

The Hard Work of Romantic Love

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Song of Songs: Eros Redeemed

Song of Songs 3:6-5:8

Have you ever been to a really extravagant wedding? Maybe you thought your wedding or your children's wedding was expensive. How about a 3-day affair that cost \$5000 per person? There is a celebrity wedding planner named Colin Cowie, who believes that money should be no object in throwing a wedding. Just a few months ago he chartered a 737 airplane to jet 140 wedding guests from Chicago to Beaver Creek, Colorado for a 4-day event complete with a mountaintop wedding.

"We had an incredible party," he said, "on Thursday evening with swing dance teachers. We flew in stone crabs from Miami and caviar, props and flowers from LA. It was like producing a small movie."

He's handled celebrity clients like Kelsey Grammar, Lisa Kudrow, and rock stars. Last year he did a wedding down in the Bahamas, which drew rave reviews for entertainment, décor and food. Colin Cowie said, "You know, for 10 million dollars, almost anything is possible."

You heard about the party that Joan Rivers threw for her daughter, Melissa? Melissa got married in the Plaza Hotel last year. And so Joan Rivers decided to turn the Plaza Hotel, which was the scene for Home Alone II, sitting right there on Central Park South, into the Russian Museum, the Hermitage, that's in St. Petersburg, Russia.

And they recreated winter in St. Petersburg right in the hotel. They brought in 100 live birch trees and adorned them with lights. They had 20,000 white roses. The wedding coordinator said, “Joan wanted people to walk into the reception and say, ‘oohhh and aaahhh.’” The cost of the reception wasn’t divulged, but this particular wedding coordinator usually doesn’t do weddings unless the decorations alone cost \$100,000.

Maybe you recently read about Paul McCartney’s wedding to Heather Mills. The estimated cost varied between 3.5 million and 5-6 million dollars. For more than a week, tractor trailers delivered lighting and sound equipment. Other crews hauled in portable luxury restrooms and mobile kitchens. Fresh flowers were delivered in two 40’ refrigerated trailers. The flower coordinator said he went to Holland to choose all the flowers. When he was asked what type of flower he used, he said the list goes on for five pages. They had 100 private security guards, many of them former British soldiers. Plates were 14” gold leaf plates. Rhythm and Blues bands were flown in from the US. Several chartered aircrafts were hired to fly the guests to a remote castle estate in Ireland.

Have you ever been to an extravagant wedding? Now, you might say, “No, my standards, I guess, have been too low. I thought \$20,000 was enough to spend on a wedding.”

I’ve been doing a series from the Song of Songs, the most important, the best, the most wonderful collection of songs about the best topic love, put in the best setting

of committed, faithful marriage, and authored by the best author, God the Holy Spirit. Turn with me to Song of Songs 3:6 and we'll read about an extravagant wedding.

S.S. 3:6-11, Who is this coming from the desert like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant? Look, it is Solomon's carriage, escorted by sixty warriors, the noblest of Israel, all of them wearing the sword, all experienced in battle, each with his sword at his side, prepared for the terrors of the night. King Solomon made for himself the carriage; he made it of wood from Lebanon. Its posts he made of silver, its base of gold. Its seat was upholstered with purple, its interior lovingly inlaid by the daughters of Jerusalem. Come out, you daughters of Zion, and look at King Solomon wearing the crown, the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding the day his heart rejoiced.

There are two overall approaches to this passage of scripture. Some people believe that this is dealing with an actual historical event involving Solomon. We read in v. 7 that it is Solomon's carriage. In v. 10, "King Solomon made for himself the carriage." And in v. 11, "Look at King Solomon wearing the crown."

Most other people, including me, believe that this is a poetic description that draws upon the opulence of Solomon's life in order to celebrate weddings and marriage as royal and as magnificent, as something grand.

The idea of a married couple as royalty can be found in marriage customs all over the world. In Greece the bride and groom are literally crowned by the best man to show that this couple becomes a king and queen, at least on their wedding day. Among Chasidic Jews several days before a couple's wedding and for the week following the wedding, the couple never goes out in public unescorted because they are royalty. Just as a king or queen would not go out without an escort, so this couple has people running in front of them.

In most countries in the world, among most cultures and most religions, the wedding day is a big deal. Even in relatively poor countries, fathers of the bride might have saved for the bride's entire life in order to put on a huge wedding.

We read in this passage, "Who is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant." Curiosity is aroused. There's anticipation. People see the smoke. They smell the sweet perfume of the finest kind coming from a distant place. What's on the horizon? People are running out of their homes to look.

This passage takes us back to rural Palestine, hundreds of years before the time of Christ. And there is a wedding procession coming into a village. We read of Solomon's marriage in v. 7, "Look, it's Solomon's carriage escorted by sixty warriors, the noblest of Israel." The carriage is one of those Eastern carriages that are carried on the shoulders of men by poles, accompanied by sixty men. We have a picture here of wealth, power, and privilege.

If you go to Irish villages to this day, one of the dances that they will have in an Irish wedding is called the “Janting Char” in which the groom is carried in on a chair and presented to his guests. My stepbrother has joined an ultra-orthodox Jewish sect. I attended his wedding. The bride and groom sat in huge dining room chairs that were hoisted up in the air and they were carried into the reception on the shoulders of several strong men.

The couple in this text is protected by soldiers. We read, “All of them wearing a sword, all of them experienced in battle each with a sword at his side prepared for the terrors of the night.” The royal couple is protected by soldiers ready to do battle against all terrors including night terrors.

It has historically been believed in many cultures that demons are especially active on a person’s wedding day. Some of you would confirm that. In America today we would say demons are particularly active the night before the wedding at bachelor and bachelorette parties. But in many cultures, there is this belief that the demonic is incensed by the joy that is being felt at a wedding and so they threaten the joy by attacking the couple. And so different traditions arose to protect the couple. For example, it was believed in the middle ages that demons did not like noise. So church bells were rung at the end of the wedding not just to celebrate a new marriage, but to scare the demons off. In Jewish weddings, the very last thing the groom does is stamp down on a wine glass. It is sometimes thought that the sound of broken glass will scare away demons. Some people say that this wine glass is

being offered at a satisfaction to the demons. But there is a reality that joy needs to be fought for even on our wedding day.

The basic theme of opulence and royalty and extravagance is continually emphasized in v. 9, “King Solomon made for himself the carriage. He made it from the wood of Lebanon.” It was made from the best wood, the same wood used for the Temple and Solomon’s palaces. The wood is overlaid with precious metals. We read, “Its posts were made of silver, its base of gold. Its seat was upholstered with purple.” Purple was especially expensive. They used a rare dye pressed from a Mediterranean shell fish.

And in a lovely phrase we read, “Its interior was lovingly inlaid.” It literally ought to read, “Its interior was inlaid with love.” The interior of the carriage is not inlaid with diamonds or pearls or precious stones. It is inlaid with extravagant love. It’s inlaid with limitless love.

You know, it isn’t hard to have a great wedding. Just have a ton of money, hire a great wedding coordinator like Martin Short in Father of the Bride (do you remember that movie with Franke?) Get a great wedding coordinator. Deck out an old historic church. Hire a great band. Decorate the reception hall with thousands of flowers. Cook a fabulous meal for your guests. Have an open bar. It’s really not that hard to have a great wedding.

The hard work comes in trying to produce a great marriage. In our church we have tried to create a culture that gets couples to make a larger investment of time and attention and thought and prayer to their upcoming marriage than to their wedding day. Its not that wedding days are unimportant. Its not that weddings don't take a lot of planning. Its not that having an elaborate wedding is somehow wrong. But we have tried to create a culture here in Vineyard that convinces people to invest more heavily in preparation for their marriage than for the day of their wedding. In the past month, I've been contacted by 4 couples who attend this church - all were married somewhere else, who are pursuing a divorce. Two of these couples have children. All claim to be bible believing. All claim to be Christians. None claims abandonment or ongoing adultery or addiction or severe abuse. As a pastor, I think: what can be done to rescue marriages - to save people and their kids all the pain. Of course, divorce doesn't end the pain.

The statistics, friends are terrible for marriages. 1 out of 2 marriages end in divorce. Only 1 in 6 married couples claim to be very happy with each other. I want to speak for a moment to those of you who are dating, for those of you who think that there's a possibility that you might get married in the next year or so. We have tried to create a culture here at Vineyard that attempts to convince people to spend more time and effort and energy and thought and prayer preparing for their marriages that will last 30-40-50 years, God willing, than for preparing for their wedding day. We have made as a Church an extraordinary investment not only from a church staff perspective, but also from a church volunteer perspective to counsel and care for and advise and guide couples who are thinking about getting married.

Indeed, we have two programs here. One that we call Fully Engaged, which is a four week premarital series taught in a classroom setting that gives you core values of Christian marriage. And once you complete this classroom work, for our members and small group attenders, we have what we call Heart2Heart Premarital Mentoring, where a couple who is planning to get married gets together with an older couple that has a great healthy, Christ-centered marriage for personal mentoring 6-8 times before you get married to talk through all of the issues – communication and resolving conflict, money and sex, in-laws and out-laws. 6-8 personal mentoring appointments that are free. And then after you are married, you commit to getting together with that couple another 6 times in the first year of marriage at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 8 months, 1 year.

We've had a lot of people look at the program and say, "Wow! That's way too much of a cost. I just want to get married in a month. We've got our date set. We've got our church hired. I've got my honeymoon planned. Me and my sweetheart don't have the time to sit through a bunch of classes and 6-8 premarriage and 6-8 postmarriage sessions."

And I would tell you with all affection, "Well, I guess it depends on what you want." You do not just luck into a great marriage. Great marriages are made by 2 committed people who choose to invest heavily in their relationship. We really do reap what we sow – particularly in our marriages – both good and bad.

Let me give you two statistics, one of which should scare anyone whose thinking about getting married to death, and the other which ought to be a great encouragement. Two stats. One is bad news. One is good news. In Ohio right now 30% of all marriages end in the first three years of marriage. Almost one out of three marriages will end in the first three years. And then there is another spike at seven years. Sadly, the divorce rate among those who claim to be born-again Christians mirrors the general public. That's the bad news.

Here's the good news. In the last three years, we had between 120-130 couples go through our premarital program. Out of those 120-130 couples, we have not recorded one divorce.

My exhortation to any body that is thinking about getting married is to extravagantly invest in your future marriage. Put your wedding dates aside for a moment. Put your wedding destinations aside. Put your personal agendas aside and think long-term for your life. What can you do before you are married to have the best possible shot at a joyful, fulfilling, life-giving marriage for the next 30-40-50 years? You will reap what you sow! If you are interested in learning more about getting married here at the Vineyard, I would encourage you to contact our Marriage and Family ministry. We have packets of information that will detail for you the process we take.

If you are married, why not invest in having a great marriage? Why not move from having an OK acceptable marriage, an unhappy marriage or something that has the wheels coming off, to having a great marriage? You believe in sowing and reaping in

other areas of life. How many of you have invested in your education, years of going to college. Many of you have graduate degrees and professional degrees. You've spent years investing in your careers. You've spent time thinking about financial investments. Why? Because you believe that investing pays off in the end. You've invested in your children. One thing that will really determine your future happiness is if you invest in your marriage. And I guarantee you husbands for 95% of you, I know there are always exceptions, but for 95% of you, if you came to your wife and said, "Honey, I want to invest in our marriage" after you got some smelling salts for your wife as she fainted dead away, after you picked her up off the floor, or after she stopped laughing and realized that you are actually serious, your wife would be completely pleased. OK, what do you suggest?

Let me make two suggestions for being an extravagant investor in your marriage. Number one, how about scheduling a weekly date night with your wife just the two of you? No kids, no work, no errands, no TV, no movies, no books, no shopping. It doesn't have to be expensive, but it has to be for the two of you. Scheduling a weekly date time. It could be having breakfast together on a morning where she or you don't have to go to work. It could be just going out for coffee together or a meal together.

Why not invite your wife to attend our monthly marriage seminar, which is the third Monday of every month? Imagine if you and your spouse could put the same kind of investment in your marriage that you've put in every other dimension of your life. We've got Marriage Enhancement groups, and if your marriage is really struggling, our church provides professional marriage counseling, Begin Again weekends, etc.

Again, I would encourage married couples to get in touch with our Marriage and Family Life Ministry and find out what the resources are that are available to you. We've got such a substantial investment in supporting married life here.

Now in 4:1-11 we move from the wedding to the wedding night. We have this extraordinary expression of love on the wedding night. *How beautiful you are, my darling. Oh, how beautiful. Your eyes behind your veil are doves. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing. Each has its twin; not one of them is alone. Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon; your mouth is lovely, your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate. Your neck is like the tower of David built with elegance; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors. Your two breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, I will go to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of incense. All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you.*

The praise here begins with the woman's head and moves down her body. A lot of people have been puzzled by the poetry, the metaphors, used. Here's a married couple on their wedding night. He is verbally expressing admiration for his wife's beauty, for her face and her body.

When you think about it, there's only really three ways to describe a person's body. You could describe someone clinically. And I suppose if this man were performing a medical exam, he might have used the appropriate medical terms on his wedding

night. Your epidermis is free from blemishes. Your cranium is proportionate to your torso. But this is not a medical exam.

He could have used locker room vulgarity. This is a couple that is not simply having sex. This couple is not just “getting it on” as they say. They are making love. And so when a couple is making love, the language of poetry, of metaphor – you are like such and such – that is the language of love. Throughout history, people have used poetry, songs and sonnets. It is the best possible medium for expressing love.

One of my favorite love sonnets is by Lord Byron. It goes like this:

She walks in beauty like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meets in her aspect and her eyes.
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

Giovanni Leone celebrated beauty in the words that only an Italian could celebrate it in. He said, “The strongest evidence to me that God exists is a beautiful woman.”

Here is a man who communicates to his bride verbally that she is altogether beautiful. How beautiful you are, my darling. Oh how beautiful. How beautiful you are, my darling. There is no flaw in you. Here is a man who knows how to talk up his

mate's physical attributes. Here is a man who knows how to sensitively reassure his wife about those areas of her body and face that she feels insecure about.

You know, husbands, our wives in the 21st century live in a world of airbrushed female models, and liposuctioned, breast-enhanced, cosmetically altered Barbie Doll women and Shaniah Twain's dancing at half time at the Super Bowl. We live in a time in the world in which most women experience a significant degree of discomfort and insecurity regarding their looks and their bodies.

Verbalized affection; talk about a wise investment. Husbands do you desire a happy contented, responsive, loving wife? Remember, we reap what we sow. Here is a man who understands the importance of verbalized praise. I wonder how many of you wives crave even one tiny compliment? One tiny verbalized expression of esteem and appreciation? Not only for you, but for your beauty. The sad fact is that many men do not express appreciation or verbalize praise very well at all. Like the husband who when confronted by his wife for his lack of verbalized affection said, "I told you on our wedding night that I loved you. If anything changes, I'll tell you about that too."

So many children of WWII generation parents say, "I knew my parents loved me, they just never said it. My dad, I guess he was just embarrassed to verbalize praise."

Husbands, it is important to show your love for your wife through deeds, through service, to wash her car, to do housework, to do home repair. But it's not enough. In

Song of Songs 4 we are reading of a man who really understands the connection between words and love. Just as our love relationship with God demands that we verbally with words worship him, speak words of love to him, so our love relationship with our spouse demands that we verbally communicate affirmation and praise, and particularly minister to those areas of our spouse's life where they feel inadequate, unattractive, and insecure.

Proverbs 27:5 says, "Better is open rebuke than hidden love." We desperately need to hear from people whose opinions we care about – our parents, our spouses, and other people in the Christian community how they feel about us. And do not excuse yourself by saying, "Well verbalized affirmation or praise just doesn't come naturally to me. It's difficult."

Friend, the Christian life is not about what comes naturally. What comes naturally to us is sin, selfishness and self-centeredness. The Christian life is all about the possibility of transformation, of becoming different than we are, of becoming better people than we are – kinder, more loving, more sensitive to others.

Now, I want you to note that the expression of love is bodily. He begins with her eyes behind her veil. The veil, of course, heightens the allure, the seductiveness, and the mystery. He moves down to her hair, which he describes as being like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead. It doesn't mean that her hair is a tangled mess or that she smells like a goat. He's talking about the lush flow of a flock moving

down a distant hill as you look in the distance and see this ribbon of dark black goats moving down a hill.

He pauses to speak of her teeth, which are like a flock of sheep just shorn coming up from the washing. Absolutely white, perfectly spaced, each with its twin, not one of them is alone.

This is a couple that is expressing their affection to one another bodily. Christianity is not just a philosophical religion concerned with some abstract philosophies or far off spiritual concepts. A lot of people think that the future of the Christian is to float around as a disembodied soul in some airy fairy land and that you can just see through us. We'll just float around with a harp. The shocking thing about Christianity is about physical it is, how bodily it is. God in our religion took on a body. He walked around as a man, the man Jesus Christ. It is the bodily existence of God that Muslims cannot abide by and that Jews reject. It is the physicality, the bodily emphasis of Christianity that Hindus do not understand and Buddhists disdain.

And for almost 2000 years the church herself has been embarrassed by the sheer physicality of our God and our faith. Look at medieval portraits of Jesus. He's not a man in those portraits, he's other worldly. He has a gold halo around his head. His face is eerily spiritual.

Think about songs that we sing at Christmas like Away in a Manger, the verse that goes "The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes. But little Lord Jesus no crying he

makes.” The church was embarrassed by the reality that maybe the baby Jesus, God come in the flesh, cried or had a poopy diaper. The baby Jesus was not born toilet trained. The church in its discomfort over body went so far as to teach that even after Jesus was born Mary and Joseph lived together without consummating their marriage in intercourse.

The Bible doesn’t teach that. The church taught that. And yet God right in the center of the Bible, here in Song of Songs 4 presents to us in totally unabashed, unashamed, explicit terms a man and a woman engaged in physical lovemaking.

Tom Howard, a Christian author, said, “There is extreme irony here. Because here we are with all of our high notions of ourselves as intellectual and spiritual beings and the most profound form of knowledge for us is the plain business of skin on skin. It is humiliating when two members of this God-like cerebral species approach the height of communion between themselves. What do they do? Think? Speculate? Meditate? No, they take off their clothes. Do they want to put their brains together? No, it is the most appalling of ironies. Their search for union takes them quite literally in a direction away from where their brains are.”

The Bible is not embarrassed by body. The Bible doesn’t communicate to us like the British aristocrat from the Victorian Era, Lady Hillingdon, who expressed her distaste for marital sex saying, “I am happy now that Charles calls on my bed chamber less frequently than of old. As it is, I now have to endure merely two calls a week. And

when I hear his steps outside my door, I lie down on my bed, close my eyes, and think of England.”

Friend, you do not have a thoroughly Christian marriage without regularly expressing your love to your spouse bodily. It is not enough for you and your mate to be great friends, to have a successful working partnership. I say this with all affection, but God’s goal for your marriage goes beyond you being well functioning roommates together. The goal of marriage is oneness. We read in Gen. 2, “Then the man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.”

The unity that God wants is not just a unity of friends, a unity of a Christian brother and sister. The oneness that God desires in marriage is also a bodily oneness. Oh, how I love to see married couples in church or in a restaurant or at a coffee shop or out for a walk who still are touching each other. They still see the physicality of their relationship not in some teenagerish public groping of each other, but in a way that announces to all the world, “We still enjoy body oneness.”

The love that this man feels for his wife is not just an expressed love, it is an excited love. It is white hot. Look at v. 9, “You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart.” That is actually one word in Hebrew. You’ve stolen the heart right out of me with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. Here is a man who is bowled over. He’s completely captivated. He is saying, “You have

enflamed my heart. You arouse me. Your glance has run me through. I am helpless before the power of your loveliness.”

How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride; how much more pleasing is your love than wine and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice. Your caresses, that’s literally what the words your love mean. It is the Hebrew word “dodim”. Your caresses are more intoxicating than wine. Your perfume sends me reeling, not because of its overwhelming stench, but because of its overwhelming loveliness.

Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon. Your kisses are delicious, he’s saying, like thick sensuous liquid.

Verbalized affection, bodily love is no grim duty to this man or this woman. The worst thing that has ever entered the Christian mind is the idea of love to spouse as a duty. There’s no hint of grim duty here. His heart is captured. He has received his spouse from the hand of God as a gift to him and he has allowed his heart to be lit up.

Let me ask you a question, married couples. Is verbalized affection, bodily affection a grim duty to you, something that you know is right, or is it a delight, something that your heart is in? Do you receive your spouse as a gift from God to you?

And their love is exclusive. You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed. The bride here is described in terms of a locked fantasy garden, a

walled-in paradise. The bride is described as an enclosed sealed refreshing fountain. 21st century America suggests that if you are virgin you are defective, there is something wrong with you. Teen movie after teen movie makes fun of the nerd who is the last American virgin. What's the matter with you? Don't you get it? Here is a woman who is alive, who has blossomed, who is flourishing, and who has kept herself for her wedding day. She is unavailable to anyone but her husband. Her allegiance, her loyalty, her love, her body is reserved for her lover alone.

And his allegiance, his love, his loyalty, his body is reserved for his bride alone. Here is a man and a woman about to reap what they've sown. They've restrained themselves and they've kept themselves clean - now they will enjoy. They've kept themselves for each other. Now they're going to reap the benefits of self-control.

Now that it's their wedding night. She says in v. 16, "Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden that its fragrance may spread abroad. Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits."

No restraints. No holding back. The active love is described as entering a fantasy garden. No guilt from past relationships, no shame, no comparisons, no garbage to work through. This couple has put in the hard work of self-restraint and now they get to enjoy its fruit.

You know, for three chapters this bride has cautioned her single friends to not awaken love until it can be consummated. In other words, she has said, "Singles,

before physical love can be expressed in covenant marriage, don't prematurely stimulate it." As Ecclesiastes 3:5 says, "There is a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing." When a husband or wife is apart from each other because of business, because they are in the military and they are away for a long time, because one of the couple is physically injured, because they are away doing ministry somewhere for a stretch of time, when there isn't the opportunity to express physical romance in a covenanted marriage relationship, the wisdom of the Bible says don't stimulate your passions.

A lot of 21st century people say, "Well, you know, you've got to express yourself physically, otherwise you are going to become repressed." Friends, there is a psychological distinction between repression and suppression. Repression means that you deny that you have sexual feelings. You are unconsciously bury those feelings and they come out sideways in perverse and neurotic ways, in some obsessive compulsive behavior, some phobia or anger. Suppression is a psychologically healthy thing to do. Single person or married person whose mate is unavailable to them, maybe their mate is physically unwell and sex is denied us in the context of married covenant, the Christian doesn't deny that they are sexual beings and that they have strong sexual feelings. A Christian is a person who is very aware of their sexual feelings, their desires, their longings.

In fact, the Christian is the most honest of all men and women because they say, "I know myself and I know if I don't exercise control here, if I don't make really healthy choices in the way that I relate, in what I choose to think about, in what I read, and

bring before my eyes, my appetite is just going to run amuck. I will reap what I sow – either guilt and brokenness or blessing. We practice suppression. It is a conscious decision, not an unconscious one.

I have sexual feelings, God. I am a sexual being. I choose to redirect my heart and my thoughts in a different direction towards friendships, towards service, towards ministry, towards life, towards fun, towards laughing, towards athletics. But on the wedding night, there is an opportunity to say, “Awaken,” no more suppression, no more holds barred, no restraints.

There is this wonderful endorsement by her friends, “Eat, O friends, and drink, drink your fill, O Lovers.” The community surrounds this bride and groom and endorses the goodness of their love. There’s no shame. It is wholesome. It’s right and proper. There’s no sense in the Song of Songs that making love is just an animal appetite or that God is just giving grudging concession to our lusts. Goodness of sexual act is celebrated.

Beyond the voice of the friends, is the voice of the Holy Spirit saying to every married couple, “Drink. Drink deeply. Enjoy each other. Allow yourselves to be refreshed in each other’s arms and with each other’s bodies.”

I will ask you a personal question. How many of you would honestly be able to say, “I feel God’s favor and his blessing on my sexual relationship with my spouse. I do feel

God saying to me, 'I have given this gift to you to refresh you, bless you, for your enjoyment.'"

But the Song of Songs will finally not permit us to stay on the mountaintop. I love the realism of Song of Songs. I love its honesty, its authenticity. We move from the wedding night and the honeymoon to marriage. Quickly.

In 5:2, *I slept but my heart was awake. Listen My love is knocking; Open tome, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one. My head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night.* Perhaps he was out in the fields. Maybe he was a shepherd. Maybe he was away on business. In any case, he comes home after not being with his bride and he's eager to make love.

Here's biblical realism. It is one of the funniest verses in the Song of Songs. V. 3 *I have taken off my robe—must I put it on again? I have washed my feet—must I soil them again?* You've got to read v. 3 with a kind of Fran Drescher whine. Do I have to? Oh no, I have a headache. I've got the worst headache. I'm so tired. I've got to get up at 5:30 tomorrow for work. Be quiet, the kids will hear you.

We settle for so much less than extravagant love, extraordinary love. Body oneness is hard work. It's not hard work to have sex. But to create love, really connect, make space for each other after dishes, after the bills, the dog, washing the toilet, and the floor, cleaning the litter box, and watching TV for two hours, you just fall into bed – that's hard work. Body oneness is just not something that you might be interested in.

Let me suggest three things to you in closing. I recognize there are lots of dynamics in the various marriages here in the church. I know that some of your spouses are not followers of Christ. I know that some of you are not followers of Christ. I know that people have utterly different agendas when they come together in marriage and very often we simply have to make the best of our particular situations.

But if you and your spouse are followers of Christ, you are committed to his agenda, and you are committed to each other, then why not aim high in your marriage? Why settle for an OK relationship, a 3 or 4 on a scale of 10? Why not go for a 10? Why not sow that you might one day reap?

When we are talking about body oneness, romantic love, sometimes the issue is simply focus. You or your spouse don't have a lot of room for each other. Your life is so full. You come together and you are exhausted. Body oneness has dropped off the radar screen. When we are dating, we're totally focused. The girl will look in the mirror 15 times, change her shirt at least 4-5 times, get herself fixed up. I would always show up 15 minutes early. They are investing.

Then you settle into the routine of life. It's interesting that when I talk with men who are on their second marriages, particularly men who are in the 40's and 50's, they are a lot more focused on their marriage. They say, "Rich, the first time around, I was so caught up with building my career. I was so interested in grabbing the brass ring. Honestly, I just didn't make any room for my wife. I want to do it differently this time."

Other things elevate in importance, as you get older. Friend, I don't think we have to be on our second or third marriage to finally understand that our mates need to be the focus of our attention and we need to invest in our relationship.

Along with focus, there often needs to be forgiveness. To live in the world of the Song of Songs, the truth is a lot of baggage needs to be let go of from the past. This woman, when she finally goes after her lover, is beaten up. It says in v. 6, "I looked for him, but didn't find him. I called for him, but he didn't answer. The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. They beat me, they bruised me; they took away my cloak, those watchmen of the walls."

They took her to be a loose woman, perhaps a prostitute, and they beat her up. And there are a lot of things in our marriages that beat us up. I don't mean physical abuse. That does happen. And it happens here in this church. And if it does happen to you, wife or husband, I ask you to contact a pastor and allow this church and its resources to stand with you. But there are a lot of other things in marriage that beat us up. I've talked with wives who have expressed to me that they feel used by their husbands. He neglects me all day. There's no communication. There's no romance. There's no help around the house. But when we get in bed, he's ready. I just feel used. That beats them up.

Many wives do not feel verbally appreciated by their husbands. They feel verbally torn down. They don't feel that their physical flaws are sensitively covered over. And that their great traits are enhanced.

Many husbands simply feel that their wives are uninterested. They feel beaten up by criticism, beaten up by grudges over past mistakes that are never let go of. Wives have been beaten up by their husbands' addictions to pornography. The comparisons made with other women, roving eyes. People have been beaten up by legalistic churches that impose intolerable guilt on sexual feelings as if there is something wrong with having feelings.

Many folks are beaten up because they never can experience the simple goodness of sex. That God actually blesses marital intimacy. People are beaten up by the ridiculous standards of TV and media. That you have to be some sort of sexual triathlete.

To move forward, there must be forgiveness. To let go of the past. To let go of the hurt. To let go of legalistic teaching. To let go of past experiences. To let go of the guilt. To let go of your partner and his or her sins. To lay aside the fantasies and comparisons. There must be forgiveness and a seeking of forgiveness where we don't minimize our flaws and our faults. I've been shellfish. I've been self-centered. I know that I've hurt you. Forgiveness enables you to let go of the past and hope for a really great future.

To have a marriage like that of the Song of Songs, there has to be focus, a commitment, there has to be forgiveness, a letting go. The Song of Songs communicates marriage as fun.

The great English author, CS Lewis, called it joy. Joy is the pointer to ultimate fulfillment in God. That's what marriage is meant to be – a pointer beyond itself to loving ultimate exclusive union with Jesus Christ. Dating couples – invest now. Spend more time preparing for marriage than planning for your wedding day. Married couples – don't give up. Continue to sow into your marriage; you will reap. Let's pray.

The Hard Work of Romantic Love

Rich Nathan
February 1-2, 2003
Song of Songs: Eros Redeemed
Song of Songs 3:6-5:8

- I. The Wedding: Extravagant Love (S.S. 3:6-11)
 - A. Wedding Investment
 - B. Premarital and Post-Marital Investment

- II. The Wedding Night: Extraordinary Love
 - A. Expressed Love (S.S. 4:1-8)
 - 1. Verbally
 - 2. Bodily
 - B. Excited Love (S.S. 4:9-11)

C. Exclusive Love (S.S. 4:12-5:1)

III. The Marriage: Excuses (S.S. 5:4-8)

A. Focus (S.S. 5:2-4)

B. Forgiveness (S.S. 5:6,7)

C. Fun

