to sex. The first way is going far into sin. This is what happens in the world, which causes people in the Church to overreact to the world rather than returning to the Word. The second error and sad result happens when the Church teaches on sex but does not go far enough into the freedoms and pleasures God intends for a husband and wife. Instead of naming all that God allows and explaining why the best sex is within the protective limits of God's commands, much Christian teaching on sex focuses on what God forbids and allegorizes what God says about the freedoms of sex, because they believe they should be able to draw the line and then tell God where it is. The Bible is clear on the heart and actions of sexual sin, so we don't need to add to God's Word either by pushing it forward like the world does or pulling it back like the Church does. If a godly wife speaks repeatedly of her body and the husband does the same throughout a book of the Bible, then believers have God's permission to do the same.

MUCH CHRISTIAN TEACHING ON SEX FOCUSES ON WHAT GOD FORBIDS AND ALLEGORIZES WHAT GOD SAYS ABOUT THE FREEDOMS OF SEX, BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE THEY SHOULD BE ABLE TO DRAW THE LINE AND THEN TELL GOD WHERE IT IS.

En Gedi

In their fun flirtation, Abbi mentions a place called En Gedi. The man and woman lived in a barren desert, but within it was a beautiful oasis that still exists to this day. We personally visited it on a trip to Israel. Out of that parched, barren desert springs forth fresh water that feeds an oasis of lush plants covered by ample shade. Apparently, this was one of Abbi's favorite places to spend time with her beloved. The application for us is that we need to find ways to make En Gedi places in our relationships. These places include our bedrooms, homes, and vacation getaways where we can relax, sabbath, make memories, and build our relationships.

**WE NEED TO FIND WAYS TO MAKE EN GEDI
PLACES IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS.**

A romantic retreat is precisely what happens in this section of the Song of Songs. In addition to going to En Gedi, Abbi talks about having En Gedi in their home by saying, "Our bed is verdant" (1:16). Solomon replies, "The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs" (1:17). Since heaven is our forever home and it will be a perfect place, we should set up our homes as best we can to practice for our eternal homecoming.

When our kids were little, we told them our bedroom was set apart and not for them. We had a lock on the door so they would not walk in unexpectedly to discover how they got here, and we asked them to knock before entering. The kids did not play in our bedroom, and as a result, it was not covered

in crackers, half-eaten lollipops, or action figures like the rest of the house. We do not bring our laptops to our bedroom, because it's not a place for work. In the Bible, for something to be holy, it means it is set apart for a specific use, and we wanted our bedroom to be holy and set apart for us to connect and rest. We set up our bedroom and our bathroom as a place to sneak away for a little slice of En Gedi at night once the kids went to bed. This is an important discussion to have: what does En Gedi look like at home and away from home for your marriage?

For me (Mark), the outdoor space is just as important as the indoor space. For the first decades of our marriage, I suffered from Seasonal Affective Disorder (a type of depression). The long, wet, and dark winters took a physical and emotional toll on me, and I spent so much time checking the weather app on my phone and planning trips to sunny places that the kids started joking that I was "solar powered." Today, living in Arizona has been one of the greatest blessings in my life. I love to study outside, eat outside, hike outside, and sit by the fire in the cool nights outside. One of my favorite things is simply holding Grace's hand and going for a walk in our neighborhood as we enjoy the desert sunshine and fresh air. Inside, I've always liked having my library and study at home so that my family sees me study the Bible and has access to my books so they can study for themselves. And I must always have fun on the calendar. I am the one in our family who is always asking where everyone wants to go and what memories they want to make. From day trips to exotic trips around the globe, I love to have En Gedi on the calendar so we always have something to look forward to.

For me (Grace), I had to get creative in our first dozen years of marriage since we didn't have a slush fund to pull from. With all the "decorating on a budget" resources we have now,

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it's much easier to create restful places at home. I had to work on getting organized (not my natural gifting) and make it a priority to arrange our room and bathroom into a place of fun and beauty. Even having fun dates at home that transitioned our room into a "vacation" destination with beach towels (minus the sand, of course), picnics, fruity drinks, music, and fun, sexy attire served as a getaway when we couldn't actually get away. I loved all the trips we were blessed to take as well, and Mark was great at planning those for us. I researched the areas and used my gift of saving money on lodging and activities, and Mark would dream about what we both wanted to do together to build new memories. We also asked people who wanted to give us gifts for holidays and birthdays to give us gift cards to restaurants and movie theaters so we could use them for date nights. The point is to get resourceful if finances are tight; find creative and fun ways not only to date until you are married but also to continue dating after you are married.

What would it look like for you to go to En Gedi and bring En Gedi home? Intentionally planning and organizing your home is an effective way to start. Some years ago, after we taught this section of the Song of Songs, a couple scheduled a counseling meeting at our church. The husband lamented that their sex life was neither free nor frequent. The wife immediately became defensive and said it was his fault. As their disagreement escalated, she explained her frustration that he never put a tub in their private bathroom or a lock on the door to their bedroom. The wife really wanted to spend her nights in the tub sipping wine after putting the kids in bed, and somehow this man who was a contractor never got around to what you would expect to be his highest priority. To make matters worse, on more than one occasion when the couple was intimate, their young kids opened the door and

walked in to see mom and dad “wrestling.” The hapless husband was one trip away to the hardware store to start singing the Song of Songs with his wife and saving a small fortune on counseling bills for his kids, but he failed to see the obvious and practical solution to their sexual frustrations.

His Fruit Is Sweet to My Taste?

As the couple dream about time away together, things start heating up from their flirting. Someone has said that when it comes to sex, a man is a microwave, and a woman is a crockpot. A man is pretty much ready all the time, and if not, just give him a millisecond, and he can be ready. A woman, however, warms up slowly and stays hot longer. Flirtatious compliments are a good way to warm her up throughout the day, which explains why he gives specific compliments to her, including calling her beautiful and loyal. The mention of doves is noteworthy because they have one mate, they are faithful to one another for their entire lives, and the dove is the symbol of purity and peace. Solomon also says Abbi is like a beautiful lily among thorn bushes in his heart compared to other women.

Using poetic language, Abbi says she looks forward to going to bed with him, having him stroke her body, performing oral sex on him, and being passionate for so long that they will grow tired and possibly need to stop for snacks to refuel, including items that were considered ancient aphrodisiacs. The poetic language is their flirtatious and creative way to be privately frank without being crass or clinical. They neither fall into the kind of language gross guys use in the locker room, nor do they use the clinical terms of a doctor’s office.

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They also don't discuss body parts the same way our three-year-old child used to do. A healthy married couple has their own poetic ways of speaking intimately while speaking in a way that is neither crass nor clinical.

If you are wondering if we made a typo and mistakenly mentioned terrific oral sex when we really meant to talk about a tyrannosaurus rex, then you need to learn to put the fun back in fundamentalism. This 3,000-year-old book of the Bible has a lot of things that were never made into a Veggie Tale cartoon, and this is perhaps the most obvious reason why. Here's exactly what Abbi says by the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit who inspired Moses to write the Ten Commandments and Paul to pen the doctrine of justification by faith. In Song of Songs 2:3 she says,

Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest
is my beloved among the young men.
I delight to sit in his shade,
and his fruit is sweet to my taste.

Knowing that religious prudes and nerds will want to criticize us for saying what this really means, we will now use an old trick where we quote the experts as our sexperts. Old Testament scholar Joseph Dillow says in the Bible commentary *Solomon on Sex*, "It is possible that here we have a faint and delicate reference to an oral genital caress."^{xi} One Bible commentator with more degrees than Fahrenheit says, "She ... tells how she delighted to shelter under the lover and to taste his fruit. It would be difficult to read this as anything other than a metaphor for sexual fulfillment. The view that women do not or should not find pleasure in sex, found in cultures both primitive and sophisticated, is plainly not shared by our

poet.”^{xii} In summary, Abbi likes to do things that Solomon also likes her doing.

Song of Songs shows the fullness of their sexual freedom. The couple has pillow talk, caressing, and oral sex in this section and also in another, as well as a marital removal of clothing (striptease?) near the end of the book. These freedoms are not, however, prescribed for every godly marriage. The Bible repeatedly speaks about our consciences, and we are encouraged to honor both God’s Word over us and the conscience He placed within us.¹⁰ For Christians, when it comes to debatable things, including the wine they drink and sex illustrated in the Song of Songs, every individual and couple needs to consider the following three categories:

1. Receive: Can I receive this act or action as a gift from God that is not forbidden by His Word or my conscience? If so, then I am free to receive and enjoy it.
2. Reject: Is this something that neither God’s Word nor my conscience can receive? If so, then I just reject it.
3. Redeem: Is this something that can be used in a godly or ungodly way, but according to the Bible, it is a freedom, and my conscience is clear to receive this act or action as a gift from God that is good if done rightly?

These questions keep us from imposing freedoms on people whose consciences have not freed them or restricting freedoms from people whose consciences permit them. These questions push us to the Scriptures, prayer, our own consciences, the leading of the Holy Spirit, and loving conversations with our spouses, while also possibly seeking wise

¹⁰ Romans 2:14–15; 1 Timothy 1:5; 4:2; Titus 1:15

counsel. These same categories of questions can be applied to a host of sexual questions the Bible does not answer but that modern day couples have, which includes the use of sex toys, frankness of pillow talk, various sexual positions and locations, and the intimate use of technology solely between husband and wife when they are separated for extended periods of time, such as a military deployment or business travel. These are not the kinds of things you must do, but they are the kinds of things you are free to discuss and try if you both agree. As we grow in our marriages and build trust, sometimes our consciences change, and things we did not want to try before, we are now interested in trying as our lovemaking is maturing. Like every aspect of marriage, there is change and growth if the relationship is healthy. We started out extremely basic in our freedoms, but as we grew in trust and healing from our past, we were willing to try new things and find new freedoms in our marriage.

The biggest idea in the Song of Songs is that a couple needs to have an ongoing conversation about every aspect of their marital relationship, including sex. Sadly, many Christian couples have lots of conversations about everyone and everything but sex. One of the saddest counseling sessions we've had in our years of marriage ministry happened early in our own marriage, and it was a sober warning. A husband and wife both committed adultery within a few weeks of each other. When their sins became known, they sat down to explain what happened. The

**THE BIGGEST IDEA IN THE SONG OF SONGS IS
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wife said her husband was always working, and she was home with the kids all day, lonely and hurting. Then she met a guy who started taking her out to lunch, was good at listening, and showed an interest in her. They ended up in bed even though she was not really attracted to him and definitely didn't love him. With tears in his eyes, the husband explained there were sexual desires that were within the bounds of Scripture he'd always wanted to experience, but those things never happened in his marriage. At work, a woman brazenly approached him and asked him to do some of those very things, which they did after his impulsive and sinful decision. We asked him, "Would you have liked to meet your wife for lunch regularly, listen to her, give her some adult conversation, and be emotionally present?" He smiled and through his tears said, "I would love that, but you never said anything." She then interrupted him, saying, "I think it would be fun to try those things together, and I would have been happy to, but you never said anything."

I (Mark) looked at them both and said, "You could have had a conversation that led to a regular lunch together and fun time at a hotel as a married couple, but instead you both committed adultery." They both started weeping as this sober reality hit them. Had they simply had an ongoing conversation about their marriage and how to serve one another, their story would have been completely different. Thankfully, they repented of their sins, forgave one another, and put the work in to heal their marriage. Since then, they have been open and honest while sharing their testimony to encourage other couples to have open and honest discussions to avoid the disasters that happened because of their adulterous dalliances. The enemy knows our weaknesses and wants to divide our marriages so we will live silent and eventually separate lives. We need to be intentional about

having conversations and learn to understand each other so we can better serve and enjoy each other!

Abbi closes this scene by speaking of those things she places in the reject category, urging her single friends not to cross God-given lines for sexual intimacy prior to marriage. Often, single people ask, “Where is the line?” when they should be asking, “When is the time?” The time for sexual intimacy is in marriage. Thus far as we have looked at various snapshots of the couple’s relationship in the Song of Songs, it is possible they have kissed during their engagement, but they did not have sexual contact prior to marriage. Then they fully enjoy their freedoms in marriage. This theme of chastity before marriage and fidelity within marriage continues into the New Testament where we learn there should not even be a hint of sexual immorality among God’s people,¹¹ there should be no sexual touch outside of marriage,¹² and Christian men are to treat Christian women as sisters.¹³

**OFTEN, SINGLE PEOPLE ASK, “WHERE IS THE LINE?”
WHEN THEY SHOULD BE ASKING, “WHEN IS THE TIME?”**

The sociological evidence only confirms the wisdom of God’s Word. Women who cohabitate are more likely to be physically and sexually abused and even killed compared to a wife living with her husband.^{xiii} Furthermore, those who cohabitate actually have higher divorce rates than couples who do not.^{xiv} You can no more practice for being in covenant with someone

11 Ephesians 5:3

12 1 Corinthians 7:1

13 1 Timothy 5:1–2

than you can practice being in covenant with God—you are either in or out. The point is simple: God’s way is the best way, and if there is sin in your past, then repent of it, heal up from it, and walk the path God created, which is frank and free heterosexual marriage. To help you enjoy the fullness of all God has for your marriage, the following discussion will be helpful if you begin with some time together, holding hands in prayer and inviting God the Holy Spirit to lead the conversation.

FACE-TO-FACE QUESTIONS *for Couple Discussion*

1. **What people are in your relationship who should not be? How can you draw boundaries with those people?**
2. **What people should be in your relationship to provide wise counsel? How can you invite those people in?**
3. **What good nicknames do you have for one another? Are there any bad nicknames you should never say again?**
4. **What does En Gedi look like in your home and on vacation?**
5. **What are some of the most enjoyable and unforgettable sexual memories you have together?**
6. **What are some new sexual things you would like to try in your marriage?**
7. **Is there any sexual sin in your past or present that you need to repent of and heal up from to fully enjoy married life as God intends? Is it time to bring in a professional like a Christian counselor to help you heal from past trauma or hurt so you are free in your marriage?**

Chapter 3



THE LITTLE FOXES

2:8–3:5

She

- 2:8** Listen! My beloved!
Look! Here he comes,
leaping across the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
- 9** My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.
Look! There he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattice.
- 10** My beloved spoke and said to me,
“Arise, my darling,
my beautiful one, come with me.
- 11** See! The winter is past;
the rains are over and gone.
- 12** Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves
is heard in our land.

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13 The fig tree forms its early fruit;
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.
Arise, come, my darling;
my beautiful one, come with me.

He

14 My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding places on the mountainside,
show me your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

15 Catch for us the foxes,
the little foxes
that ruin the vineyards,
our vineyards that are in bloom.

She

16 My beloved is mine and I am his;
he browses among the lilies.

17 Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved,
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the rugged hills.

3:1 All night long on my bed
I looked for the one my heart loves;
I looked for him but did not find him.
2 I will get up now and go about the city,
through its streets and squares;
I will search for the one my heart loves.
So I looked for him but did not find him.

- 3** The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
“Have you seen the one my heart loves?”
- 4** Scarcely had I passed them
when I found the one my heart loves.
I held him and would not let him go
till I had brought him to my mother’s house,
to the room of the one who conceived me.
- 5** Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and by the does of the field:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.
-

When we started dating in the late 80s, there was a popular dance song called “Opposites Attract” by Paula Abdul. If you are not familiar with the song, then don’t feel the urge to find it online, because your life will continue simply fine without it. Anyway, the gist of the playful love song is that a woman and her man are different in almost every way, and that’s a good thing once they accept that their differences are their strength.

We are very different in every way except one. Whenever we take various marriage inventories, we score pretty much in complete agreement on our beliefs about our faith. On everything else, we are quite different.

- Mark likes to arrive everywhere early; Grace tends to be late.
- Mark prefers big potato chips; Grace likes the smaller crumbs.
- Mark is an introvert; Grace is an extrovert.
- Mark likes football; Grace really dislikes football.

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- Mark is organized; Grace is more random.
- Mark is more of a pessimist; Grace is more of an optimist.
- Mark is impatient; Grace is patient.
- Mark likes to study with music cranked up; Grace prefers silence.
- Mark loves driving with the windows down; Grace does not.
- Mark doesn't get nervous when speaking in public; Grace does.
- Mark thinks writing a book about sex is fun; Grace ... not so much.

What about you and your spouse? In what ways are you opposite, and why do those differences that once attracted you to one another often annoy you now?

During the first days of a romantic relationship, we tend to be on our best behavior. We get dressed up, make sure our breath does not smell like Satan's gym shoes, and try our best to hide our quirks, eccentricities, and personal peculiarities in everything from how we drive our cars to how we chew our food and sneeze. We also hold all our intestinal gas in until we are married, and then many of us make up for lost time. When our variances do surface, they are quickly dismissed as interesting differences, which explains why the spender marries the saver, the night owl marries the early bird, the introvert ends up with the extrovert, the neatnik ends up with the slob, and the person who leaves the toilet seat down cannot live without the person who leaves it up. In essence, we overlook frustrations that will one day cut into our romance.

Many of our differences in marriage have nothing to do with sin. Often, our spouses are not violating any of God's laws, but

they are violating one of our rules. We've all got our own ways of doing things and tend to think that our way is the right way.

Then, we really get to know one another, especially after we've been married a while. Eventually, we've not only prayed over one another but also found innumerable ways to annoy one another.

I (Grace) am easily annoyed when Mark doesn't load the dishwasher correctly, wants to watch certain boring TV shows, and adds a topping or ingredient when dinner is already served. None of those things are sin, but if I stew about them and let my heart grumble, then it starts to tear down our marriage and romance. I can either talk to Mark about them and ask him to be aware, or I can let them go and recognize I also create annoyances.

I (Mark) do not understand why you need to clean the dishes before you put them in the dishwasher—it only has one job and should not delegate that job to me. I find guys building houses and cars as the last hope for a world filled with beta-males, and I do not understand anything about cooking because I have been spoiled by my wife for our entire marriage and have the spiritual gift of going out to dinner.

How about you and your spouse? What are the things that annoy you about one another, cause ongoing frustrations, and feel like a stubbed toe that keeps getting bumped?

The Two Train Tracks of Life

A wise pastor once said that he used to see life as good seasons and bad seasons, with the goal being to push through the bad seasons to get to the good seasons. Then, he learned over time that life is like two train tracks running side by side

throughout life. One track is good things that we are enjoying or looking forward to. The other track is bad things that we're suffering through or not looking forward to. Every day, life travels on both tracks at the same time. In our marriage, I (Mark), in homage to my initials M.A.D. (Mark Alan Driscoll) more easily act like the pessimist and notice the bad track, whereas Grace, true to her name, is more of an optimist and focuses on the good track.

The analogy of two tracks is entirely true, nowhere more so than in our romantic relationships. In this section of the Song of Songs, we see the two tracks in full view as the couple starts with flirting and ends with fighting.

When Abbi is “gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice” (2:9), it does not mean she’s stalking Solomon; rather, she’s anxiously awaiting her beloved to come to her parent’s house where she is living prior to their marriage to head out on a fun, romantic date together. Solomon arrives and invites her to “arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me” (2:10). In this scene, we witness the power of the ministry of presence. One of the great blessings of marriage is the ministry of presence with our spouse. When God said it was not good to be alone, His solution for that problem was a spouse. The reason Abbi is waiting eagerly and looking intently is because every moment with someone you love is sacred. How wonderful is it that God did not just speak to us from heaven, but He also came down to be present with us in Jesus Christ. Jesus knew we would fear abandonment when He ascended back into heaven, so He told us in John’s Gospel that when He went up, the Holy Spirit would come down. God’s ministry of

EVERY MOMENT WITH SOMEONE YOU LOVE IS SACRED.

presence would always be with us and, in fact, *in* us as believers in Jesus Christ. The ministry of presence cannot be overstated. Being together is a blessing and explains why a healthy married couple cannot wait to get home from work, looks forward to weekends off and vacations away, and waits at the airport when a dad returns from a long military deployment, running to enjoy the ministry of presence.

Their date opens by Abbi passionately flirting with her man. She calls Solomon her young stud or stag, something that men still like to hear some 3,000 years later. In saying that winter is over, spring has come, and their love is in full bloom, the comparison is between the season they are in annually and the season they are in romantically. Curiously, springtime seems to be the time for love. Most weddings are in the spring, and we had our first date in the spring (March 12, 1988, to be exact).

It is important for married couples to be aware of seasons. Life goes through them, and a couple needs to be aware of the change in seasons and determine how they can best love and serve one another when a new one comes along while continuing to their marriage. When a couple is dating, their lives are still somewhat independent. Once they marry, they must figure out how to live as one, with one schedule and one budget, which takes some intentional effort. Adding children changes literally everything and requires an incredible amount of physical effort from both mom and dad. As the kids get older, they have more activities and friends along with school, so the husband and wife need to orient a lot of their time and energy around the growing needs of their children. In the teen years, a lot of discipleship is done regarding everything from having your own faith, managing money, choosing friends, navigating romantic relationships, learning to drive,

planning for post-high school life, and choosing career paths. The college years are expensive and require a lot of coaching. Once a child moves out on their own, there is still a lot of energy invested in helping the child launch as an independent adult. The empty nest years require a couple to reset their entire life together, make sure their marriage is a priority, help their adult children get married and start their own families, and look after aging parents. Eventually, the couple ages and deals with their own health and career issues, along with welcoming grandchildren. Every season of life has opportunities to build and obstacles to break a marriage. Understanding the season you are in helps make the most of every one of them. When a couple fails to recognize they have entered a new season, they tend to be stuck in how they previously operated, which no longer works and causes pains and problems.

“WHEN A COUPLE FAILS TO RECOGNIZE THEY HAVE ENTERED A NEW SEASON, THEY TEND TO BE STUCK IN HOW THEY PREVIOUSLY OPERATED, WHICH NO LONGER WORKS AND CAUSES PAINS AND PROBLEMS.”

If you've ever seen a couple so dripping with love and oozing adoration for each other to the degree that they are a little awkward to be around, then you get the sense of what Abbi is saying. Solomon flirtatiously responds by calling her “darling,” “my beautiful one,” and “my dove.” For the ancient Hebrews, the dove was considered ceremonially clean and an acceptable sacrifice that was pleasing to God; it was even offered by Jesus’

parents at the Temple.¹⁴ The dove is also a symbol of purity¹⁵ and later a symbol of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ He then reminds her how much he loves the look of her face and sound of her voice.

At this point, things are headed in a romantic dalliance direction, quickly moving toward some terrific times. One observation from their interactions is that most women tend to be more verbal, and most men are more visual. Abbi has a lot to say here and throughout the Song of Songs. Remember, in the Song of Songs, she speaks firstly, freely, and frankly. A lot of what she expresses is emotional—how she is feeling and what she is desiring. Like most men, Solomon uses less words and speaks about what he enjoys seeing—in this scene, her face and eyes.

From Flirting to Fighting

Like a perfectly cooked meal that gets dropped on the floor before a bite is taken, everything goes bad very quickly. We’ve all had this same experience—the day or the date starts good but ends bad. Like a car wreck we did not see coming, we are blindsided and dumbfounded that a good start had a sudden bad ending with the air bags deployed and a lot of confusion. Why does this happen? The answer is “little foxes that ruin the vineyards” (2:15).

A vineyard could take years or even generations to nurture. The constant watering, pruning, and cultivating was an art form that produced grapes for wine. Some years ago, we toured a winery in Sonoma, California, that was owned by a

¹⁴ Luke 2:22–28

¹⁵ Psalm 68:13

¹⁶ Matthew 3:16

Christian family. If you were raised in a strict Christian home that forbid alcohol, please remember our trip was entirely devoted to Bible study and learning about the numerous viticultural metaphors, and when we drank the wine, we did so solely for research purposes in a King James Bible. Anyway, as we toured their large family vineyard, the owners reminded us of all the times the Bible uses the imagery of a vine, branches, fruit, and harvest. As we stopped at one dying vine, they told us the meaning of this image in Song of Songs. Apparently, a small animal had gotten into the vineyard and gnawed at the base of an old and prized vine, which caused it to begin dying. The point of this Scripture is little things can get into the vineyard of a marriage and gnaw away at the root of our vine, causing our love to start to wither and die.

A fox in your vineyard is any little thing that gnaws away at your enjoyment and love for one another. Examples of foxes in the vineyard includes a poorly architected marriage where the priorities of God, spouse, kids, work, and *then* extended family are out of order. The intrusion of extended family or friends who do not respect healthy boundaries is another common fox in the vineyard. Another would be simple disorganization where the schedule, chores, and budget are a mess and sources of constant frustration. Pain from past hurts that remain unforgiven or unhealed can also be a fox in your vineyard. Some seasons are simply tough, like when one of you has bad health, a child is born, older parents are sickly, or you just cannot come to an agreement on a critical issue

**A FOX IN YOUR VINEYARD IS ANY LITTLE THING
THAT GNAWS AWAY AT YOUR ENJOYMENT AND
LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER.**

and need to go to counseling for help. Financial pressure, job loss, unexpected medical bills, and other mounting cash crises are common foxes that gnaw away at the vine of a marriage. Shame over secret past or present sin, such as pornography, is a common fox in the vineyard. Annoyances also count, as it's not always sins but simply differences that can gnaw away at a marriage. These can include answering the phone during dinner, not going to bed at the same time, not helping with household chores, or disagreeing about how to parent the children. Snoring loudly, belching frequently, spending frivolously, and freaking out frequently are also good candidates to qualify as foxes in your vineyard.

One common fox in the vineyard is differing visions for the home that lead to repeated conflict. Most people would never live in a home that did not have an architect who designed it and a builder who constructed it. However, most people build lives that they have not intentionally architected.

There are several similar versions of a story in which a large boat was tied to a dock and two men walked up to survey it. One man asked the other, "In regard to that boat, who is the most important person?" Without a pause, the answer was, "The captain." The man who asked the question then responded, "Incorrect. The most important person is the boat builder. The best captain in the world cannot succeed with a boat that does not float." This analogy holds true for many areas of our lives but especially in our marriages. Too often a husband and wife are so busy working that they do not take the time to step back and work on their lives. The result is lots of foxes in the vineyard.

In college, we had a professor share with us the three common types of households:

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1. **Random Homes:** There is little order, structure, scheduling, or planning. People eat meals whenever they want, rather than sitting down together. Bedtimes are chaotic and sporadic, and sometimes there are not even assigned beds for the children because they simply crash wherever they choose every night. Guests come and go out of the house as they please, and curfews and chores are nonexistent.
2. **Closed Homes:** There is much order, structure, scheduling, and planning. The family sits down at a regular time for dinner, weeks are scheduled and organized, the home has systems and chores to keep it tidy, bedtime is consistent, and people cannot simply drop by the home unannounced. Instead, they need to schedule an agreed upon time in advance.
3. **Open Homes:** These are somewhere between Random Homes and Open Homes. There is more order, structure, scheduling, and planning than a Random Home but not as much as a Closed Home. Most of the time, the family sits down for dinner but not always. Approved friends and extended family members are welcome to drop by unannounced, but everyone else needs to ask in advance.^{xv}

I (Grace) grew up in a home with one parent who wanted an Open home and the other wanted a Closed home. It led to confusion and frustration in the marriage and with the kids, as we weren't sure what was expected at any given time. Sadly, it also made manipulation of my parents far too common since they didn't agree. We had uninvited people constantly showing up for dinner, random stray animals that would be adopted, the same

chores our entire childhood, semi-consistent bedtimes, and a general curfew that was often broken. My parents went above and beyond to serve the people in the church that they pastored.

I (Mark) grew up in a home that was more Open to Random. I had one of the only dads in my neighborhood, and my mom stayed home to raise five kids, of whom I was the oldest. Since most of the kids in our neighborhood had a mom who was at work as their only parent, they ended up at our house a lot. My parents were gracious to clothe, feed, and provide a safe place for the kids in our neighborhood. As a result, we had an intact family that sat down for meals and had bedtime and structure, but we also had random kids showing up at random times with random needs. To this day, I am really proud of how my parents opened their lives and home to help kids stay out of trouble and have a warm meal, safe place to sleep, and even a coat or shoes if they did not have those basic provisions. My dad even built a batting cage in the backyard and bought a pitching machine to give the neighborhood boys something to do other than sin and folly.

Early in our marriage, Grace and I led a college ministry and hosted Bible studies multiple nights a week in our home. Eventually, this morphed into a church plant, and we started adding our eventual five children every other year. Our struggling church consisted mainly of broke college kids, so the interns, Bible studies, and counseling sessions, along with the church offices and study, were all contained in our home. I am a strong introvert, so I was losing my mind as people constantly came and went through our house. In one year, we had a few thousand people in our home, and I taught everyone the Bible while Grace fed them. We had a Random Home, and I wanted to transition to a Closed Home to get our life and family boundaries back. Because we did not agree on the big picture of how

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we were going to manage our home, we ended up having conflicts over all kinds of small things and individual relationships. Almost everyone and everything became a fox in our vineyard. After many conversations, we agreed that for the safety and health of our family and, as we've had seasons of genuine threat and attack, we needed a home that was somewhere between Closed and Open, depending upon what season we were in.

Today, technology keeps trying to turn every house into a Random Home. Our phones demands that we pay more attention to them than our spouses or even our God. In days past, people would have to get in a car and travel to someone's house, hoping they were home, to barge into their marriage and family. Today, almost everyone you know can do that whenever they want for whatever they want. The constant distraction and disruption of technology leads to much division and damage in a marriage. In our constantly connected and chaotic world, we need to learn how to manage the people we interact with not just physically but also digitally. Social media can never replace our spouses, and if we live on our phones, constantly available to anyone trying to communicate with us, then the least healthy people will surely take the best of our time and energy, which should belong to our relationship with God and then our spouses as our first priorities. Setting boundaries with technology and people will help safeguard your marriage. The phone (and other technology) is likely the fox that moved into the vineyard of most marriages and is busy gnawing away at any and every fruitful vine.

Every marriage has had foxes in the vineyard, and they may still be there. As we mentioned before, I (Grace) lean more toward extroversion and can feel energized by being with people. Mark, on the other hand, loves people but is extremely drained after socializing. This was a fox in our vineyard (and

still can be) because I thought it was a sin that Mark needed to repent for rather than the way God created him so he can more effectively and passionately focus on preaching the Bible. Meanwhile, Mark thought my regular time with people was me neglecting my priorities. This issue ate away at our marriage until we were able to see that we could find ways to serve each other better by being gracious with personality differences, while also challenging each other to grow and not let our personalities give us excuses. I needed to pull back from having people over to our house constantly and look through the calendar to see when he had the most energy to give to house guests. Mark needed to be open to spontaneous social times when we couldn't schedule them. I also make sure I am prioritizing my time with him so he knows our marriage matters to me rather than spending constant time with other ladies and giving him the leftovers. If we had let this go and not talked about it, then resentment and bitterness would have eaten away at both of us and ultimately wrecked our marriage. When left untended, issues big and small will cause destruction in the relationship and erase romantic pursuit.

I (Mark) needed to realize that Grace has the spiritual gift of hospitality. She enjoys having people over, feeding them, and caring for them. The problem was that when we had people over, it was a workday for me as a pastor because people would want to talk about theology or counseling issues in our home, and I wanted to save my home as a place to get a break from pastoring people. I also really appreciated all the ways Grace tirelessly served me and our kids. Honestly, we are all very spoiled by her, and I selfishly did not want to share her with others. Meanwhile, she was at home all day with little kids and just wanted to have some adult conversations, fun parties, and events. We learned, through repeatedly failing,

to get time with people on our calendar so I could prepare for the emotional output, and Grace got more organized with our social life so we had a healthy rhythm with friends and extended family that we both enjoyed.

What are the foxes in your vineyard?

The Four Horsemen of Marriage Apocalypse

When a fox shows up in your vineyard, how each member of the couple responds is crucial. In this scene in the Song of Songs, the couple says a fox got in their vineyard, and they don't tell exactly what it was. Nonetheless, they did not deal with it well, and it led to a heated conflict in which Solomon walked out, and Abbi had no idea where he had gone.

When foxes show up in our vineyards, bad conflict resolution patterns emerge, adding even more foxes. Marriage expert John Gottman, whose method predicts divorce probability with a 91 percent accuracy,^{xvi} identifies what he calls “the four horsemen” of marriage apocalypse. Marriage dissolution begins with a “harsh startup”^{xvii} (criticism or sarcasm), which only becomes more extreme and descends into the following pattern, pulling hell up into the marriage instead of inviting heaven down into it:

1. **Criticism:** Unlike a concern or a complaint about an issue, this response is very personal so that the other person does not just have a problem but also *is* the problem.
2. **Contempt:** Sneering, mocking, name calling, eye rolling, and volume raising communicate personal disgust and disdain for the other person as the goal becomes winning instead of worshipping.

3. **Defensiveness:** Rather than repenting of how we are treating the other person, we make excuses and blame shift so that it's their fault, all to double down on the fight or attempt to change the subject if we sense we are losing the battle.
4. **Stonewalling:** We tune out, practice the silent treatment, leave the room, drive away, or otherwise disengage so that what was a heated battle now becomes a cold war. Generally, it is the husband who chooses this lonely path of ignoring one another, and that is exactly what we see in the marital battle in the Song of Songs.^{xviii}

Often, big fights occur in our romantic relationships over petty things. Why does this happen? While the issue may not be a big deal, the person responsible for it is. This fact explains why a stranger or an enemy can do something that is bad and big without much effect to our emotional well-being for months and years afterward. Conversely, a person near and dear to us can do something comparatively minor, and it sends us into a tailspin because we have higher expectations when we have opened our hearts to them in ways that cause their sins or failures to be more painful.

During one counseling session with an older couple, the wife lamented that for years of their marriage, her husband had an ongoing habit of saying, “That was a fail” whenever she made a mistake. It did not occur often, but it was often enough to discourage her. If she dropped dinner on the floor, got a dent on her car door, or showed up late because she lost track of time, he would say, “That was a fail.” She already felt bad and knew she had failed, but he added to the situation. As she explained how this habit hurt her, her husband shrugged it off by saying, “It’s not a big deal.” She then responded, “You

are a big deal to me. What you say may not be a big deal, but I love you, and when you say that, it hurts me because you are a big deal to me.” After years of ignoring her pleas, he finally understood that it’s not just *what* is said, but also *who* says it that determines what is and is not a big deal.

Additionally, we spend so much time with our spouses that quirky little habits become patterns that drive us nuttier than a peanut factory because of their regularity. This reality explains why some couples have more conflict the more time they spend together. Vacations and holidays are prime times for marital conflicts to escalate easily. The home lockdown as a response to COVID-19, for example, caused many couples to get on one another’s nerves like never before and set divorces in motion. In this section of the Song of Songs, this is what happens. A fox got in their vineyard, which explains why Abbi closes this section of Scripture by talking about how they were separated, Solomon left, and she could not find him, which only added to her distress.

Make the First Move

In some ways, the relationship between North and South Korea is like a dysfunctional marriage. The two sides tried for years to get along but to no avail. Eventually, a demilitarized zone was built to ensure each side kept to themselves, and they never interacted. They do not have any contact, because if they did, a war would erupt.

In marriage, stonewalling left over time can lead to a similar relationship. The Bible opens with God creating marriage and telling us in Genesis 2:24 that we need to “cleave,” “be joined,” “become united,” “stick with,” “hold fast,” or “cling

to,” depending on which English translation of the Bible you read. The big idea is we should continually and passionately pursue our spouses so that we can live together, united as “one.” The opposite occurs in stonewalling, as we lose our passion for our spouse and do not pursue them. Often, the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. We become two people living separate lives with the equivalent of a demilitarized zone to keep us from interacting out of fear of yet another war breaking out.

**OFTEN, THE OPPOSITE OF LOVE IS NOT HATE
BUT INDIFFERENCE.**

Examples of stonewalling include:

- not coming home
- sleeping in different beds
- keeping different schedules
- spending time in different parts of the home to avoid one another
- communicating through the children or technology rather than face to face
- the husband retreating to the garage or man cave
- the wife retreating to the kitchen or laundry room
- one or both spending lots of time away working, hanging out with friends, or enjoying hobbies

Obviously, these activities are not harmful in small doses, but if they are done simply to avoid a spouse, then they can be deadly to a marriage. In extreme cases, a couple will remain legally married but functionally divorced, possibly

Real Romance

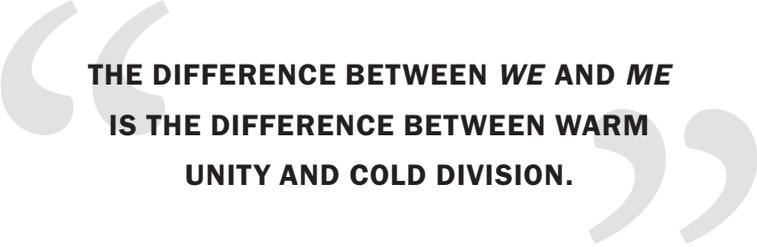
even living and working in different cities, not because they have to but because they choose that way of life to avoid each other.

If we're honest, every couple has seasons in which a fox gets in the vineyard, a good day goes bad, and stonewalling occurs. The longer this behavior goes on, the greater the opportunity Satan has to infect your vineyard with bitterness and selfishness. He will use this silence as an opportunity to whisper in your ears, setting a negative narrative about your spouse that becomes a lens by which you view them as the problem. We can never forget that Satan did not even show up until Adam and Eve were married, as after the wedding comes the war. Our first parents started well, but then things went bad as they stonewalled and separated. Thankfully, the Lord came looking for them, just as He does for every believing couple ever since. Once the Lord has dealt with our anger, hurt, bitterness, and selfishness, He wants us to go searching for our spouse to treat them as He has treated us.

In this scene from the Song of Songs, Solomon is the one stonewalling, and Abbi is the one searching. Unless one pursues the other, they will no longer enjoy the principle of mutual belonging that she rejoiced over when she said, "My beloved is mine and I am his."¹⁷ Unless one pursues the other, they will never get back to "we" because they will be both stuck in "me." The difference between *we* and *me* is the difference between warm unity and cold division.

The key to any healthy, holy, and happy marriage is for both the husband and the wife to be givers and forgivers. Our God is a giver and forgiver, and we must follow His example if we are going to have a godly marriage He will bless. Whenever the marriage has one person who gives and one who takes,

¹⁷ 2:16



**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *WE* AND *ME*
IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WARM
UNITY AND COLD DIVISION.**

it is an abusive relationship. If only one person is pursuing, praying, forgiving, and serving, then it is more of a master-to-slave relationship than it is a husband-to-wife covenant. The principle of mutual belonging means both the husband and wife give all that they have and are to one another.

In this scene Abbi needs to give, and Solomon needs to forgive. So she pursues him to apologize and mend the broken fence that let the fox into their vineyard. He forgives her, and they work things out.

Eventually Abbi finds Solomon and brings him back to her parents' home. Their romantic relationship started by him visiting her there, so she takes him back to where they fell in love to remind them both of why they are together in the first place. She concludes by reminding her unmarried friends not to arouse or awaken the sexual aspect of a relationship until the right time, which is a wise admonition. Sometimes a couple who is not yet married but is fighting ends up in bed together as the emotions are running high, and the desire to connect is particularly strong when the relationship is strained and in the process of reconciling. When we are single and a fox shows up in our vineyard, sleeping together to feel close and connected is just adding a bigger fox to the vineyard as we are not solving our problems but rather multiplying them.

Fight For Your Marriage, Not with Your Spouse

In closing, what we witness throughout the Song of Songs is both the husband and wife are strong personalities. He is the King of Israel, and no one would ever dream of telling him what to do, rebuking him, doing most of the talking in his presence, or acting like a peer. His beloved, however, does those very things. Abbi is an incredibly strong person, the kind of wife he needs to have a healthy, loving marriage.

The truth is, we are both extraordinarily strong personalities with strong opinions. We have found that in marriage, strength is not a problem. Independence, however, is always a problem. When we operate independently of our spouse or, even worse, independently of our God, nothing good happens. This truth can be seen all the way back to the Garden where our first parents ruined their marriage and our human family by acting independently from God and one another, which is the cause for sin.

In this scene of the Song of Songs, we see that Solomon and Abbi are both acting independently. What started as flirting and time together ends with fighting and time apart. The key to a strong marriage is working with our God and spouse, especially when foxes show up in our marriage vineyard, to serve and forgive one another.

It might seem odd that a book of the Bible devoted entirely to the passions and pleasures of marriage reports not only flirting but also the pain of fighting. However, the Bible is the

**WE HAVE FOUND THAT IN MARRIAGE, STRENGTH IS
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most honest book ever written, and every honest couple knows they are going to have some fights. The key is to learn how to fight for your marriage, rather than fighting with your spouse. To help you do that very thing, we have an exercise for you to do together that will help you avoid a harsh startup if you have “foxes in your vineyard” to discuss. The key is to begin with a lengthy time in prayer, inviting the Lord into the conversation so that you are both dependent on the Holy Spirit.

FACE-TO-FACE QUESTIONS *for Couple Discussion*

- 1. What are the good and bad things in your marriage and life right now, running like parallel train tracks? On which track are you most likely to focus?**
- 2. Lovingly, kindly, and patiently discuss some of the foxes in your vineyard to which you both need to pay attention. What will happen if they are not kept from gnawing away at your relationship?**
- 3. What are some bad patterns you can honestly and humbly own that you fall into when the two of you have an argument or disagreement? How can you repent of those, and what can you do differently as you go forward?**
- 4. What unhealthy habits did you establish before you were married that you need to be aware of because they are negatively affecting your marriage now (e.g., the four ways a disagreement goes deadly as listed in this chapter, or sexual sin together so that the relationship was not built upon the worship of God and holy friendship but rather sexual pleasure)?**

