

“How to Begin a Love Story”
Song of Solomon 1:1-8

What does love, romance and marriage look like through the eyes of a child? I came across some answers that kids gave which might interest you.

To the question, “How do you decide who to marry?”

Allen, age ten, said, “You’ve got to find someone who likes the same stuff. Like, if you like sports, she should like it and she should keep the chips and dips coming.”

Kristin, age ten, replied, “No person really decides before they grow up and who they’re going to marry. God decides it all the way before, and you got to find out who you’re stuck with.”

When asked, “How can a stranger tell if two people are married?”

Derek, age eight, said, “Married people usually look happy to talk to other people.”

A boy named Eddie responded, “You might have to guess based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids.”

When asked, “Why do people go out on a date?”

Lynette, age eight, was rather straightforward from the female perspective: “Dates are for having fun, and people should use them to get to know each other. Even boys have something to say if you listen long enough.”

And responding to the question, “How do you make a marriage work?”

A seven year old boy, wise beyond his years said, “Tell your wife that she looks pretty, even if she doesn’t.”

What does love, romance and marriage look like through the eyes of a modern Washington writer and businessman? The opinion held by Philip Harvey is not nearly as hopeful or positive as that of the adolescent children surveyed above. In a newspaper story carried in the *Washington Post* entitled “Divorce For the Best,” Mr. Harvey said,

A reasonable level of divorce may be a symptom of a healthy and mobile society, a society in which men and women are living unprecedently long lives, lives for which the companionship of but a single other person for 30 or 40 or 50 years may simply be inappropriate ... That most Americans categorically oppose divorce on principle is a function more of our aspiration to the ideal state than a realistic acceptance of how we humans actually behave ...

The freedom to have more than one mate over a 75 year lifespan may be a positive thing. Is it not possible that the ideal companion for our younger child-rearing years will not be the ideal companion for our middle and later years? Is it not reasonable to suggest that the radical differences in the way we live in our fifties and sixties and beyond may be under many circumstances, most appropriately lived with a different person from the one with “whom we reared children? ... The interests of children must be given a very high priority. But allowing for that, it seems to me that a reasonable level of divorce is more likely to be a quality of a mobile and healthy modern society than a sign of moral decay.”¹

Harvey is not alone in his rather pessimistic prediction of one man with one woman for life. James Dobson in his January, 2000 newsletter shared that,

“Sandy Burchsted, an unmarried “futurist” from Houston, estimates that one hundred years from now, the average American will marry at least four times and routinely engage in extramarital affairs with no fear of public humiliation. Miss Burchsted, who is writing a book on marriage in the year 2100, identified what she believed will be four different types of marriage at a World Future Society conference in July, 1999. The first union is called the “icebreaker marriage,” (usually lasting about five years) in which couples will learn how to live together and gain sexual experience. Once disillusionment sets in, claims Burchsted, it will be perfectly acceptable for the couple to divorce. If one of the partners decides to marry again, he or she will enter a “parenting marriage,” which lasts between 15 and 20 years. These couples will view raising children as their primary purpose, although child-rearing in the future will be in communal settings, not nuclear families.”

After the second marriage is terminated, couples might enter a third union, which Burchsted calls the “self-marriage.” This relationship will be focused on self-discovery and personal awareness. “We see marriage as a conscious, evolutionary process,” says Burchsted, “so this marriage will be about consciously evolving yourself.” Finally, there is a fourth category of marriage, which will emerge as a result of the theory that people in the twenty-first century will be living until at least the age of 120. Burchsted calls this late-in-life marriage the “soul-mate connection,” characterized by “marital bliss, shared spirituality, physical monogamy and equal partnership.” *The Washington Times* says that Burchsted’s theories are based on “trends showing women becoming more financially independent, marriage and childbearing becoming more ‘delinked,’ ‘serial monogamy’ becoming more acceptable and extramarital sexual affairs occurring more frequently and with less public outcry.”²

Burchsted’s views on our future sexual habits is shared by others as well. In an article in the Nov. 8, 1999 edition of *Time* magazine the question was asked about the future of male/female relationships, “Will We Still Need to Have Sex?” Their answer: “Having sex is too

¹ Philip D. Harvey, “Divorce for the Best,” *Washington Post* (8-11-2000).

² Cheryl Wetzstein, “Researchers See Marriage as a Weakening Institution,” *The Washington Times*, Oct. 28, 1999, p. A2.

much fun for us to stop, but religious convictions aside, it will be more for recreation than for procreation.”³ Others add, “Sex will be just for lust – babies will come from reproductive bank accounts.”⁴

I am convinced God did not hardwire or program human persons to long for these kinds of shallow, pseudo relationships where any meaningful idea of love vanishes like an early morning mist vaporized by the sun. I believe we would be wise and go “back to the future” and see what the Creator says about “How to Begin a Love Story.” I believe God is something of a cosmic romantic who enjoys a good love story. Song of Solomon paints the portrait of such a love story and right from the start provides principles to get us off to a good start. How do you begin a love story?

I. **Anticipate the rewards of being with your mate.** 1:1-4

This book is entitled “the song of songs, which is Solomon’s.” First Kings 4:32 indicated he authored 1005 songs, but out of all of them this is his “song of songs,” this is his best. The second-century rabbi Akiba ben Joseph said of the Song of Songs, “In the entire world there is nothing to equal the day in which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. All the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies.” (*Mishnah, Yadaim* 3:5) In other words this was the #1 song of the Jerusalem hit parade in 1000 B.C.! First Kings 4:29-31 also teaches us that God blessed Solomon with wisdom that excelled all his contemporaries. Aided by God’s Spirit to pen these words, we find in this book divine heavenly wisdom for our marriages. Marriage is God’s good gift. It should be a blessing. It should be rewarding. What kind of rewards await us?

1. **Desire the physical pleasures of marriage.** 1:1-2

Marriage is the context in which physical passion and pleasure is set free. The kiss is a universal expression of desire and affection and the woman (called Shulamite in the book) expresses her desire for her lover to kiss her and to kiss her deeply and repeatedly. The senses of touch and taste both come together and the resulting passion is more than she can handle. She says, “your love is better than wine.” By describing his romantic, affectionate kisses in this way, she is saying, I find the touch of your lips and the embrace of your mouth sweet, powerful, intoxicating. It sweeps me off my feet. It sets my head to spinning. The passionate kiss, we have discovered, is a tell-tell sign of a healthy romantic marriage, even more than sex. “The passionate kiss (avg. length one minute) reveals a lot about your relationship. Considered even more intimate than sex, passionate smooching is one of the first things to go when spouses aren’t getting along.” (*Marriage Partnership*, Fall 1998, p. 10). Several years ago I heard of a survey taken in Germany that said if a man kissed his wife in the morning before leaving for work, he would: 1) live five years longer; 2) have 50 percent less illnesses; and, 3) make 20 to 30 percent more money than one who doesn’t! Guys, give the gal a kiss. You’ll live longer, be sick less and make more money. This is definitely a no-brainer. Proverbs 5:18-19 says, “rejoice with the wife of your youth, as a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times, and always be enraptured [intoxicated] with her love.”

³ Matt Ridley, “Will We Still Need to Have Sex?”, *Time*, Nov. 8, 1999, p. 66.

⁴ Lyndsey Griffiths, “Brave New World,” *Toronto Star*, Nov. 4, 1999.

2. **Experience the personal pleasures of marriage.** 1:3-4

The word “love” occurs five times in verses 2 – 7. A careful examination reveals love’s connection to the mind, will and emotions, and in proper balance. Love is to be a delightful experience which expresses itself in many ways. Love has a physical dimension, but is not just physical. Here are four avenues whereby lovers should enjoy one another.

a) **Delight in their fragrance.** 1:3a

The thought of the physical caresses of romance calls to mind not only the intoxication of wine, but the swell smell of his cologne. He tastes good and he smells good. Without stretching the text, he brushed his teeth and used mouthwash. He took a bath, used soap and then anointed himself with “good ointments.” This is good counsel for every man, any time! Already we see the senses of taste, touch and smell come together in the pursuit of romance and love. Here is a man sensitive to the things his woman finds attractive. She is appreciative and responds in kind.

b) **Delight in their fame.** 1:3b

His kisses are intoxicating. His smell is exhilarating. His reputation is without question. “Your name [meaning his reputation and character] is ointment poured forth” (NIV, “like perfume poured out”). A person is more than their physical appearance. Who they really are goes beneath the skin. A wise person, when dating, will not only form their opinion of the person with whom they are involved, they will also listen and hear what others have to say. No matter how strong the physical attraction, they will also listen to public opinion. Is he honest? trustworthy? Does she possess a calm spirit? A level head? Is he known as a playboy? Does she have friends who believe in her? We should carefully consider what others say about the persons we date; the person we would consider marrying. We all have blind spots. Love can indeed be blind. We must not let our emotions override good decision making, even if it hurts. Shulamith knew her man was respected. He was known as a person of character and integrity. She was not only physically attracted to him, she could respect him.

c) **Delight in their friends.** 1:3c; 4b

Solomon was a much desired man. He was indeed a catch! Verse three says the “maidens,” the other girls love you. In verse four these same women exclaim, concerning Shulamith’s good fortune, “We will be glad and rejoice in you. We will remember (or “praise,” NIV) your love more than wine.” Other women enhance Shulamith’s love and admiration for the man in her life. In essence they are saying, “If you don’t get him and keep him, then we are going after him.” Any woman would be fortunate to have such a man for her own.

d) **Delight in their faithfulness.** 1:4a

While it is the case then potential rivals are lurking about, the woman is so secure in her relationship with her man that she can allow and rejoice in the praise and admiration showered on him by others. Love, to be sure, is jealous (cf. 8:6), yet it can also be generous when the bond is secure. She knows at the right time she can ask him to “draw me away” (v. 4) and he will, and quickly. He is her “king” and she is his queen. Their love is majestic and royal. On one plane she can share him publicly and with others. On another level she possesses him as her own, and there are things only the two of them share, and that, in private. He brings her, and only her into his chambers. There is an exclusive love that dare not be shared with another.

In a survey *Glamour* magazine asked men which marriage vow was the hardest to keep: 19% said it was to love “in sickness and in health,” 19% said it was to love “for richer or for poorer.” The toughest of all said 60% of the men was “to forsake all others.”¹ A woman should be confident in her man’s faithfulness. Ephesians 5:33 says it well, “let each one of you [husbands] in particular so love his own wife as himself...”

II. **Accept the realities of being with your mate.** 1:5-8

Marriage has its romance, its rewards. It also has its rough spots and realities. Persons anticipating marriage may think wow! We’ll spend all of our time in the bed. Well, I’ve got some news for you. Hopefully you will enjoy some marvelous time in the bed and other places. You will, however, spend the majority of your time out of bed, and you will need to face head on some of the realities which will confront you as you try and build a marriage with another person. Let’s note two realities a man must face when living with a woman. This list, by the way, is by no means exhaustive. It’s just a place to start!

1. **A woman can be ambivalent concerning her appearance.** 1:5-6

Women change. It is their prerogative as a female. It is built into their genes. They change, and they can change quickly and often. A man must be alert and sensitive. Like weather radar, he needs to try and see what is on the horizon.

How a woman thinks she looks is extremely important to her. It goes to the very foundation of her self-worth. In particular she wants to know that she is attractive to the man in her life. But guys must understand, what she thinks about how she looks matters more than what we think about how she looks.

a. **She may be delighted with her appearance.** 1:5-6

Shulamith knew she possessed a natural beauty. She believed that she was pretty and attractive, lovely and pleasing in appearance. She was sensitive to the fact that men are creatures of sight and that they are moved by what they see. She was confident he would like what he saw when he looked at her.

¹ Cited in *Entertainment Today*, 1-2-97.

b. **She may be defensive with her appearance.** 1:6a

A tan was not grand in Solomon's day. Women prized fair skin and the "indoor look." This would signify the lofty social standing of the well-to-do city girl. In contrast Shulamith was deeply sun-tanned and dark. She was a country girl who had been "looked upon" negatively by both the sun of nature and the sons of her mother who forced her to labor in the vineyards. "She had been doubly burned, by the sun, and by her brother's anger."² "The tents of Kedar" speaks of "the Bedouin tribes whose tents, made from the hair of the black goats so common among them, are a frequent sight on the fringes of the deserts."³ "The curtains of Solomon" draw a different analogy. These curtains would be beautiful and valuable, of "exquisite craftsmanship ... she is both hardened by the elements and yet beautiful."⁴

c. **She may be disappointed with her appearance.** 1:6b

She worked hard to tend the vineyards in the field. As a result, her own vineyard, her body, had been neglected. Unable to give the time, attention and care she would have liked, her physical appearance, at least to her way of thinking, was less than the best. One easily senses her pain, her insecurity. "Her vineyard represents everything that conveys her essential femininity. Her looks, her complexion, her dress, her status, her sexuality – all those considerations which would make her attractive to a man ... In these verses we are brought face to face with the problems of our own self-image. How do we view ourselves? When we look at our own reflection in the mirror, do we like what we see? Can we accept ourselves as we really are, with all our quirks, idiosyncrasies and limitations? Do we like the way we look? Or are we always wishing we were like someone else?"⁵

A woman's appearance is an important area in her life. It requires on the part of a man great sensitivity and understanding. Men, make sure you praise her and build her up. Don't be like the husband whose wife walked out of the closet one day wearing a new dress and asked, "Honey, does this dress make me look fat?" To which he responded, "Nah, your hips make you look fat." Such a response will do neither you or your wife any good!

2. **A woman can be anxious concerning his absence.** 1:7

Security is important to a marriage. A man feels it when he is praised by his mate. A woman feels it when her man is present. A marriage is destined to suffer, and suffer greatly if there is extended periods of separation.

a) **A husband's absence can be a source of personal sorrow.** 1:7

Solomon is gone. Why we are not told, though the imagery implies he is about the normal duties of life. Here the picture is that of a shepherd tending his sheep. She misses him. She longs for him. She is interested in a midday (not midnight) rendezvous. Wow! What a lady! To speak so frankly exposes her heart, but it

² J.A. Motyer, *The Message of the Song of Songs* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), p. 104.

³ G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984), p. 78.

⁴ Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), p. 387.

⁵ Moyer, p. 105.

would also excite the heart of her lover. At noon the sheep would sleep. The other shepherds would be resting. There would be time just for them. No distractions. No interruptions. She wants him and at any cost. Furthermore, what a creative lady we see. Their meeting would be outside in the wide open spaces, perhaps under a shade tree? Perhaps in a temporary hut or shelter? Even as she sorrows over his absence, she strategizes about how to make their intimate time together new, exciting and memorable. But, you can't love them if you're not with them.

b) **A husband's absence can be a source of personal shame.** 1:7

To wear a veil as she wandered among the other flocks and shepherds would be embarrassing. It would, in that day, give the impression she was a prostitute. A prostitute has many men, but she has no man she can call her own. There is no one at whom she can point and say, that man is my man and this woman is his woman. She did not want there to be the slightest doubt that he was hers and she was his. For there to even be a question of their fidelity and commitment to each other would be shameful. Shulamith knew there was a cost, a price to be paid, in committing herself for a lifetime to another person. She was aware of the fact that a marriage relationship can sometimes become high profile and take on a fish bowl type of scrutiny. As long as the facts were known, she was willing to accept and live up to such a challenge. Oh that each of us could do the same.

III. **Acknowledge the risk of being with your mate.** 1:8

This romance thing is risky business. You take a chance. You roll the dice. There are, however, ways to improve the odds in our favor. Verse eight is best understood as a mild, maybe even a playful rebuke of Shulamith. She is looking to "hook-up" with her man. What does she need to do?

1) **Know where you can find him.**

Shulamith is called "fair" or "beautiful" yet she is teased for not knowing where her man is. Perhaps she doesn't, as of yet, know him as well as she should. After all, marriage is a lifelong, learning process. It is imperative that we grow in knowledge of our mates, of their needs, disposition, gifts, weaknesses and inclinations. To love them we must know them and know where and how to find them when we want them.

2) **Go where you can find them.**

Knowledge must be accompanied by action. How often is it in a relationship that we know what the right thing to do is but we do not do the right thing? Shulamith is told to follow, what in essence are, familiar paths which Solomon is known to walk. If she will follow the familiar paths she will find him. The rest we leave to a sanctified imagination.

Conclusion

Researchers Howard Markman and Scott Stanley of the University of Denver, help us understand in part why good marriages work and bad marriages fail. It's not sex, money or how many fights you have that make for a happy union. Marriage-wise couples aren't afraid to accept influence from each other. They connect on a daily basis in many small ways, think about their partner

periodically when they're apart, take time-outs to soothe tempers, use humor as a coolant in arguments and have softer start-ups when fighting. Even in conflict, their ratio of positive to negative actions - - from a simple "mmmmh" or "yeah" to a pat on the arm - - are 5 to 1 as opposed to 0.8 to 1 for unstable marriages.⁶

This is sound advice. We should be influenced by each other. We should learn from each other. We must grow in our knowledge of each other. Let me conclude with an assignment that will help move us in the right direction as we think about marriage and as we think about each other.

⁶ Shirley Barnes, "Keeping It Together," *Seattle Tribune*, 8-2-98.

“Getting Started On Thinking About Marriage”

If we would raise our marriages to the level God intends, we must guide them with principles that focus more on “we” than “me,” and that esteem the other better than self. What we are after is “having the mind of Christ” (Phil. 2:3-5).

Here are seven areas that need our careful thinking and commitment.

I. Educationally:

1. Study marriage; become a real student of it.
2. Study the opposite sex; at least try and become an expert on them. (Be ready for a lifetime adventure!)
3. Study your spouse; really get to know her/him.

II. Sexually:

1. Be faithful to one another for life. Put safety guidelines in place now and commit never to compromise them.
2. Know the difference between your “needs” and “wants.”
3. Exercise self-control (resist outside temptations).
4. Never bargain with sex. Don’t become a marital prostitute. (To play you must pay!)
5. Make sure there is mutual consent to all you and your spouse decide to do (1 Cor. 7:1-7). If they cannot say “no” when circumstances warrant it, how can we be sure that they are not our slaves?
6. Do not expect your spouse to have the same appetite and desires as you do.

III. Individually:

1. Do not make unilateral decisions that affect your relationship.
2. Do not depend primarily on your spouse for a sense of self-worth. Look to God.
3. Own up to your own mistakes, etc. Be willing to say seven magical words, “I am sorry, will you forgive me?” (Eph. 4:32)
4. Deal with your own sins first before dealing with theirs. (Gal. 6:1)

IV. Publicly:

1. Keep confidential matters confidential.
2. Never criticize your spouse in public or in front of others.

V. Rearing Children

1. Set up disciplinary policies jointly and stick to them. (Eph. 6:1-4)
2. Do not argue about discipline in front of the children.
3. Be loving and always restore fellowship after discipline.
4. Discipline in a manner that is appropriate to the child’s action, age and maturity.

VI. Financially:

1. Set up financial priorities jointly and stick to them.
2. Remember no one is entitled to a “superior status” just because one earns the money to pay the rent, buy the groceries, etc. Keeping the house clean and guiding the homefront efficiently is just as important and just as worthy of appreciation and praise.
3. All who share in the labor to maintain the family ought to share in everything the family earns or produces.

VII. Relationally:

1. Take one another seriously, (but not too seriously).
2. Nurture one another. (Eph. 5:29-30)
3. Set up a problem-solving strategy.
4. Be respectful and courteous at all times. Treat your mate like a good friend.
5. Spend time with your spouse and family. (Both quality and quantity)
6. Make room for intimacy and affection without pushing for sex. (Guys, are you listening?)
7. Treat one another as equals, because you are.
8. Be honest with one another; always speak the truth in love. (Eph. 4:15)
9. Give your spouse practical and relational priority in all aspects of your life.
10. Be slow to anger, slow to speak, and quick to listen. (James 1:19)
11. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. (Eph. 4:29)
12. Never stop caring about pleasing your spouse. (Phil. 2:3-4)
13. Seek unity and do not feel threatened by disagreement. (Phil. 2:2)
14. Honor one another’s rights and needs.
15. Do not impose your will on the other. Be peaceful and kind and use persuasion, not coercion.
16. Seek to be one another’s best friend.
17. Try to deal with facts rather than feelings.
18. Minister to rather than manipulate one another.
19. Put your spouse before all others including the children.
20. Honor the Creator’s structure for marriage. (Eph. 5:21-33)
21. Be approachable, teachable, and correctable (even by and especially by your spouse).
22. Do not try to control everything.
23. Confront one another with tenderness, compassion, loving concern and without exasperating them.
24. Be willing to sacrifice for your loved ones.
25. Do not neglect your responsibility to provide for your own.
26. Be willing to communicate and to listen.
27. Despise divorce and determine it will never be an option.
28. Eat as many meals with one another as possible.
29. Whenever possible, postpone doing things you want to do for yourself to the times when your spouse is busy with other things.
30. Do not stop trying to make time for your spouse just because it seems so impossible to do so.