

Mark D. Reichert

Song of Songs 1:15-2:7 – A Gift Worth Waiting For

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There's just something very alluring about a beautifully-wrapped Christmas gift, isn't there? As soon as the Christmas tree goes up, as soon as the gifts start to appear underneath it, the excitement and joy of the season come with it. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if some of you have already started some Christmas shopping, because it's exciting not only to get those gifts, but also to give them – and that excitement is hard to contain.

When you see a Christmas gift, you know some important things about it. First, you are just sure that it's going to be magical. Second, it is wrapped and given with love. And third, there's no snooping around ahead of time or opening before Christmas comes, because it works best when the gift-giver and gift-getter can enjoy all the excitement and joy and surprise of opening that gift together.

Well that's the way God would have us think about his gift of marriage, too, and especially the intimacy and romance that go along with it. We shouldn't think about it as a roped-off museum piece that has a "keep away!" sign on it and that you get scolded for talking about too much. Too often that's the way we Christians are conditioned to think about Sixth Commandment issues, like they are a dirty but necessary part of life that should be left unspoken. Even now it makes us uncomfortable to talk about the s-word in church instead of using a euphemism for it like romance or intimacy.

But even from all the way back when God brought the first man and woman together in marriage and Adam sang the praises of his new wife Eve, "*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,*" that taught us that marriage and sexual intimacy isn't a *cringeworthy* thing. It's a *praiseworthy* thing – something that we can praise God for because he gave us such a wonderful gift. And our First Lesson for today from Song of Songs teaches us that this gift is really just like those Christmas gifts. We're going to see here that marriage is a gift worth waiting for that God wants us to anticipate with pure joy and to enjoy fully in its proper time.

Now Song of Songs is not a Bible book that typically finds its way into our normal reading and sermon cycle, but King Solomon wrote this book in the Old Testament to give us a beautiful, joyful picture of what Christian marriage can look like, and this section especially has good truth to teach us about how we can lead a pure and decent life in words and actions, especially before the wedding.

So the Song of Songs tells a love story between the king and his young bride, and the book basically traces that story from what we would consider dating, to wedding, to marriage. The verses before us seem like they are right around the wedding, and we certainly see here a couple that has plenty of newlywed passion and that gives us a good example to learn from.

The first thing we see here is a playful exchange: *He says, "How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves." She says, "How handsome you are, my beloved! Oh, how charming!" She says, "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys." He says, "Like a lily among*

*thorns is my darling among the young women."* What are they doing here? We'd say they're flirting. You're beautiful. No, *you're* beautiful. Come on, I'm just a common wildflower, a poor country girl. You may think you're just a wildflower, but all the other girls are *thorns* by comparison! It's all enough to make a guy like me roll my eyes. But there is something pure and innocent here, isn't there? These two delight in each other, and they want each other to know it. Nothing they're saying or doing is overtly dirty like you might hear in jokes or see out at bars or parties; they're not talking to each other like all they are is sex objects. Dating for a Christian isn't just about stoking or satisfying sexual desire. No, we do it to find a life partner that we can walk together with down the path of life where God leads us. And so it is with this young couple. They can tell how much their words and affection mean to each other, and it brings them pure joy to see the other so brimming full of love.

But their relationship is more than just sweet nothings. You get the picture that they're laying out on a grassy hillside together on a beautiful country day, and they're making life plans together. *She says, "our bed is verdant." And he says, "The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs."* She may be a country girl who loves nature, but the king has something better in mind than just those trees and grasses that surrounded them right then – he's thinking about the royal palace in Jerusalem that was made from the finest cedars and firs, and how beautiful that's going to be for them to make their home together. Ever practical, the man is thinking about the roof that he's going to place over his wife's head and how well he wants to take care of her.

But then she sneaks in one last compliment to remind him that it's not the house that's important to her, not the decorations or furnishings that make it a home for her; it's him. "*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. Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love.*" She's not going into this relationship with a selfish entitlement about what she's going to get out of the deal. She's going into this relationship with a humble, genuine appreciation for everything her husband does for her. Like shade on a hot day, he's the shelter where she can find real peace and comfort. Like apples to the taste, he is a sweet provider for her needs. And like a banner – really the idea here is a military insignia – she feels totally safe with him, because she knows he will fight to protect her because that's how much he loves her. And overall, the obvious message is that they can't wait to go to the banquet hall, to celebrate their marriage and spend the rest of their lives together.

So what can we learn here from this young couple about Godly guidance for other young couples before the wedding? The first thing is that there's nothing wrong with flirting; it is a good thing to let your significant other know how much you love them and how highly you think of them! Who doesn't appreciate a good compliment, especially from the person you're closest to in this world? It means the most that way! But this is a good reminder to keep that flirting clean and pure so your boyfriend or girlfriend knows that you have a higher opinion of them than just a piece of meat. We all know that as time goes on, it can be so easy to let our sinful hearts focus on the negatives or the friction points in a relationship. But when we make a conscious effort to see the positives – to see and to voice the good things our significant others bring to our lives and to notice the ways they *do* show us love – well then we can learn to appreciate them in just the same way as the couple here did. So remember always how delighted you were with each other when you first dated, how fulfilling it was

to connect on such a deep level, and how much joy it brought to your partner to share that delight and connection. Yes, a little romance is a good thing that God's Word smiles on, even if you don't really consider yourself a natural Casanova.

But then another lesson here is that there is a place for physical displays of affection. Hugging, kissing, holding each other, spending close time together – these are all things we see the King and his future bride doing here. But just remember – they were looking forward to their marriage as a gift worth waiting for and anticipating it with *pure* joy, so they knew that their physical affection should only go so far until after the wedding day. And this is important for us to remember, too. I've heard it said that a good measure to use to think about how much physical affection is proper before marriage is to think about what you would be comfortable doing with your grandma in the room. If you wouldn't be comfortable doing it with grandma there to see it, then save it for marriage.

And actually, that's the message that we see in the last few verses of our text. *She says, "Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love. His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me. 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."* Just as you can see the intimacy beginning to ramp up here, it's almost like an old-time romantic movie where the curtain gets pulled on the love scene, and the woman instead turns to the audience for a quick monologue, "Now don't be too hasty – this is a gift that should only be enjoyed fully in its proper time!"

That's not the message we normally hear in today's hook-up, shack-up, break-up culture, is it. Sex is seen as something fun, something natural, something harmless, something that anyone should be able to do as long as it's consensual. What's the big deal with finding someone to hook up with over the weekend, what's the big deal with watching porn, who's it hurting? It's just kids having fun, right? Well no, it's not. That kind of culture can do terrible emotional damage to the people who get used by it, it teaches us to treat the opposite sex without respect as if they really are nothing but pieces of meat, and the ones who get the worst part of the deal are the children who are irresponsibly conceived and then either aborted or all too often brought up without a mother and father who are both fully dedicated to them and to each other. And we all probably have an ever-growing list of struggling single parents in our lives that prove that.

But then just as equally common is the practice of couples living together outside of marriage. Surely shacking up is a step further in the right direction than just hooking up, right? After all, it's the norm nowadays, it's financially easier, it's a good test drive to see if two people can work together, and marriage is really just a piece of paper you send in to the government anyway. *Isn't our relationship so much deeper than that?* Well again, no, it's not, and time and study have shown that again and again. First and foremost, God's Word warns against falling into sexual sin, exposing ourselves to undue temptation, and giving offense to others who might be led to assume the worst about our actions – and for normal sinful people, living together inside of romance but outside of marriage checks all those boxes. It's like saying to God, I don't care about your plan for marriage and family and I don't care about the Christian testimony that I give to the world around me. But not only that, it also has so many worldly drawbacks – if you read the extra information at the back of the service

folder, you'll see things like depression, relationship dissatisfaction & instability, a lack of trust and self-worth, domestic violence, and greater instances of cheating and breaking up, all of which are much more likely to occur among couples living together outside of marriage. And really, who should be surprised by any of that, when two people aren't willing to commit their lives to each other unconditionally according to God's plan and will? When the luster wears off and life gets tough, what's keeping them there?

No, God's plan for marriage is better, because this gift worth waiting for has three great blessings – we call them the 3 C's – that can only be fully enjoyed in their proper time. The first, the greatest, the most essential is companionship. Having someone God created specially to complement and complete you; having someone dedicated to sharing their whole life with you; having someone make that kind of full and free investment in you is a great way to chase off that lack of trust and self-worth and relationship security. There are lots of ways that God's plan for marriage can be spoiled in this world, but when it's waited for and saved for just the right time and just the right person, it is truly beautiful. Friends so often come and go, but a committed, life-long spouse is worth more than anything else.

Then the next blessing of marriage is called chastity, which is an old word for sexual faithfulness or fulfillment. You know, we call it "making love" because that's what actually happens in our brains when two people share that together – they are rewired for an intimate connection to each other. God intends for this to be the physical consummation of the deepest emotional and relational bond two people in this world can ever know. No, sex is never just an empty, meaningless physical act. Even somebody like Wilt Chamberlain, a famous womanizer who claimed to have over 20,000 bed partners in his day, came to confess that having one woman a thousand times is so much more satisfying. That's why Paul Newman once quipped, "Why fool around with hamburger when you have steak at home?" It's because sex can only be everything it was meant to be within God's blessed plan for marriage.

Then finally, the last great blessing of marriage is the product of that sexual union, children. Children are raised best in a stable home with parents who love them and support them. Only in a home with a mother and father's unique-yet-complementary influence can children develop in the well-rounded way that God fully intends. That's why it's been said that the best thing a father can do for his children is to make sure they know how much he loves their mother, and vice versa.

So now that we're into the last quarter of the year and the holiday season is coming, let's remember how special it is to open those gifts together at Christmas and share that with the ones we love. They have their proper time and place, and the anticipation only makes the joy all the greater when the day finally comes. And Christian marriage is that same way. We do things differently from the rest of the world, and that's a good thing because the way we do things follows God's plan and brings God's fully-intended blessings, and that is always best. Even when we fail to keep God's 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment in the way that he wants, Jesus forgives us, Jesus restores us, Jesus motivates us anew and calls us again to see marriage for the gift it truly is. If you're still waiting for your wedding day – or if you know someone who is that needs the encouragement – it is a gift worth waiting for, and when you follow God's Word and will for it, it's one that he will certainly use to bring amazing blessings into your life. Amen.