

The Art of Intimacy

Song of Songs 1:15-2:7

Introduction: 1) Lasting romance and marital intimacy might well be put on the endangered species list in Western civilization in the early 21st century. On the one hand, cohabitation in the United States has increased by more than 1500% in the past half century. In fact, more than half of all marriages are now preceded by cohabitation, even though evidence indicates that, “Couples who cohabit before marriage (and especially before an engagement or an otherwise clear commitment) tend to be less satisfied with their marriage—and more likely to divorce—than couples who do not. Those negative outcomes are called the cohabitation effect” (Meg Jay, “The Downside of Cohabiting Before Marriage,” *The New York Times*, 4-14-12).

2) On the other hand we are seeing a rise in what some call “Grey Divorce,” with there now being a significant number of persons divorcing after the age of 50. For the first time in our country’s history, “more Americans 50 and older are divorced than widowed, and the number is growing...” (Sam Roberts, “Divorce After 50 Grows More Common,” *The New York Times*, 9-20-13). Stephanie Coontz, speaking particularly for women, says in our day, “If you are a healthy 65, you can expect another pretty healthy 20 years. So with the kids gone, it seems more burdensome to stay in a bad relationship, or even one that has grown

stale... We [women] expect to find equality, intimacy, friendship, fun, and even passion right into what people used to see as the ‘twilight years.’”

3) We read all of this and I can draw only one clear conclusion. Men and women have not changed since God put Adam and Eve in the Garden in Genesis 2. Both are looking for and longing for a love that is real and a love that will last. Sin has us looking in all the wrong places and often thinking about it in lots of wrong ways. Nevertheless, we cannot escape the reality that God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone, I will make him a helper as his complement” (Gen 2:18). As a result of the way God made us, we thirst for a love that is real and a love that will last. We pine for an intimacy that is the fruit of a love that truly is a gift from God. As James Russell Lowell said so beautifully in his poem “Love,” we have an insatiable hunger for,

A love that shall be new and fresh *each hour*;
 As is the sunset’s golden mystery
 Or the sweet coming of the evening star,
 Alike, and yet most unlike, *every day*,
 And seeming ever best and fairest *now*.”

4) In Song of Songs 1:15-2:7 we see the Shepherd-King and his “darling” (v. 15), the “most beautiful of women” (1:8) continue their “parade of praise” for each other. However, their dialogue quickens and intensifies. The expressions of their

love for one another are even more direct and intimate. As Kinlaw well observes, “It hints of a return to Eden (Gen 2:18-25), with its simplicity, naiveté, equality, and purity. It is as if this were the original couple” (EBC, vol. 5, 1221). Yes, their intimacy and purity hints back to Eden, and it also looks forward to what a husband and wife regain and enjoy in Christ (Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:19-20). The alienation resulting from the curse that has marred and destroyed so many marriages is capable of being overcome through the gospel. Paradise regained and more again resounds in these verses. The act of intimacy is rediscovered in a bed lush with foliage (1:16), a valley of beautiful flowers (2:1-2), a forest with apple trees (2:3), and a banquet hall filled with raisins, apples, and love (2:4-7). Once again we see our heavenly Father providing “good things to those who ask Him” (Matt 7:11).

Transition: Now, what are some practical and specific steps we can take to cultivate a love that lasts and also excel in the art of intimacy?

I. Learn to say the right thing. (1:15-2:2)

1) In our song the man is a Shepherd-King, a male lover who is “so idealized that he scarcely seems to touch the ground” (Barry Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 19). This is not surprising because this male human is a type of our divine-human lover, the Lord Jesus.

2) The woman is a lovely (1:5), beautiful lady (1:8) who is much valued by her man. One of the keys to a fulfilling and happy marriage has been captured early in their relationship: healthy and positive communication! We saw this in 1:9-14 and we see it continue in this passage of Scripture. Criticism and contempt, hangovers from the fall, are far removed from their relationship.

3) Steve Stephens is helpful at this point, in a negative fashion, when he challenges couples to let “your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person” (Col 4:6). Stephens lists 27 things we should avoid saying to our mate; words that hurt, cut and tear apart. He says,

There is nothing more painful than having unhealthy communication with the one you love. It is through communication that we connect and our spirits touch. If that connection becomes contaminated, it is only a matter of time before the whole relationship is poisoned. In the process of communication, wisdom is knowing what not to say rather than what to say....

Therefore, I gathered together some close friends and asked them what not to say to your spouse. Here is their list:

“I told you so.”

“You’re just like your mother.”

“You’re always in a bad mood.”

“You just don’t think.”

“It’s your fault.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“All you ever do is complain.”

“I can’t do anything to please you.”

“You get what you deserve.”

“Why don’t you ever listen to me?”

“Can’t you be more responsible?”

“What were you thinking?”

“You’re impossible!”

“I don’t know why I put up with you.”

“I can talk to you until I’m blue in the face and it doesn’t do
any good.”

“I can do whatever I like.”

“If you don’t like it, you can just leave.”

“Can’t you do anything right?”

“That was stupid.”

“All you ever do is think of yourself.”

“If you really loved me, you’d do this.”

“You’re such a baby.”

“Turnabout’s fair play.”

“You deserve a dose of your own medicine.”

“What’s your problem?”

“I can never understand you.”

“Do you always have to be right?”

(Stories for the Heart, 175-76)

Both Solomon and Shulamite knew the importance of words. They knew the power of words. Both were interested in fanning the flames of love with words of affirmation and blessing. Both were determined to develop and grow in the art of intimacy. Three particulars unfold for our consideration and edification.

1) Admire their attractiveness. (1:15-16)

- 1) Solomon again tells his lady she is beautiful (cf. 1:8). In fact he does it twice in verse 15. This is a gentle reminder to men that our wives appreciate repeated compliments. Once is obviously not enough. He truly and genuinely finds her attractive, and he tells her again and again. I like the striking nature of the *Common English Bible* here: “Look at you—so beautiful, my dearest! Look at you—so beautiful!”

- 2) Solomon also again calls her “my darling” (cf. 1:9). The *ASV* translates the phrase as “my love.” It is a term of intimacy and endearment. His heart-felt affection for her is strong. She is precious to him.
- 3) And, he also says to her, “Your eyes are doves.” As they looked longingly and intensely into each other’s eyes, Solomon speaks of her captivating eyes (see 4:9; 6:5; 7:5). The one who has the eyes of a dove is his dove (2:14; 5:2; 6:9). Lloyd Carr notes, “Beautiful eyes were a hallmark of perfection in a woman (cf. Rachel and Leah, Gen 29:17). Rabbinic tradition identifies beautiful eyes with a beautiful personality” (Carr, 86). This woman’s eyes were a barometer of her character, of the kind of godly lady she was. From the outside or the inside, Solomon saw Shulamite for the radiantly beautiful lady that she was and he told her!

2) Appreciate their thoughtfulness. (1:16-17)

- 1) Shulamite now returns his compliment with one of her own. She is especially appreciative of his thoughtfulness and attention to detail. She begins by telling him she likes the way he looks too! He is handsome, she loves him and he is delightful. The word “handsome” is the same Hebrew word as “beautiful” in verse 15, except it is in the masculine gender. “The word occurs 14 times in the Song, but only this once in the masculine form” (Carr, 86). My love is translated “my lover” in the *NIV*, a term of affection

she has already used twice (1:13, 14). “Delightful” has the idea of pleasant or pleasing. He is all that she could want in a man, and the economy of words she uses to express this is quite remarkable.

- 2) As he was specific in his praise of her, she will be likewise in verses 16-17. First, she addresses the beauty of their bed. Second, she addresses the beauty of their home. He is thinking of everything! Notice the word “our” appears 3 times. These are the blessings of marriage they will share together. The two have become one.
- 3) Their marriage bed will be sexually active and sensually attractive. It is “lush with foliage;” alive, fresh and fruitful. It is a perfect environment for passionate lovemaking that God heartily approves. And, “the beams of our house are cedars, and our rafters are cypresses” (“firs” or “pines”). Their home is safe, secure, and sturdy.
- 4) Paul Griffiths says Solomon has built her a “magnificent home,” a “king’s house.” He also notes, “These decorations are mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, where they belong to Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 5-6) or to the palaces of the first kings of Israel....Once again, the text pushes beyond its surface meaning and draws the attuned reader toward a deeper one, according to which the beloved [the beautiful woman] is in the temple,

accepting and rejoicing in the Lord's caresses as do both the church and Israel" (Brazos, 48).

3) Affirm their Uniqueness. (2:1-2)

1) There is an old hymn sung about Jesus that says, "He's the Lily of the Valley, the Bright and Morning Star; He's the fairest of ten thousand to my soul." There is little doubt that song was based on Song of Songs 2:1. And, there is no doubt the hymn is building upon a misinterpretation of the verse. Christ is not the lily of the valley. The beautiful woman is, and by extension, we are!

2) Speaking of herself, Shulamite says she is "a rose (better a common wildflower) of Sharon, a lily of the valleys." Hers is a natural beauty and one that promises fruitfulness and love. Hess is particularly insightful at this point, making an interesting connection with other Scriptures:

"The female goes on to describe herself as the lotus [lily] of the valley (2:1). In parallel with the asphodel [rose of Sharon], it suggests fruitfulness but also beauty and love. As a lotus [lily] this term describes the decorations of the temple (1 Kings 7:19, 22, 26; 2 Chron. 4:5). In Hosea 14:6 (14:5 Eng.) Israel's blessing is likened to a blossoming lotus [lily] and a cedar of Lebanon. The Song's earlier images of trees compare with those of a flower in this verse; but in

Hosea they describe the resurrection of a nation and its blessings of prosperity and well-being. Thus the self-description of a female lover (in Song 2:1) is one of self-confidence in which her beauty becomes a key to fruitfulness and success for the male. Here it seems that God has created the natural world primarily as a paradise in which the couple may find one another and enjoy their love. The nature imagery will continue throughout the book. It's intensity at this point allows the female lover to develop the thought of her partner and to present their love as a part of the natural world, which God created. In a similar vein Jesus compares the lotus or lily favorably to Solomon with all his splendor (Matt. 6:29)" (Hess, 75).

- 3) The Shepherd-King is quick to respond to her modest expression of self-beauty. He again refers to her as his "darling" and he picks up on the image of the lily, carrying it to heights far beyond hers. You are utterly unique my darling. You are not just a flower among flowers, one of a million. No, you are one in a million, a beautiful wild flower among thorns. You are a flower that reminds me of Eden, and in comparison all other women are like thorns and conjure up images of the curse! You are like an only flower in a world of thorny weeds. That is what you are to me. You are different and distinct, separated in my eyes from all others. Your beauty outshines all others. They

may be pretty flowers too, but when I compare them to you, they come up as thorns. Ours is truly a restored, redeemed relationship (Eph 5:21-33). Do you hear my words, my dear? Can you sense my heart, most beautiful of women?!

II. Seek to respond in the right way. (2:3-6)

1) Psalm 1 is a wisdom song that portrays the righteous man as a fruitful tree “whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers” (Ps 1:3). Perhaps Shulamite had this very psalm in mind when she responded in verses 3-6 to Solomon’s words of kindness in 2:2. Ultimately Psalm 1 is fulfilled in the One greater than Solomon, the Lord Jesus (Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31). But Solomon, in our Song, typifies the One who is greater than he, and his bride to be finds him utterly delightful (2:3) with all that he provides for her. He shades her (2:3) and sustains her (2:5). He invites her into a house of love (2:4) and his loving embrace is an undeniable evidence of his devotion (2:6). He indeed “provides and cares for her, just as Christ does for the church” (Eph 5:29).

2) So she, as Longman says, “responds with a botanical analogy of her own” (NICOT, 111). Every woman longs to have a man who is strong and reliable, dependable and trustworthy. This woman has found such a man, and she lets him know it. She also lets him know she wants him.

3) God has given us some biblical principles governing sex. Given that our text anticipates the issue, let's consider at this point some good guidelines given by our great God. How do we respond to our mate in the right way in this tender and sacred area of life?

1. Sexual relations within marriage are right, holy, and good. God encourages intimate union and even warns against their cessation (1 Cor 7:5).
2. Pleasure in sexual relations is both healthy and expected as we share our bodies with one another (Prov 5:15-19; 1 Cor 7:5).
3. The pursuit of sexual pleasure is to be guided by the principle that I will esteem the needs of my mate as more important than my own (Phil 2:3-4).
4. Sexual relations are to be regular and normal. No exact number of times per week is right or correct, but the biblical principle is that both parties are to provide adequate sexual satisfaction to their mate so that both "burning" (sexual desire) and temptation to find satisfaction elsewhere are avoided (1 Cor 7:9)
5. The principle of satisfaction means that each party is to provide sexual enjoyment as frequently as the other party requires. Other biblical principles (moderation, seeking to please another rather than oneself,

etc.) also come into play. Consideration of one's mate always is to guide one's desires for sexual relations.

6. In accordance with the principle of "rights," there is to be no sexual bargaining between married persons ("I'll not have relations unless you..."). Neither party has the right to make such bargains. This is a form of "marital prostitution" and must always be avoided.
 7. Sexual relations are equal and reciprocal. The Bible does not give the man superior rights over the woman or the woman superior rights over the man. Mutual stimulation and mutual initiation of relations are encouraged in Scripture.
 8. Whatever is safe, pleasing, enjoyable, and satisfying to both is acceptable. The *body* of each belongs to the other (1 Cor 7:4). Neither should ever demand from the other what is painful, harmful, degrading, or distasteful to him or her.
- 1) Tell him he makes you feel safe. (2:3)

1) This verse is specific and sensual as the imagery of God's good creation is again employed. Our beautiful lady compares her delightful man to an apple (or "apricot") tree found in the forest. This is who her love is "among the young men." An apricot or apple tree in the woods would be rare and something you would not expect to find. It would be attractive to the eyes

and sweet to the taste. It also would provide needed sustenance. Solomon said she was a flower woman among thorny women. Shulamite says Solomon is a special tree amidst ordinary woods. Finding him brought her great delight, and she loves “to sit in his shade.” She delights in him. She is comforted by him. She is protected by him and only him. “I never knew love before, then came you” could be the song of Shulamite’s heart.

2) Apples were believed by some in the ancient world to have sensual and erotic qualities. Shulamite is secure and safe in Solomon’s shade, his watchcare. She now longs for physical intimacy, for lovemaking and sexual union. She simply says, “His fruit is sweet to my taste.” The language is chaste and appropriate. It is not lewd or out of bounds. It is also highly suggestive and erotic. What I find in him I like. What I taste, smell, and feel is sweet and causes me to want more and more. Romance truly is an environment which prepares us for sexual union. As they anticipate their wedding night (4:1-5:1), the flames of passion are under control, but they are burning.

2) Tell him he makes you feel loved. (2:4-6)

1) Solomon brings Shulamite into “the banquet hall, literally “the house of wine.” This is the only time this phrase is found in the Bible. Wine has already been associated with their love (1:2) and it will be again (4:10; 7:9).

“He is intoxicated with her and has brought her to a place to make love”

(Longman, 113).

- 2) Yes, they desire a private time of sexual union, but their love is something Solomon wants the whole world to know. “He looked on me with love” could be translated “his banner over me was love.” I like that rendering better. This is a reference to a military banner used in warfare to rally and gather the troops. The ideas are those of strength, protection and identification. Her lover is not ashamed to declare his love for her and to do so in full public display. His intentions are to make love and these intentions are rooted in a love he is happy for all to see!
- 3) Shulamite is overcome by all of this. “I am lovesick” also could be rendered “I am faint with love.” The “I” is emphatic. Quick! Give me something to eat! “Sustain” and “refresh” are both imperatives. “Raisins”, as well as “apricots” (“apples”), were viewed in that day as highly erotic and sensual. Sexual vibes are everywhere in the air.
- 4) In the passion of the moment, Shulamite is still aware of his gentle touch and his warm embrace (v. 6). With one hand he cradles her head. With the other he lovingly holds and caresses her. Interestingly the word “embrace” is used in the Old Testament “both of a friendly greeting (Gen 48:10) and of a

sexual union (Prov 5:20)” (Carr, 93). He is her friend and her lover. Both are vitally important, especially to a woman.

- 5) Our beautiful bride has a King who extends his banner over her, and who will provide for and protect her for the rest of her life. This reminds me of another King who has a bride he has promised to provide for and protect for all of eternity!

III. Determine to wait for the right time 2:7

1) A number of years ago a sexual purity movement began called “True Love Waits.” It challenged young men and women to make a pledge to sexual abstinence until they married. The pledge itself is followed by “The Five Commitments of True Love Waits.” Both read as follows:

Make the pledge

Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to a lifetime of purity including sexual abstinence from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship.

The Five Commitments of True Love Waits

1. **To God:** Matthew 22:37 – “Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’”
2. **To yourself:** Matthew 22:39 – “And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
3. **To family:** Philippians 4:5 – “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”
4. **To friends:** John 15:13 – “Greater love has not one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”
5. **To future mate and children:** 2 Timothy 2:22 – “Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

2) Such a pledge clearly has biblical warrant. In fact it has a fan in the most sensual and sexual book in all of the Bible, The Song of Songs. Not once, not twice, but three times we read in this love song, “Young women of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and the wild does of the field; do not stir up or awaken love until the appropriate time” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Let’s unwrap this solemn oath that Shulamite lays upon these young virgin women.

1) Commit yourself to your God that you will wait 2:7

1) This verse takes the form of an oath as Shulamite charges (ESV, “I adjure you”) the young women of Jerusalem. “Give me your word.” “Promise” “Swear to it” is the idea. But why “the gazelles and the wild does of the field?” Both are creations of God, beautiful female animals, vigorous and sexually active in season, the right time ordained by their Creator. And, yet, something more subtle may be going on that you would only see (better “hear”) in Hebrew. A number of Hebrew scholars have noticed that the Hebrew word for “gazelles” is *sebaot* and could suggest the name Yahweh of “Sabeoth” (the Lord of Host or Armies). And the Hebrew words for “wild does” are *ayelot hassadeh* and sounds similar to “El-Shaddi” (Gledhill, 128). This would be a creative and even playful way of evoking the divine Names without actually using them. Any Hebrew child would have immediately recognized the similarity in sound. The young women of Jerusalem would have done the same, and they would understand that it strengthened and “raised the stakes” of the oath they were being placed under.

2) Commit yourself to your mate that you will wait

1) “Love should have its own rhythm and its proper progression. Too fast too soon would spoil it all” (Kinlaw, EBC, Vol. 5, 1222). This is a great word for singles, and this is the word that Shulamite has for the “young women of

Jerusalem. Do not stir up or awaken love until the appropriate time.” *The Message* says. “Don’t excite love, don’t stir it up, until the time is ripe –and you’re ready.”

- 2) Ecclesiastes 3:5 reminds us that there is “a time to embrace and a time to avoid embracing.” Sexual relations is a good thing, it is a God thing, when it happens at the right place with the right person in the right way and at the right time. Not just any time is a good time. There is a proper time, a God time, and it is called marriage. “Patience now, passion later...So that’s 2:7. Trust God’s timing before marriage—wait for your spouse and your wedding day. Wait.” (O’Donnell, 61). I have never met anyone who said that they regretted waiting. I know way too many who regret that they didn’t.

Practical Applications From Song of Songs

Sexual attraction is one thing, but marital intimacy is something different. The former can be almost immediate, but the latter grows over time. By God’s grace, it “grows deep” over the years as we share life together. Below is a short and simple marital intimacy test. It is not complicated at all, but it could be insightful and helpful as you seek to grow closer in the intimacy department. A periodic checkup is good for our physical health. It is also good when it comes to our marriages too!

“A Marital Intimacy Test”

(Answer: 4 – often, 3 – often enough, 2 – not enough, 1 – rarely, or 0 – never for each.)

Place the wife’s score in the first blank; the husband’s in the second. Then have a loving and healthy conversation concerning what you discovered.

1. How often do you show affection for each other that your mate truly appreciates? _____
2. How often do you laugh at each other’s jokes? _____
3. How often do you say something nice and kind to each other? _____
4. How often do you compliment your partner in front of others? _____
5. How often do you enjoy sexual intimacy? _____
6. How often are you playful with each other? _____
7. How often do you look each other in the eyes while talking? _____
8. How often do you give each other a little surprise? _____
9. How often do you say please? _____
10. How often do you say I’m sorry? I was wrong? _____

Add up your points and divide by 10. You will get your score per a 4.0 scale.

Where is Christ in these verses? Resting in the shadow of the King

In Song of Solomon 2:3 the bride to be says there is no bridegroom like her Shepherd-King and that she “delights to sit in his shade and his fruit is sweet to my taste.” Shulamite found rest and security in Her Shepherd-King because he loved her and pursued her. He sustained her and invited her to come near and experience his embrace. This Shepherd-King is a wonderful picture of the One who says, “Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). In this Shepherd-King we find eternal rest and security. Here we are sustained by both “living water” (John 7:36-38) and “the Bread of Life (John 6:35). We (not He!) are the lily that He has rescued from the thorns of the curse (S.S. 2:2; Gen. 3:17-19). We are beautiful in his eyes and loved with His particular affection. We are now cleansed and made pure as His virgin bride, waiting expectantly and patiently for the consummation, “a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). This Bridegroom also is preparing a house for us to live in (John 14:1-3), one far more magnificent than the one Solomon built for Shulamite (1:17). Shulamite saw inklings of the God of Psalm 91:1-2 where the Psalmist writes, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.””

Like the most beautiful of women, we are the object of a Shepherd-King’s love. And his love can only be described as “great love” (Eph. 2:4). And, does He

put on public display a banner that declares His love? Indeed He does! It is called the cross of Golgotha where this King declares for the whole world to see, “I love you!”

This bride found the fruit of her King “sweet to my taste.” What a blessing it is to hear the King of Kings invite us to, “Taste and see that the Lord is good. How happy is the one who takes refuge in Him” (Ps. 34:8). His house is like no other house. His fruit is like no other fruit. His love is like no other love. Come to Jesus and eat! Come to Jesus and drink! You will find His words to be true, “No one who comes to Me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in Me will ever be thirsty again” (John 6:35).