

When Love Is Hard

Rich Nathan

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Song of Songs: Eros Redeemed

Song of Songs 2:8-3:3

Over a decade ago, a psychiatrist named Scott Peck wrote a book that's been on the best-sellers list since he wrote it. The book was called *The Road Less Traveled*. It opens with this powerful statement: "Life is difficult." He then takes the rest of the book to unpack that statement. Life is difficult.

You know, when I read a statement like that, I think what would America be like if people actually believed that life was difficult. What would the drug companies sell, if they couldn't convince people that life should be pain free? What would happen to situation comedies if you couldn't resolve family conflicts or racial prejudice or cheating in a half an hour? What a different country this would be if people believed that life was difficult.

Well, I want to tell you today that if life is difficult for one person, it's more than twice as difficult for two people to make married life work. Let me tell you a personal story.

I don't know what comes to your mind when you think of a wedding or a honeymoon. If you are young and in love you may picture in your mind a wedding like that of Prince Charles and Princess Diana – dozens of attendants, everything absolutely perfect, a honeymoon in which you and your beloved lie together on a rubber raft in the Caribbean while a waiter wades out into the surf to bring you a tropical drink with a little umbrella and some more suntan lotion.

Let me share with you a slightly different picture from my own wedding and honeymoon. Many of you know that when Marlene and I married we were very young. I was 19 and she just turned 20. My parents are Jewish from New York, very ethnic. Marlene's parents were Protestant from a small suburban community outside of Cleveland. Marlene and I were planning to have a rabbi and our pastor perform the wedding together. Two weeks before the wedding Marlene's mother hit the roof and said under no circumstance would she attend a wedding with a rabbi, or with out a pastor, who she considered to be a fundamentalist.

To placate her at the last hour, we found a judge before whom Marlene and I got married. We were not married in a church with a pastor, but by a judge in a non-descript reception center.

Now my family and Marlene's family never met until the week of the wedding. Their meeting was akin to the meeting of the Hatfield's and the McCoy's, only not quite as civil. Marlene's parents asked my entire family to come over to their home. My family came dressed to kill. They were wearing suits, evening gowns. Their hair was fixed.

Marlene's mother greeted them in Bermuda shorts and a sleeveless top. They stood staring at one another in the living room. She served one small bottle of Champaign and my family left in a huff.

The night before my wedding, my aunt took it upon herself to try to persuade me not to get married. Now she didn't know Marlene; she didn't know me; she didn't know anything about our relationship, our dreams, and our faith. But as a good New Yorker, that didn't stop her from offering her unsolicited opinions for about an hour and a half.

The next morning, Saturday morning, Marlene and I had our wedding before the judge in this hall. I was joyously happy and very much in love. And then at our reception one of our friends said, "What are you guys going to do on your honeymoon?" We said, "Gosh, we hadn't even thought of it." We literally had not thought of our honeymoon. We just thought we'd go back to the apartment that we'd found near our university and lock the door for a few days.

They said, "You guys need to go on a honeymoon." So they loaned us their car. Marlene and I chatted for a few minutes about where we might go. We decided it might be nice to go to Lancaster, PA where the Amish live and find a bed and breakfast for our honeymoon.

By the time we began our drive, the accumulated stress of the week had so built up in me that I had pounding headache. I also, probably because of the stress, had caught a really bad cold. I was coughing and sneezing. At the time I didn't even have a driver's license, so Marlene was forced to drive. All I wanted to do was sleep.

As Marlene drove, she interpreted my sleeping as my way to escape from her. She thought that I was actually disappointed that we got married. And so mile after mile she drove and cried. I woke up to my beautiful bride in tears. Oh, I forgot to add, she was also on her period.

What I love about the Bible is that we never get an airbrushed, fairytale, romance novel version of marriage, love or life in general. The Bible does not edit out the bad stuff, the unpleasant stuff, and the stuff that makes you ache and groan. The real stuff that tells us that life is difficult is still there. The Bible starts in paradise, in the Garden of Eden, with a man and a woman who are completely comfortable in each other's presence. This man and woman totally understand each other. They have no secrets. They have no baggage from the past. They have no emotional or sexual hang-ups – no addictions. They are completely secure, completely vulnerable, completely available, and completely in tune with each other.

And then after reading three or four pages in the Bible, we read that paradise is lost. And immediately we read about the husband and wife engaging in blame shifting and cover-ups. They are ashamed. They have hang-ups. They are hiding from each other. There's anger, violence in the family, infertility, incest and jealousy.

Last week I began a series from perhaps the least preached book in the Bible. The Song of Songs is claimed to be the best collection of love songs ever written by the author. But the Bible in its utter honesty sets The Song of Songs not in paradise on some idyllic island in which the calm is never broken. The Bible sets The Song of Songs in paradise lost, in a world in which life is difficult and married life is doubly difficult.

You know, friends, the Bible makes every married couple an ironclad promise. Whether you believe you made a mistake in getting married, or you still remain blissfully in love, the Bible makes every married couple an ironclad promise. Here it is. You can write this promise on your refrigerator or attach it on a little post-it-note on your shaving mirror. The apostle Paul says, “Those who marry will face many trials in this life.”

I’ve called today’s talk, “When Love Is Hard.” Let’s pray.

Song of Songs 2:8-13 – Listen! My lover! Look here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice. My lover spoke and said to me, “Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.”

Like many young couples, when Marlene and I got married we wrote our own wedding vows. Marlene’s vow was borrowed from the book of Ruth 1:16-17. But my vows were borrowed directly from The Song of Songs. One of the passages that I used was Songs of Songs 2:10-13.

This new love song opens with the excitement of two people who are in the throes of early love for each other. Listen! My lover! This woman is excited by the sound of her lover’s voice. She hears him and her pulse quickens. Her face flushes and her heart skips a beat.

The man, for his part, is not walking towards the woman, or even running. He is leaping; he’s bounding. Look! Here he comes leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. No obstacle is too great for him to surmount. Drive all night just so I can see you for two hours while you switch planes in another city? No problem. I’ll be there with a bouquet of flowers waiting for you to get off the plane. Walk totally out of my way across campus so that I can meet you and walk you to your next class, even if I’m going to be late? You’ll do anything to be together. No obstacle is too great when you are in love. Jacob worked for his Father-in-law for 7 years to marry his beloved Rachel – but it says in Genesis 29:20 it seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

She compares the man to a gazelle. My lover is like a gazelle, or young stag. He’s sleek and swift. He’s full of masculine virility.

The setting of this young love, of course, is the springtime. Spring has long been associated with new love. Everything in spring is fresh and alive and new: Verse 11, *See the winter is past; the rains are over.* The winter rains that are common in Israel have come and are now gone. The weather is warmer and drier. It's time to go outside and lie on the grass together. Remove our heavy winter clothes. The flowers appear on the earth. Springtime in Israel meant that the countryside would be ablaze with wild flowers, wild roses, pink juniper, tulips, iris, gladiolas, and lilies.

Singing would be heard outside. Springtime is a time of joy. There's the cooing of the turtledove, which returns to Israel in early April. The fig tree is ripening and the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.

I remember when Marlene and I fell in love. We were teenagers. It was spring. I had just become a Christian. We used to go to a park, to a private spot with her guitar and sing together outside and worship. And then just lay next to one another in the grass and let the warm breeze blow over us.

This picture of spring fills up our senses. You hear the sound of singing and turtledoves cooing. We see hills filled with wildflowers. We feel the warm breeze. We smell the scent of blossoms from the vine. The writer communicates throughout the book Song of Songs the truth of the goodness of creation.

Christian spirituality, especially of the evangelical variety of which our church descended, has tended to underplay the goodness of creation in all of its beauty. Christian spirituality, especially evangelical spirituality, tends to be other worldly. Christian houses, if you're really spiritual, ought to be drab, Spartan, white walls, very simple furniture, maybe a picture of Jesus over the mantel.

If you are a spiritual person, you ought to give almost no attention to your dress or appearance. You should dress in dark, muted tones, very plainly. Women should never wear makeup. Food should be simple, healthy, plain and nutritious.

Here is the totally opposite side of the coin. Here the senses are set on fire. The Song of Songs chapter 2, as we find in the rest of the book, teaches us that God in his goodness wants to fill up our senses. It is the gift of God for food to taste good. When someone lovingly prepares a meal, and it tastes great, that's a sign of God's blessing to you. It is good for your office, for your home, for the out of doors, for you to smell good.

Beautiful music is a gift from God. So are gentle touches, and warm hugs, and hot rolls fresh out of the oven. Homemade preserves, a great cup of coffee in the morning and the feel of your favorite sweater are all gifts. Do you ever thank God that you don't have to live your life in a prison or in an Army barracks? Some of you need to be set free from a legalistic stranglehold of your spiritual upbringing, or from temperamental strangleholds, which cause you to believe that the enjoyment of creation and all its grandeur is unspiritual.

You know, love in the springtime is the way most people think about love. It is the love found in the movies. It is what we call being in love. This couple is full of mutual attraction and anticipation. Love in the springtime is love where the other person is gorgeous. They are phenomenal. They are intoxicating. They are funny. They are sensitive. They are generous and amazingly, most amazing of all, they are interested in you. You can't believe your good fortune. Of course you love them. How could you not with all their wonderful qualities? But that they love you back, that's the amazing thing. This perfect person actually loves you back.

I remember when it dawned on me that Marlene actually loved me. It blew my mind. How could I be this lucky? Love in the springtime. You find yourself in the springtime actually being wonderful. In the presence of your beloved you are more thoughtful. You are a better listener. You are more patient. You are focused. You are more devoted than you've ever been in your life. Love in the springtime feels so good that we never want it to stop. Love in the springtime is easy. It's no work. You're swimming with the current and running with the wind at your back.

The fact is, as the author Walter Wangerin puts it, we so strongly want to keep up the feeling of easy perfection, of what I call springtime love, that we start editing the facts. Wangerin says if love is not blind, it does squint a lot. Springtime love, if it's not blind, squints a lot. Springtime love idealizes everything. Everything is admired.

I just love the way he stretches a dollar. He is so wise in his handling of money. She's so clever. She always has a great comeback. I just adore her sharp wit. He knows everything. He loves to debate and discuss and argue. He just knows everything. She's such a hard worker. She doesn't let up until the job is totally done and it's always done perfectly. WOW, I enjoy watching him eat. He really attacks the food with so much intensity. It is so much fun watching my lover eat.

The people who plan to married who really scare me are the great idealists. "I just love everything about this other person. We have absolutely no problems. We have absolutely no conflicts. We just know we are never going to have a problem communicating."

"I'm so glad I found someone with whom I will never have financial problems." And then you wake up, stop squinting, open your eyes and find this guy who can really stretch a dollar is actually just cheap.

And the woman who is so witty and who has such a great comeback, you wish sometimes she'd just be a little gentler.

And the guy who has an opinion about everything, sometimes you just wish he'd shut-up.

The hard worker, you want her to stop working and be able to relax a bit. And the guy who eats with such gusto – actually now that I think about it, he's kind of disgusting. He looks a little bit like a pig. And then there's the hair left in the sink, the underwear on the floor, and someone else is using your razor or your toothbrush. They leave the bathroom seat up in the dark and they have a very different body temperature than yours, a very different thermostat. They snore.

I get really afraid when couples squint too much before they get married.

Now, look at what's going on here. This woman is safe behind a wall gazing through the windows and peering through the lattice. She's secure behind her wall, behind the lattice; she's safe and protected with the family she grew up with. And this man is saying to her in verse 10, *Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come away with me.* Verse 13, *Arise, come, my darling, my beautiful one. Come with me.* She is being called away from her comfort zone, away from the familiar, away from her relationships to join him on some adventure into some uncharted future. Come away with me. Come away. Come away for what? Come away to what? To a relationship that is described in verse 16 as *my lover is mine and I am his; I am my beloved's and he is mine.*

The woman is being invited into a relationship that asks her for her total commitment. I'm asking you, beloved, to promise me your all. Come away with me, the man says. Every part of you I want to be mine. My lover is mine and I am his. I'm asking for your body. I'm asking for exclusive rights to sex with you for the rest of our lives. I'm asking for your heart. I want your money, your help when I am sick. Your care when I am old. I'm asking you to give me massages when I'm tired. I'm asking for your emotions, your prayers, your housecleaning, all of your vacation time, date nights, half your bed, and your attention when I speak. I'm asking for you to keep growing. To keep pursuing Christ. To serve together with me in ministry.

Marlene even takes my sweatshirts, my t-shirts, my razor, and my comb. When I asked her where my favorite sweatshirt was, Marlene said: "It's in my drawer." "Why" I asked her, "is it in your drawer?" "Because you and I are one."

Come away with me to a total commitment. Come away with me; he invites her to a timeless commitment. My lover is mine and I am his forever, until death, no escapes. No it didn't work out the way I anticipated and no the reality is way worse than the ideal I imagined. I didn't sign up for this. It is a timeless commitment to walk on a tightrope with no safety nets. Not just love in the springtime, but in the heated arguments of summer, the autumn blahs and the winter of declining health...talk about love when it's hard!

Total commitment, timeless commitment until death, which in your spouse's case you may want to speed up a little bit. No wonder this woman appears to be a little frightened. She's described in verse 14 this way: *My dove in the clefts of the rock, in*

the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, he says. She's a shy turtledove hiding in the clefts of a rock. How do you go from being a shy turtledove hiding in the clefts of a rock to my lover is mine and I am his? To total timeless commitment?

You know, there are lots of good reasons to fear commitment. A number of years ago I came upon a book in a bookstore titled *Commitment Phobic*. It described all the signs in current American life that signaled people's fear of commitment. People are waiting longer to marry, even after years of dating or living together. A rising percentage of people simply fear putting legal definitions around their relationship. More and more people buy tickets to expensive Broadway shows and don't show up. Fewer people RSVP for weddings. It is hard for churches to have people show up consistently as volunteers. People quit leadership positions. People leave jobs without notice. America has become commitment phobic.

And we have become particularly commitment phobic as it pertains to marriage. Sadly, it's going to get worse. One of the saddest legacies, not just of our easy divorce culture, but of the growing percentage of commitment Christians who are divorcing is the impact upon their children's view of marital commitment. If mom and dad who went to church and talked about Jesus, mom went to women's groups and dad read the Bible and sent us to Sunday School; if mom and dad couldn't pull off a marriage, what hope is there for me?

The culture of divorce trains us to believe that relationships are very fragile, that love doesn't last and promises can always be broken. My lover is mine and I am his, total commitment, timeless commitment? How can we do that? We could squint our eyes and pretend that our beloved is perfect. We can pretend that we'll never have any problems. We can cover our ears, close our noses and leap off a cliff into the great unknown.

But the great Christian alternative to idealization is trusting commitment.

I'm not being super-spiritual here. I want to offer you right now, you who fear making a commitment, I want to offer you the Christian response to our commitment phobic society. The Christian alternative is faith in a timeless God who totally commits himself to be with us every step of our marital journey.

I think it is absolutely insane for anyone today to sign up for a total timeless commitment to another person who does not have a strong faith in a timeless, totally committed God. A strong faith that the God who blessed you in the springtime of your new love will be there in the hot summer of misunderstanding and the fall of apathy and indifference, and the winter of declining health and discontent.

How can you venture out unless you know that God is going to be there whether we are fertile or infertile; and if children are born, whether they are healthy or not, obedient or disobedient? That God will be there offering wisdom when I just can't figure you out. God will give me conviction when I screw up and don't want to admit it. He'll give

tenderness when I'm tempted to be harsh and strength when I'd rather go to sleep instead of talk to you.

Friend, how can you possibly give your life to someone else to be naked and vulnerable emotionally, physically and spiritually unless you can cry out to God for his provision his protection and his safety. Even if they keep their end of the bargain, how can you trust yourself? You who have screwed up so often? You who come into a relationship with so much baggage? You who are so broken from your past? How can you trust yourself to possibly be the right kind of partner unless you go on this journey with God?

We must hear behind the lover's voice, "Come away with me," the voice of Jesus Christ himself saying, "Come to me, first, all you who are weary and heavy laden. I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." Friend, unless you've learned to come away with Jesus, you are not ready yet. You are not safe enough yet. The other person is not safe enough for you to go away with them. But when you hear the promise of Jesus, "I will be with you always even till the end of the age" you shy turtledoves can come out from hiding in the rocks.

Well, the mood shifts very suddenly from springtime to nighttime. *All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did not find him. 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. The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. "Have you seen the one my heart loves?"*

From springtime to nighttime. The emotional tone of chapter 3 shifted radically from the absolute joy and wonder and long bright days of springtime love in ch. 2. It's night here. This woman is alone. She is not with her lover; she is alone. We don't know if she is dreaming or awake. If her fears are real or if she is just having anxiety attacks. Fearing separation, fearing loss, fearing aloneness, she cries out to the watchmen, "Have you seen the one my heart loves?"

See, the fundamental issue for every one of us as human beings, whether we are single or we're married, is who is going to meet our needs. All of us want to feel important to someone else. All of us want to feel secure. All of us want to feel loved. All of us want our lives to count. We all want to make a difference. We're all ultimately seeking completion. We all have Grand Canyon-sized holes in our souls that we long to fill. Everyone on earth is asking the same question she asked the watchmen: Can you tell me where I can find the one my heart loves? Can you tell me where I can find what I'm looking for?

The difference in human beings boils down to the way we choose to meet our need for security, significance, meaning, love, union, and completion. Some of you sitting here today simply choose to deny that you have these needs. You deny that there is a Grand Canyon-sized hole in your soul. Because admitting that is too personally threatening and so you amuse yourself, or distract yourself.

Neil Postman, a number of years ago, wrote a book called "Amusing Ourselves to Death." Do you know what the word "amuse" literally means? A = not and muse = think; it literally means not to think. To choose not to consider. To choose not to meditate. To choose not to feel. To choose not to remember. It means to choose to live an unexamined life. Amusements = things that get us to stop thinking. We amuse ourselves because thinking about the hole in our souls is too threatening. You may amuse yourself with drugs, sex, with endless TV watching, endless chores, working on our homes or some phobia. You distract yourself from your need for love and completion and union and fulfillment by having an emotional problem. My issue is not that I'm incomplete, that I have these cravings, that there is something inside of me that cries out, "Where is the love that my heart seeks?"

A multi-billion dollar self-help industry is based on the premise that you can find completion in yourself. That you can on your own fill up the Grand Canyon-sized hole in your soul. That you can be your own best friend and pull your own strings and be your own lover.

Some of you try to meet your need for love and completion by achieving. You've been trained from the time you were little by your parent's model, by what they rewarded and what they punished, that achievement means love. So life you is, throwing yourself into your work, getting a prestigious job, buying a nicer car, having another line on the resume, having someone pat you on the back and telling you "good work," making the dean's list, engaging in more ministry, making partner in your firm, and you are on the treadmill trying to fill the hole in your soul.

Some of you try to find the perfect person. You know, I sometimes imagine two people who actually believed that in each other they would find the completion, the security, the union, the love that they've always looked for in life. I sometimes imagine if we were really honest in our marriage vows, what two people who are looking to each other to fill that Grand Canyon-sized hole in their souls would promise each other in their marriage? Sometimes I wish there was a law that applied to marriage vows kind of like truth in advertising. Truth in vowing. Let's just tell the truth on our wedding day.

Let's stand before all these witnesses, before God. You can hear the bride say:

Look, I'm taking you for better, but you can forget about the worse part, the sickness part and the until death part. What I'm committing to today is to have you make me completely happy. I want you to be able to read my mind and know with a glance when you should apologize, when you should shut up and just listen to me, and when you should give me a hug. I want you to be able to read my moods even when you're in another room. I want you to be strong when I need you to be strong and completely compliant when I need you to be compliant. Never miss a birthday, an anniversary, a Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, ever.

Oh, by the way, you've got to pay the entire bill for how my dad related to me and how other men have treated me. I want you to know when we're in bed together without

asking whether I'm in the mood for lovemaking. I want you to always make me feel pretty. Lift me out of every depression. Respect one of my opinions. Allow me the freedom to pout when I feel like it. Allow me to express and do and minister and be and work anywhere I want to be and do and minister, even if I don't know what that is.

In general, I'm asking you to meet all my needs, all the time, until I die, or until I kill you first.

And in response, the groom would say:

I totally want the same thing you do. I totally put a lot of value on what other people think of me, so when I walk in a room with you, my bride, I want you to always look great, because that builds up my sagging ego. I'd like to blame you and hand you the bill for anything that goes wrong at my job or with the kids or with life in general. And because I'm a little insecure, try not to disagree with me about anything important and never correct my driving habits. Don't make me talk if I don't feel like it, but if I do...listen. Sunday is for football with my buddies. I want a huge supply of food and no interruptions.

I take it as a given that you will be available sexually whenever I feel like sex, even if we haven't spoken for days and I've been a big jerk. I do, by the way, want you to pick up after me and cook for me and be my mom, only nicer and less nagging than she was. In general, I'm asking you my bride to meet all of my needs, all of the time, until I die or until I kill you first.

For how many of you would these vows contain just a little too much truth? Friends, there is hole in the female soul, single or married; there is hole in the male soul, single or married, the size of the Grand Canyon. We long for completion. We long for union. We long for intimacy. We long for security and significance. But where will we find the one our hearts love? Where will we find the one who completes us?

In a famous story, Jesus once talked with a woman who had been in a series of relationships with men. Maybe she just had a nose for losers – you know the kind of woman – you are feeling pretty good about yourself for a while, so you need to find another loser who will shred your self-esteem and make you feel like a piece of lint for the next couple of years. Maybe this woman was like a lot of men and women. She just lived with the Cinderella fantasy that there really was a perfect prince or princess out there, who would help her to live happily ever after.

When Jesus talked with the woman, it was a hot day. It was noontime. They talked about water. And then Jesus said this in John 4:13, *Every one who drinks this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*

Men and women, there is water for our thirsty souls that only Jesus can give us. There is completion, there is union, there is intimacy, there is the security that you seek, there

is the internal peace, safety, and love you want. You don't have to amuse yourself to death or achieve yourself into love, or parasitically devour another human being.

Let me bring this down. I want to talk personally to singles here in these closing moments. At the end of this message, single people, I'm going to ask you to do something that for many of you is going to be painfully difficult. I'm going to ask you to put on the altar, to surrender to God, your longing for a mate to complete you. I'm going to ask you, single people, to come before the Lord – this is hard. For some of you, it is going to feel absolutely impossible. It will feel like you are putting a knife into your chests – but I'm going to ask some of you to come before the Lord and say, "Lord, you know how much I crave a relationship with a man or with a woman. I want desperately what I see around me. I want to feel loved, be held and have someone to talk to, and to share life with." For some of you single parents you might add, "I want someone to love my child as much as I do, to fill in the gap in my son or daughter's life that they feel for a dad, or a mom."

But then add this: "But Lord, I'm tired of living on the edge all the time – wondering if this is the one – whether it will work out with this person. I'm tired of my fantasies. I'm tired of my dreams that never seem to work out. Lord, I confess that I'm tired of being disappointed." Some of you might say, if it applies, "I'm tired of having physical relationships apart from your will. Lord, I'm tired of being angry with you for not giving me what I think I need. So here's the prayer. Today, Lord, I confess that I have a Grand Canyon-sized hole in my soul that only you can fill. Today, Lord, I confess that I am so thirsty for love and I want to find in you the water that will quench my thirst and meet my needs now. Today, Lord, I want to turn over to you the entire responsibility of determining whether or when or who I marry. I want to surrender the marriage question to you."

Singles, to pray a pray like that, a prayer of relinquishment, a prayer of surrender requires you to believe in God at a level that many of you have been afraid to go. Many of you do not know God enough to believe that God can meet you at such a personal and practical way. To surrender to God your future with the opposite sex means that you've got to believe that God is really good. That he wills to be good to you. That he will uphold your end of life and if you have children, your children's lives. He really, really can meet your needs. Do you know it is possible for Jesus to work so deeply inside you that he can change what you want. Jesus can change your want. He can change you so that what you want is Jesus.

Let me tell you something single people. If you put your future romantic relationships, if any, on the altar and you say, "God, if you want it for me, then I want it. And if you don't, then I'm going to believe that you can meet me," that resolution will crawl off the altar in the hour. This is a major fight of faith. A fight that you have to fight today, and tomorrow, and Tuesday, and Wednesday, until it becomes such a part of the fabric of your life that it is natural to trust in the Lord. Looking to Christ, instead of looking to a man or a woman can be as natural to you as breathing.

I long for you to come into this kind of liberty. Friend, if you can go here, if you really can put romance on the altar, really, and relinquish your future to God, you have become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

And married people, you aren't off the hook here either. In answer to the question: Have you seen the one my heart loves? The answer is not ultimately going to be found in your husband. And it's not ultimately going to be found in your wife. I'm going to ask you in a moment, married people, to confess, if this is true: "I've looked to my husband (wife) to fill my needs."

To say something like, "Father, I'm tired of being angry at my spouse because there is something missing inside of me. I'm tired of being disappointed because I'm not getting from them what I crave and hunger for. Father, I'm tired of being resentful. I'm tired of being so clinging, so demanding, so nagging, so needy, so insecure. Father, I don't like the person I've become and I blame my spouse."

Some of you, I want you to add this line: "And Father, I will stop saying to you, 'I never should have gotten married.' I will repent of continually saying, 'It was all a huge mistake.'"

"Father, I'm tired of living on the emotional roller-coaster of my spouse's moods and attitudes and how he or she is relating to me today. I want to get off the roller coaster. I'm more than just a little sick. I confess today that you are the one my heart seeks. You are the one I need. I will never be happy until I connect more deeply with you. I put on the altar today my spouse. I put on the altar today my fantasies about what my spouse ought to be like. I sacrifice to you the current ways that I tried to fill the hole in my own soul from this other human being. Lord Jesus, I'm thirsty. I want from you the water that really will quench the thirst I have inside, a thirst for love, a thirst for completion, a thirst for affirmation and security and significance."

Friend, putting your spouse on the altar is a fight of faith that you will walk off within an hour. You've got to ask for God to convict you today, tomorrow, and next Tuesday and Wednesday until it becomes the most natural thing in the world. Do it until it is as natural as breathing for you to meet your needs in Christ. If you do this and ask the Lord to convict you when you are looking again to your mate instead of Jesus for your ultimate needs, you can truly call yourself a disciple of Jesus Christ.

There is a wonderful literary parallel to the story found in Song of Songs 3. It takes place at night as well – it involves a woman alone who looks for the one her soul loves. Like the woman here she searches and looks and asks watchmen where her lover is. When she finds the one she loves she clings to him and doesn't want to let go either. The woman's name was Mary Magdalene – the one she sought was Jesus and the day was Easter. It is the heart of Mary Magdalene, a heart that went after Jesus, that God wants to put into your heart. Let's pray.

When Love Is Hard

Rich Nathan

January 11-12, 2002

Song of Songs: Eros Redeemed

Song of Songs 2:8-3:3

I. Love in the Springtime: “Come Away with Me” (S.S. 2:8-17)

- A. New Love (S.S. 2:8-9)
- B. Sense-Filled Love (S.S. 2:11-13)
- C. Idealized Love
- D. Committed Love (S.S. 2:10, 13, 14-16)
 - 1. Total Commitment
 - 2. Timeless Commitment
 - 3. Trusting Commitment

II. Love in the Night Time: “Have You Seen the One My Heart Loves?” (S.S. 3:1-3)

- A. Who Will Meet My Needs?
 - 1. Denial
 - 2. Achievement
 - 3. My Lover
- B. How Should Our Vows Read?
- C. Who Can Meet Our Needs?