CHAPTER ONE

ATTRACTION

If you watch little boys and girls from birth to around age two, they are rarely aware of each other’s differences. But gradually they begin to notice their unique distinctions, and by preschool or kindergarten, they are keenly aware that they are different. Around this time, children tend to split off and hang out with their own sex. They will occasionally shove one another or argue, but for most, the preference is to run with their own kind.

Most boys like to wrestle and climb, and they like to build and then destroy whatever it is they built. This behavior is of course unacceptable to the majority of little girls who play more relationally. I have two daughters, and both of them when they were this age would make any two objects friends. A pencil and a spoon would have conversation and laugh together. The friendship between the pencil and the spoon wouldn’t last long in the world of boys where destruction is always imminent. Mr. Pencil’s leaden
guts would be spilling out, and Mr. Spoon would be laughing his silver face off.

As boys and girls get a bit older, they begin to mingle a little more but still stay predominantly with their own kind. The first bit of flirtation will be disguised as dislike. When boys playfully begin picking on girls (and vice versa), it is usually a kind of first “Hey, something is changing here” moment. The teasing and pranking are basically fourth-grade-ese for “I have weird feelings for you but don’t know what to do with them.”

And then it happens: Somewhere between fifth and ninth grades, depending on a variety of factors affecting development and awareness, what I like to call the “Day of Epiphany” occurs. Up until this moment, a child has been largely indifferent to the opposite sex or even thought they were “gross.” But on the Day of Epiphany, something changes.

Do you remember that day? You woke up that morning for school, got dressed, put on your shoes, slung your backpack over your shoulder, saw your friends, and then as you were walking toward your crew, you saw him or her, and all of a sudden he or she wasn’t gross anymore. The indifference and repulsion had vanished. A particular member of the opposite sex caught your eye in a suddenly different way, and, well … you kind of wanted one. This is the Day of Epiphany.

I served in youth ministry for a decade, and I witnessed firsthand the marked change between most sixth graders and ninth graders. For instance, if you gather together one hundred sixth graders for three days, by the end of that third day, the environment will smell like body odor and cheap cologne. But by the time they hit ninth
grade, the boys are taking showers and styling their hair. All of a sudden they care about the kind of clothes they’re wearing, how they look, and how they smell. What happened to those funky-smelling sixth-grade boys? The Day of Epiphany.

What seemed to matter very little before now matters immensely. Boys in ninth grade now care very much what ninth-grade girls think about them. Boys go from wanting to appear repulsive to wanting to appear impressive, especially to girls. The Day of Epiphany changes everything. After the Day of Epiphany, boys begin to pursue and girls begin to want to be pursued.

There are certainly exceptions to everything I’ve outlined above, but by and large, this smelling and teasing, wooing and pursuing is the typical trajectory through the onset of puberty for boys and girls. And the important thing to remember is this: it is all by God’s good design.

**ATTRACTION**

Attraction is a strange, ambiguous force. The *Psychology Dictionary* defines *attraction* as “the natural feeling of being drawn to other individuals and desiring their company. This is usually (but not necessarily) due to having a personal liking for them.”¹ That’s a little vague, but then again, so is attraction. We feel ourselves drawn to people, whether romantically or not, because they have “a certain something.” It’s usually not just one thing, but a variety of characteristics or impressions, that attracts us to one another. There are lots of beautiful people in the world, of course, but most of us feel drawn romantically to members of the opposite sex we find physically attractive plus something else.
And yet, when it comes to romance, there is something physical that typically draws us to someone else. When we say we find someone “attractive” today, this is basically what we mean: we find that person physically appealing. He or she is good-looking. For both men and women, but especially for men, our initial attraction may have little to do with the person’s character or competency but rather emerges simply from liking the way he or she looks. This is only logical, because physical appearance is the first thing we notice, and it takes a while longer to get to know someone’s character. For the moment, we look across a room and see someone who is physically appealing.

It ought to go without saying, but it doesn’t, so I’ll say it: There is nothing wrong with this process of being physically attracted to someone. It’s completely natural. In fact, the Song of Songs begins this way: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine” (1:2). The woman in the Song saw Solomon, and she liked what she saw. She wanted him to kiss her, and just looking at him made her glad. He was what we might call “eye candy.”

Over and over, in fact, the Bible doesn’t just describe physical attraction between the sexes; it sanctions it. From Adam’s love-at-first-sight song about Eve in Genesis 2 to Jacob’s immediate attraction to Rachel in Genesis 29, where verse 17 tells us she was “beautiful in form and appearance,” we do not see the Scriptures opposed to physical attraction. Certainly, the Bible’s wisdom on God’s design for romance is more than physical attraction, but it’s not less than that. Nor is it even something we are advised to outgrow. Even as your love for your spouse deepens and takes
on the character of more thorough knowledge of your spouse’s weaknesses, wounds, and sins, the instruction to pursue physical attraction throughout the years remains. Thus, the father advised his young son in Proverbs 5:19 about his wife: “Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.” Note the word “always.”

Nearly all of us will always be physically attracted to what we consider beautiful. Our tastes and interests might vary, but the instinct itself is fairly common across the billions of human beings in the world: we are attracted to those we find possessing of beauty. Beauty is that particular combination of qualities that especially pleases the sight. It is, as the saying goes, “in the eye of the beholder.” Men find beautiful a woman’s particular shape (curvy or thin, according to taste) or style of hair or dress, and women may find beautiful a man’s particular eye color (blue or brown) or physique (toned or burly). We naturally notice these qualities across a room, and even if just mentally, we are drawn to the people we find “beautiful.”

The fact that we all tend to have different tastes when it comes to physical attraction proves how creative and versatile our Creator’s artistry truly is. And the fact that we all tend to find somebody physically attractive proves how brilliantly our Creator has embedded in us the very appreciation of beauty (which is to say, more deeply, the appreciation of glory, of which his own is the pinnacle). The natural and biblical reality is that most human beings are going to be physically attracted to the opposite sex. This is a good and right thing. But according to the same Word of God that sanctions physical attraction, we must be very careful with it.
As I’ve noted, the Bible has much to say about physical beauty. But we should expect that God’s Word on beauty is not as one-dimensional as our own. Although the very reality of beauty presupposes the nature of attraction, we also see that beauty, according to the wisdom of God, can be deceptive.

For example, in the book of Proverbs, there are warnings given to the male reader about being unduly captivated by a woman’s beauty. In Proverbs 6:25, we read the caution, “Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes.” Is the Lord speaking out of both sides of his mouth? Are we supposed to be attracted to a woman physically but at the same time not?

In a way, yes. The key phrase related to desire in Proverbs 6:25 is “in your heart,” with the added helpful context of the word “capture.” This is not the same as being “captivated,” which can be a good thing. What the Bible repeatedly challenges us toward is getting beyond mere external appearances and wisely considering beauty of the heart.

Another well-known biblical warning is found in Proverbs 31:30: “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.” For beauty to be vain means it can be superficial—preoccupied solely with the external. For beauty to be deceitful means it can trick us into missing a deeper, darker reality. We can be mistaken by the lure of beauty into being captured—namely, by sin.

In the Bible we see a reflection of a pervasive cultural recognition: it is very often the more physically attractive who prove to be
more spiritually deceptive. We can be easily baited by our attractions down the wrong paths. In Matthew 23:27–28, Jesus admonished the Pharisees for their superficially religious behavior:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

The old saying that “beauty is only skin-deep” is rich with biblical truth. It is true of the attractive harlot in Proverbs. It is true of David’s sinful pursuit of Bathsheba. It is true of Samson’s lurid relationship with Delilah. And it is certainly true of the deceptive schemes of the evil one himself, whom we are told often masquerades as “an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14).

This is not to say, of course, that you ought to marry somebody you find unattractive! It means only that our romance—sense of beauty itself—must run much deeper than physical attraction. Certainly in marriage, the ongoing nurturing of attraction must endure the changes that come with the years, affected by the bearing of children, the slowing of metabolisms, the weathering of skin, and even the ravages of illness and hardship. Romance in marriage, for it to be truly a mingling of souls, cannot simply be a mingling of body parts. No, we must acknowledge both the blessing and the danger of beauty.
THE EVOLVING IDEAL

Another reason we must be careful with the concept of physical attraction is because of how arbitrary it can be. Tastes vary person to person. But they also vary culture to culture and age to age. Indeed, attraction that is rooted simply in the physical is culturally determined and changes depending on where you are in the world and where you are in history. We are all subject to the evolving ideal of beauty, which Reischer and Koo outline in detail in their article “The Body Beautiful.”²

My sister and her husband have lived in Asia for close to eight years. Whenever I visit, I notice the ideal for beauty is different there from where I live in Texas. For instance, women in Asia seemingly desire light skin; the stores there proliferate with creams and lotions that will help women bleach their skin to increasingly whiter shades. I must have seen twenty commercials for these products and another hundred or so billboards. In the Dallas area, the opposite is true. Women long for the summer months when they can lie by the pool and soak up the sun’s rays, transforming their white, wintery skin by roasting it, basically, until their flesh resembles that of a bronzed goddess. This is just one of hundreds of cultural examples of different beauty standards around the world. Which culture is right? Is bleached or tanned skin more beautiful?

When we look at the vast trajectory of history, the cultural landscape gets even more complex. The “ideal woman” throughout the ages has morphed over and over again, sometimes quite dramatically.³ From more ancient times through the Middle Ages, in European cultures especially, women with pale skin and more shapely figures were
considered exceptionally beautiful. When we look at paintings of beautiful women from these time periods, we may think they look fat and unattractive. And yet what passes for “hot” in today’s culture would have been considered sickly back then. In the early twentieth century (especially in the 1920s), women cut their hair very short into “bobs” and wore dresses to conceal their figures. In the 1940s, the introduction of tan skin and longer, flowing hair became the standard of beauty.

And on and on the ever-changing standard goes.

Today there seems to be a hodgepodge of styles that cover the full range of history in defining “beauty.” Perhaps one of the best examples is the popular Barbie. One researcher provides a summary:

Even our toys are undergoing “the knife” in the name of beauty. In 1997, Mattel’s most famous toy, the Barbie doll, emerged from the factory operating room with a “wider waist, slimmer hips, and … a reduction of her legendary bustline” (Wall Street Journal 1997). This reconfiguration of the West’s premiere icon of femininity after nearly forty years suggests that the image of femininity embodied by the original Barbie of the late 1950s has undergone a radical transformation of its own. Beauty, though highly subjective, is more than simply a matter of aesthetics or taste. Cultural ideals of beauty are also an index and expression of social values and beliefs—so much so that “the history of [society] is in large measure the history of women’s beauty” (Jury & Jury 1986)."
Feminists lament what they call the oppressive “male gaze” that has objectified the female form since the beginning of time, and they are not entirely off the mark. The idea is that feminine beauty exists for male pleasure and is in fact determined by male pleasure. Generation to generation, it seems, the incessant but unstable feminine ideal, driven largely by males, has shaped the very generations themselves. Can there be any doubt that especially in our advertising age, sex sells, and that this superficial commoditizing of beauty and sex has made us both a more visual culture while also a more vulnerable one? Aren’t we simply objectifying each other to dullness?

Our understanding of beauty in relation to men has not evolved the same way it has for women. Making the comparison between the Renaissance and today, the idea of what is considered physically attractive has not changed all that much for men. Men have been and are still considered attractive based generally on their height and the broadness of their shoulders.

The more recent struggle for men is the evaluation of “true masculinity.” There is a growing crisis about the meaning of masculinity itself, a crisis that points to the betrayal of men by the very hyper-masculine ideals that they are meant to embody. On the one hand, coming out of the hippie movement of the sixties and seventies, men were expected to become more sensitive, more “in touch with their feminine side.” Then there seemed to be a revolt against this perceived effeminacy in the late seventies and early eighties with the rise of the free-swingin’, macho types and the rise of crass jock culture.

Ideals for men have vacillated back and forth ever since, as the eighties and nineties gave us the sensitive grunge rockers and the sex-hungry party boys. From the beginning of the twenty-first century
onward, we have seen the rise of “metrosexuals,” the protohipster males, and now we seem to be witnessing a revival of the swaggering alpha males with their beers and beards. Is it any surprise that in the dizzying lust of the broken male perspective toward women we wouldn’t become confused about what it means to be a man? Should we be sensitive or tough? If both, when? How do we display sensitivity in a way that doesn’t make us effeminate? And how do we display toughness in a way that doesn’t make us chauvinistic or stubborn?

This pervasive cultural gender confusion has complicated the so-called ideal of beauty for both men and women and turned us all into a confused mess.

THE REAL YOU IS THE INNER YOU

We’ve established that the force that grabs our attention and pulls us like a tractor beam into relationships is more than likely physical attraction. And we’ve established that this is not a bad thing; we simply must take great care to not let it drive us into relationships that are toxic and ungodly (or drive toxic and ungodly ideas into our relationships).

I recently sat down with a non-Christian who attends our church. He wanted to discuss some of his doubts about the things we teach and to ask me pointed questions. By all physical indicators he would be a good catch. He is in his midtwenties, single, handsome, attends church regularly, and is quite wealthy. During our conversation he told me that one of the reasons he attends our church is because the type of woman he wants to marry can’t be found in the clubs he frequents. He wants to marry a church girl.
Here I am sitting in a room with a guy who goes out on the weekends to “hook up” with women, then gets up, showers, and comes to our church to look for a young woman to marry. I felt my heart getting angrier and angrier the more we talked, and I informed him that he couldn’t hunt at The Village. The world is filled with men and women who have a veneer of relational health and godliness but underneath are driven by selfishness, lust, and the need for control. That’s why the second line of dialogue in the Song of Songs is so important. The woman liked looking at Solomon, but she knew something else too: “Your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out; therefore virgins love you” (1:3).

Not only was Solomon handsome, but he was also known to have great character. He was upright and wise; the word on the street was that he was a good man, a godly man. The other women didn’t think he was a dog. He wasn’t known as lazy or incompetent. He hadn’t played around with the hearts and minds of other women. His name was like oil poured out—like an offering, in other words. When people heard Solomon’s name, it “went down smooth.” It was pleasing, fragrant.

Now we are going deeper than the surface. What good is it in the eyes of the Lord, whose estimation matters most, if we look great but our reputations are lousy? Only one of those things will last.

Therefore, our physical attraction should always be held in check by the character of the person to whom we are attracted. In Proverbs, we find valuable instructions given to King Lemuel by his mother. As king, Lemuel could have had his pick of the fairest beauties in the land. But his mother’s reminder was wise: “An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels” (31:10).
This translation actually does not do justice fully to the verse. The NET Bible reads, “Who can find a wife of noble character? For her value is far more than rubies.” In the translation of “noble character, it is the same word used in Ruth to describe her as a ‘woman of valor.’”

Now we are seeing how much more complex attraction ought to be when guided by the Word of God. Physical attraction is good but only outwardly important; character, on the other hand, is a matter of internal importance and should be valued as greater than jewels.

We see something similar in 1 Peter 3:3–4. Here, Peter encouraged wives in the way of prioritizing inner beauty over outer beauty, and wrote:

Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.

As this passage was written directly to wives, it can be somewhat ambiguous for dating and initial romantic attraction, and bear in mind that when this was written, most marriages were arranged, and physical attraction was not of the highest concern. However, by examining this passage fully, we can clearly see that the idea of beauty for the wife should be focused more on the internal. External beauty is fine, but we must move past it and see what’s
in the soul of a person, who he or she actually is, and what that individual is made of.

Several years ago I saw a television show called *Caught on Camera*. It featured clips of people being secretly filmed doing all manner of horrific things, precisely because they thought they were alone. In one scene a man urinated into a pot of coffee that had been brewed for his coworkers. In another, a cook in a restaurant spit into a meal he was preparing for customers. And in yet another scene, a woman threw a puppy across a room. The show was disgusting, but it revealed that a lot goes on in a person’s heart and head that simply can’t be seen. In our brave, new surveillance culture, we catch the real character of people all the time, as “nanny cams” capture abuse of children and the elderly, and security cameras film employee vandalism and cruelty.

It is certainly true that the measure of a man’s character is what he would do if he knew he never would be found out. Or character is, as Bill Hybels said, “who you are when no one’s looking.” Everyone has a public face and a private face. As a friendship begins between you and some handsome man or beautiful woman, you need to see if there is real depth of character. When the beauty fades, what integrity will remain?

We can always adjust our outer appearance. Our culture has advanced in the ways of makeup and hairstyles and beauty products, but we’ve also added cosmetic surgery, health-food culture, and fitness programs bordering on cults. We don’t all look great, but we can all look a little “better” with a little work. But the inner us? That will come out. We can’t hide it forever. In times of intimacy, in times of stress, in times of struggle, there’s no putting makeup on a terrible personality. There’s no cosmetic surgery for poverty of character.
You can’t hide that inner you. It’s the real you.

Physical attraction, then, is not a substitute for knowing somebody, for being in relationship with him or her. And this is why relationships built on physical attraction never last and tend to be superficial, self-absorbed, and legalistic.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “Character was like a tree, and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree was the real thing.” The first way we can look to see if the person we’re attracted to has solid character is by evaluating his or her reputation. What do people say about her? Is he known for his godliness? (Remember that church attendance doesn’t always equal godliness. There are a lot of “neat” Christian boys and girls but far fewer godly men and women.) Proverbs 22:1 says, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.” Reputation is the shadow of a person’s character. If a person’s reputation is poor, more than likely so is his or her character.

Let reputation be one of the green or red lights that leads you toward or away from a person you are considering dating.

Solomon’s reputation, the shadow cast by his character, was so celebrated that the people watching his romance blossoming in the Song of Songs celebrated it. They were pleased by it: “We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you” (1:4).

What do you look for in a person’s reputation? Is it enough to see that people are impressed? What if he or she is merely a flatterer, or simply rich or powerful? What are some marks not just of impressive character but godly character?

For these, we have to look counter to the way of our culture once again. What the Bible lays out as the marks of godly character...
are so often diametrically opposed to the expectations and celebrations of the world. And one of the first aspects the Song of Solomon presents as commendable for a romantic relationship is one of the most despised by our broken culture.

**SUBMISSION TO AUTHORITY**

Is there any arguing that in our world there is an abominably low view of authority and submission? Modern society, which actually relies on the dynamic of authority and submission to survive, seems so often emotionally allergic to it! The air we breathe is this: “No one tells me what to do. I do what I want to do. No one is the boss of me.”

Every generation’s pop music has become increasingly anti-authoritarian. (You could, of course, say that rock-and-roll music itself subsists on a spirit of rebellion.) One example comes from the most influential rock band of all time, the Beatles, who characterized the need to change the world with their song “Revolution.” The Beatles’ leading cultural revolutionary, John Lennon, gave the world a song called “Imagine.” It’s a very pretty song, but the whole thing is about how the world might benefit if there was no religion, no government, no borders, no hell, no heaven, nothing but “peace.” There has probably never been another song so simultaneously high-minded and low intellect. But it struck a resonant chord for those coming out of the countercultural sixties and seventies.

The eighties gave us “Authority Song” by John Mellencamp. “I fight authority,” Mellencamp sings, “and authority always wins.” He goes on to say, “Well I’ve been doing it since I was a young kid, and I always come out grinning.”
The philosophy of antiauthority is so pervasive that it has driven major movements in arts and entertainment, politics and culture. The most recent cultural example is probably what the media have dubbed the “Occupy Movement,” which is predicated on the idea that the few people who are said to own 99 percent of the wealth in the West need to be divested of all their “ill-gotten” gains. But the sentiment runs so much deeper than wealth inequality or social status. Each of us, deep down in our hearts, has an antiauthoritarian streak a mile wide. And the idea of submission makes us nervous, fearful, stubborn, and even angry.

Of course, this resistance to the idea of authority and submission is totally informed by the reality that many people throughout the ages have abused their positions of authority. When a sinner is in charge, his leadership is influenced by his sin. There are no exceptions to this. And while many virtuous leaders by God’s grace have employed their authority in honorable ways, none of them have done so perfectly. For the rest, however, the abuses of authority, toxic leadership, dictatorial excesses, and exploitation of power have complicated and soured the general culture of authority and submission that the Bible establishes as an inherently good system. It’s good for government, good for the church, good for the home. But when those in authority abuse their authority, those in submission suffer. And it makes submission more and more a scary prospect.

We should say without hesitation that when a person exalts himself or herself beyond all authority and tradition, he or she is walking outside of God’s design. Authority is not bad; abuse of authority is bad. God gave us institutions and authorities to help shape us and protect
us. So we have to ask, as we consider a member of the opposite sex for romantic relationship, what is his reputation as it pertains to authority and submission? Is she in glad submission to any authorities over her? Has he placed himself under the authority of a local church? Is she in covenant with other church members? Does he submit to his pastors? How does she treat older men and women?

Look to see if your prospective significant other is his own authority. See if she bristles or blossoms under proper authority. If you can’t tell, or if it doesn’t seem as though he has any authority at all, I would pump the brake on the relationship.

A woman who is functionally her own god won’t have the ability to hear from others about blind spots and errors in her life. A man who cannot gladly submit to his leaders likely cannot be expected to exercise a humble authority in his home. A woman who rebels against leadership cannot be expected to practice honorable submission in her home.

Continuing in Song of Solomon chapter 1, we see something peculiar in verses 5–6:

I am very dark, but lovely,
    O daughters of Jerusalem,
like the tents of Kedar,
    like the curtains of Solomon.
Do not gaze at me because I am dark,
    because the sun has looked upon me.
My mother’s sons were angry with me;
    they made me keeper of the vineyards,
but my own vineyard I have not kept!
There is some complexity to these two verses, but essentially, the woman was expressing some insecurity about the darkness of her skin. She had not, in her estimation, had much opportunity to care for her complexion—to keep up her “beauty regimen,” in other words—because she spent a lot of time outdoors. And what was she doing? Tending to the family business, apparently. Some Bible scholars debate whether the “mother’s sons” who are angry with her are the woman’s actual brothers or her cultural kinsmen—other potential suitors, actually—who did not desire her because of her sun-darkened complexion. In other words, she may have been saying, “None of the other boys have been attracted to me because I have spent more time working in the fields than in tending to my beauty.”

In any event, we see two primary things about her character here: she was a hard worker, submitting herself to the needs of her family above the desires of vanity, and she had a humble insecurity about her appearance. She was not vain.

COMMITMENT

One of the things I noticed when I was in college ministry was the large group of students who wouldn’t commit to anything—a college major, a gym, a church, a place to live, a group of friends. The only thing they seemed committed to was being noncommittal. Every semester the talk would turn to another school they might transfer to, a new major they were going to try out, or a new part-time job they were interested in (because, you know, their current one was lame). This group was always holding out for something better
and didn’t want to miss out on anything that *might* be happening somewhere else. They were unstable. And this instability cost them the joy of *knowing* and *being known*.

In Song of Solomon 1:7, we read this: “Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon.”

The woman is equating “love from the soul” with a commitment to her partner’s presence. Wherever he is pasturing his flock, wherever he is providing a place of rest and nourishment and provision, that’s where she wants to be. There is an indication here of the desire to commit.

Obviously, when you are first attracted to someone, you don’t make inappropriate commitments, but you do want to see before you pursue someone in a potentially romantic way if he or she is inclined toward commitment. The woman in this Song wants to commit to her suitor’s pasture; for her, the grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence.

As you consider the person you are physically attracted to, look for evidence of commitment in his or her life. Has he joined and become committed to a local church? Does she have a deepening relationship with a group of friends? How is his relationship with his family?

I think that church membership is a huge consideration, precisely because there is no such thing as a perfect church, and in our day and age in the West, we have so many options to choose from. Churches are full of sinners, so there will always be some messiness in a church. Churches are like families that way. So when a person stays in a church for a long period of time, there is evidence
that she has been able to see that everything’s not perfect, but she nevertheless said, “I’m going to stay. I’m going to try to make this work. My commitment is more important than my desire to run away.”

If you find someone who is rootless, always looking for what’s next, always looking for “better than”—better job, better group of friends, better church, better hobby, better whatever—you should be extremely cautious.

What you’re looking for is a deep rootedness, or at least a deep capacity for rootedness. Obviously among young adults there is much that is in transition in relation to school and jobs and so on. But despite the transient nature of that particular stage of life, are there signs of deep commitment? If there is no evidence of commitment in his or her life, I would caution you to move very slowly into any kind of serious relationship.

Because the Bible tells us we need to go deeper than physical attraction in our relationships, and because we know that what we find physically attractive has been for the most part culturally informed, it is wise to acknowledge that God has hardwired us for the commitment of companionship over and above sexual attraction or physical pleasure. Companionship brings deeper joy and greater pleasure than the mere physical could ever bring by itself.

If you have physical attraction and no companionship in your relationship, you’ll eventually be miserable; but if you have deep companionship with each other, physical attraction isn’t as important and becomes less and less so as time passes.

In the movie Cast Away, we see a stark depiction of a person’s innate hunger for companionship. The main character, Chuck
Noland, is involved in a plane crash. He survives but ends up stranded on a deserted island. As his loneliness wears on him, Chuck finds a volleyball that floated ashore, draws a face on it, and has conversations with it over the course of his time on the island.

After a number of years of isolation and a failed suicide attempt, Chuck builds a raft to try to get off the island. Following his successful launch, he encounters and overcomes a great storm. The next day, once the waters had calmed, his constant companion, Wilson, the volleyball, falls off the raft. In perhaps the most powerful scene of the movie, Chuck begins to weep uncontrollably because of the anguish of losing his only “friend.” Through this brief scene, director Robert Zemeckis laid bare the undeniable ache in every human heart for companionship. It is a beautifully powerful portrayal of a need, which supersedes the mere desire for sexual gratification or “attraction.” It truly is “not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18).

In the end, of course, it is Jesus who provides this perfect companionship for his children. “No longer do I call you servants,” he said in John 15:15, “but I have called you friends.” Through him we see that the commitment we make to our brothers and sisters in the church far outweighs even the good gifts of marriage and sexual fulfillment. Marriage and sex will pass away (see Matt. 22:30), but our commitment as friends—as family!—with the saints of God will endure forever.

Can your prospective partner commit? His or her physical attractiveness is a good thing, but it’s not an enduring thing—the ability to commit may carry the weight of eternity.
SUFFERING

Embedded in a person’s ability to commit is his or her ability to endure in suffering. You can look for evidence of someone’s “commitment ability” by observing how he or she handles times of stress, hardship, or brokenness.

Helen Keller once said, “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired and success achieved.” The apostle James put it this way:

> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (1:2–4)

Most people are pleasant when the world is going the way they want. But a person’s character can be seen most clearly when the brokenness of the world has invaded his or her peace, when the way he or she thinks things ought to be is interrupted, disrupted, and dismantled.

How does your partner respond to betrayal, to drama in her family, to arguments between friends? How does he behave when he is stressed, sick, frustrated, or tired? You’re not looking for perfection, of course, because everyone except Jesus has responded to difficulty in ways that are out of step with the gospel. We are all sinners, and over time we engage in responses that are less than godly. But in
times of challenge, does the person you’re attracted to circle back around and own her sin? Does she repent for her ungodly responses and seek forgiveness? How prone to anger is he? There is a reason why when a church is looking for leaders, it specifically excludes the quick-tempered (see Titus 1:7).

In times of stress, the fractures in our projected images appear. The real us—the one inside—is revealed. Speaking about suffering, the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” The image here is one of a fragile container broken open in hardship. When we are broken open in suffering, what we truly treasure (what we worship) is revealed. Paul continued:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. (vv. 8–10)

When the person you’re attracted to goes through something difficult, it is evidence of her humanity if she is sad, stressed, or wounded. But what she does with that sadness, stress, and woundedness makes all the difference between someone who treasures Christ as supreme and satisfying and one who is her own god, who lives with a sense of entitlement and worships comfort.

If you are seeking a romantic relationship, be wise and keep things with a prospective partner in the “friend zone” until you have
seen how he handles the stress of a broken and fallen world. Because there is no avoiding the stress and fallenness of the world, especially in the covenant commitment of marriage! When we commit to a spouse for life, we are agreeing to enter a sacred union between two sinners and Jesus, and when you’ve got two sinners walking together over the years, you will see just how sinful he or she—and you—can be. Tim Keller said, “Marriage is the Mack truck driving through your life, revealing your flaws and humbling your reactions.”8 Yes, and in fact, marriage can itself sometimes be the “suffering” that breaks us open to reveal what we truly worship.

After surveying the character of a potential partner, if you find out that his reputation is not great, she isn’t very godly, he seems commitment-phobic, or she does not handle stress well, yet you’re still attracted to this person, you should ask yourself why. What is it that you are worshipping that would draw you toward romantic intimacy and potential commitment with someone of unhealthy character? Is it possible you are thinking superficially? Are your values tied to things that don’t last?

If you can say yes to any of those questions, there is great hope for you.

One of my fears in writing this book is that by pointing out the wisdom in the Song of Songs, many of us who are guilty of foolishness might feel condemned and lose heart. But I want to end each chapter of our journey through the Song by looking at how the gospel’s call to confession and repentance enters our mess and removes the weight of guilt and shame by pointing us to Jesus. We read about one of the biggest relational disasters in the Bible in 2 Samuel 11, where King David saw Bathsheba bathing, was
compelled by her beauty, and with no thought of the repercussions of his actions, sent for her. He coveted another man’s wife, abused his authority by having her brought to him, and committed adultery with her.

If that wasn’t bad enough, he then arranged to have her husband, Uriah, moved to the front lines of battle to increase his chance of death. Uriah was killed, and David, by intention, became a murderer. In the aftermath of sin upon sin, David took Bathsheba as his wife.

In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan confronted David, and David erupted in tears under the weight of his conviction. He repented of his sin against the Lord. Although there were plenty of circumstantial consequences for David’s rebellion against God (see 2 Sam. 12:10–12, 14), David was forgiven by God and was still called a man after God’s own heart (see Acts 13:22). What a thing to say about a man guilty of lust, adultery, deception, and murder—and those are only the most obvious of his sins! That this kind of person could in the end be declared a man after God’s own heart is a testimony not to the greatness of David but to the greatness of God.

There is no sin—past, present, or future—that has more power than the cross of Jesus Christ. Whatever darkness from your past or trouble or guilt from your present bothers you as you progress through this book, please know that you haven’t strayed too far that there is no redemption for you. Full reconciliation and healing are abundantly available for you in Christ Jesus. The man who knew no sin took our sin to the cross so that we might be clothed in his perfect righteousness and completely justified before God the Father. God has seen our unloveliness—the deep brokenness and rebellion in our
hearts—and instead of withdrawing, he pursues us to the beautiful end. He made an eternal commitment to sinners because of his great love for us. And because grace is true, you can face the world with all of its dangers and troubles, knowing you have been established forever as blameless by the holy groom, Jesus Christ.
What we have seen so far in the Song of Solomon is that dance of consideration and imagination we call attraction. A woman looked at King Solomon and found him desirable. The attraction was mutual. Next, the two of them began to consider each other’s character and imagine what a romantic relationship might be like. Part of this consideration involved spending time together to “test the waters,” to see if the attraction was only skin-deep, to see if the initial appraisal of the other’s character was accurate.

We’ve all been attracted to someone before. We know what it is like to have that initial captivation, to find somebody pleasing to see and to be around. When we want to become intentional about pursuing this attraction further, we begin to find ways to hang out with each other. We watch how the other person lives his or her life. Most of us, if we are thinking wisely, will not be too quick to throw our hearts out there. We exercise patience and consideration.
At this point in chapter 1 of the Song of Songs, we have not seen a serious entry into what we might call “dating,” or what historically would be called “courtship,” but more of a testing the waters to see if they should jump in.

If a person’s reputation is good and you have seen in the person a willingness to submit to others, to commit to things, to see things through, and if you’ve watched her navigate difficult days with character and wisdom, then it’s not a bad thing to seek her out and consider moving deeper into the relationship. And this is exactly what happens in chapter 1, verse 7:

Tell me, you whom my soul loves,
where you pasture your flock,
where you make it lie down at noon;
for why should I be like one who veils herself
beside the flocks of your companions?

This was no longer just physical attraction but a mixture of physical attraction and delight in the character of a person. She asked the question, “Where are you going to be?” The reason she asked is because she planned on being there too!

If you are single, you know that can be a risky question. We have already seen her anxiety over the way she looks, but she now boldly asks. She wants to hang out in a more meaningful way. And of course, it’s quite natural for a relationship to grow in this way. We can call this the dating stage.

Dating in our day and age—let’s just be honest—is goofy. It can sort of be like selling a used car. We try to hide anything that
may make a sale less likely and advertise only what will “close the deal.” And what closes the deal in the modern dating world is almost always sex. Thus, dating becomes a lot about hiding who you really are, hiding your imperfections, and in many cases, unfortunately, displaying and making primary what ought to be reserved only for marriage. Things have certainly changed over the decades, and while human beings aren’t any more lustful today than they’ve always been, our cultural standards and romantic ideals have certainly degraded to the point where the lustful desires have become more prominent, even more driving.

Historically speaking, a dating relationship began with an expectation and hope that a person would either stumble across or be introduced to someone of the opposite sex who had the potential for compatibility. The two would begin spending time together, gradually getting to know each other first in social settings, and then spending more one-on-one time together in conversation and recreation. That was dating in decades past. But traditional dating is becoming more and more rare, and a culture of hooking up has emerged in its place.

While technology has begun to play a large role in how people meet (and certainly has both pros and cons), the dark side of today’s approach to dating is not really dating at all. For all of our romantic aspirations and relationship advice in magazines, books, movies, and blogs, our culture suffers the unfortunate rise of “hooking up.” What exactly does that mean? Hooking up is defined as “a sexual encounter which may or may not include sexual intercourse, usually occurring between people who are strangers or brief acquaintances.”1 It is when men and women seek shallow relationships for the sole purpose of sex.
The stats on this hookup culture are staggering. One study reveals that 77.7 percent of college females admitted to “hooking up.” This means that these young women connect with young men they either don't know at all or barely know for the sole purpose of physical gratification. For males, the percentage is even higher—84.2 percent.

If sex is what God says it is, then there are few things as damaging to the human soul as casual sexual encounters. The hookup culture is yet another symptom of a confused and broken society that has elevated the role of physical gratification and sex beyond the biblical norms and wasted them, sacrificing contentment and joy on the altar of momentary pleasure—leaving only brokenness and regret.

It should be apparent to clear-thinking Christians that today’s young people must navigate the dating world with more caution than the generations before us. Believers pursuing romantic relationships perhaps now more than ever need to remember Jesus’s words in Matthew 10:16: “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

To help you develop this wisdom and innocence, I want to cover some important considerations when it comes to dating. If you are pursuing a romantic relationship into the dating stage, here are some things that should always be present.

**RECIROCITY**

In Song of Solomon 1:7, the woman asked Solomon where he was going to be so she could be there too. Look at his response in verse 8: “If you do not know, O most beautiful among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the
shepherds’ tents.” Notice that Solomon didn’t respond by telling her he would text her later, only to forget, or inform her he was busy with the guys. Instead, he was playful and (appropriately) flirtatious, encouraging her to find him.

This should go without saying, but in our world, it probably warrants being said: in dating there must be *reciprocity*. If you want to move from the “friend zone” into dating, the object of your desire has to want the same thing. It is never okay to stalk or hound a person who doesn’t feel the same way you do about the nature of your relationship. I have often watched young men and women make each other very uncomfortable when they continue to pursue and attempt to woo someone long after a clear “I’m not interested” has been given.

Men, the Bible commands us in 1 Timothy 5:2 to treat older women as mothers and younger women as sisters. I don’t know if you have sisters, but I have two. My younger sister didn’t have a date until I graduated and left home, and at that point, dudes came out of the woodwork! It was as though they were just waiting for me to bail. But when I was around, I had several friends who were interested in dating my sister. One guy named Brent flat out asked me, “Hey, man, would you mind if I dated your sister?” It was pretty big of him to even ask, but of course I responded, “Yes, I very, very much mind. I would like you to not be anywhere near my sister.”

Maybe I was overprotective, but I think, in general, this is how we ought to consider every woman—as a sister to look out for. We should want to protect, encourage, and love. It’s never okay to make a woman feel unsafe. It’s never okay to pressure a woman, to make a situation so uncomfortable that she has to avoid you. If she says,
“This ain’t happening,” then it’s not happening. Our default posture toward women should always be to honor them.

Women, in the same way, if you are trying to pursue a romantic path with a man and he’s indicating that’s not the path he wants to take with you, throwing down ultimatums or trying to seduce him is foolishness. It is foolishness that might win you some affection in the short term, but in the end, it will produce regret and resentment and disaster. Don’t do it.

There must be reciprocity to move out of the friend zone. If a person is clear that he or she is not interested in you romantically, learn to trust that God has someone better for you than you have imagined for yourself.

Most of us are pretty clear that forcing ourselves on someone, even if just emotionally, is wrong. But too often we become so wrapped up in our emotions and desire for romantic fulfillment that we go beyond where our hearts are meant to and therefore sometimes take our bodies where they ought not go. Sometimes the object of our attraction is more than willing to reciprocate in the way of physical intimacy but not in the way of Christlikeness and godly romance. This is not the kind of reciprocity you should look for. As you pursue a relationship into the world of dating, don’t simply look for someone who reciprocates your attraction but one who reciprocates your desire to honor Jesus in your relationship above all else.

**LIFE-GIVING IMPACT**

In 1:9–10, Solomon’s response left no ambiguity about his intentions. “I compare you, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh’s chariots.
Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels.”

It seems like an odd compliment to compare a woman to a horse, doesn’t it? There are several lines throughout the Song that I would not advise using on your significant other, and calling your girl a horse is probably one of those. But, in context, Solomon was very much complimenting her. He spoke to her insecurities, establishing clarity about his desire to be with her in the same way she wanted to be with him.

Not only is there reciprocity in this book—they shared an attraction—but they also were intent on nurturing each other emotionally and spiritually. This is the first sign that their relationship was going to be life-giving. Here’s how I know this to be true: Pharaoh’s horses were always white Arabian horses.

My oldest daughter rides horses. She has a brown quarter horse named Gypsy, and at the stable where she keeps her, there’s also a white Arabian, Toi. Toi is spectacular. When we drive out to the barn or past the pasture, I can’t always see Gypsy because there are ten or eleven other horses out there, and Gypsy the brown quarter horse just kind of blends in with the background. But you can always see Toi.

Toi stands in stark contrast to the rest of his surroundings. He doesn’t blend in. White, powerful, beautiful, easy to spot. And this is what Solomon was saying to this woman: “I see you. When I look around, you stand out to me. You don’t blend into the crowd. You’re the one that my eyes go to. You are unique. You are eye-catching. I am drawn to you. You are not like the rest.”

Do you see how this might be like water to an insecure soul? Theirs was a life-giving relationship. He didn’t capitalize on her insecurities but instead brought the good news of his approval to her.
The deepest cries of our hearts so often can be characterized by a desperate desire for our whole selves to be known and at the same time delighted in. Solomon said to his prospective partner, “I see the things you’re insecure about, and I find you absolutely captivating. You impress me and please me.” That was life-giving.

Those of you who are pursuing a dating relationship right now, if your attraction has given way to a relationship that’s making you miserable, a relationship that’s emotionally exhausting and spiritually compromised, a relationship that’s a culmination of mixed signals and tears and confusion, I think you ought to get out. If the relationship is wearying, life sucking, or lacks clarity and intention, or if someone is just playing games with you, I would hit the brakes hard. The harsh reality is that behavior in these kinds of relationships doesn’t get better over time; it gets worse. Familiarity will not breed better behavior. The further you go together, the less guarded you will become. At the beginning of a dating relationship, people tend to be on their best behavior to give the best impression. If at the beginning your romantic interest’s “best” is pretty bad, you can bet it will get only worse.

**APPROVAL BY GODLY COUNSEL**

What we see next in our look at the Song of Songs is the excitement and joy that others had about their dating relationship: “We will make for you ornaments of gold, studded with silver” (1:11). The friends of the couple in this text weren’t fearful for the hearts and souls of these two as they grew closer; they were excited.

One sure way to walk in foolishness in a romantic relationship is to date someone who troubles the godly counselors in your life.
There was once a beautiful young woman at The Village who began a friendship with a young man who attended the church off and on but seemed to have no real love for the Lord or fruit in his life. He was charming, had a great sense of humor, and was doing well at the firm that employed him. Friends of this young woman noticed how she was drawn to him and gently reminded her that her desire should be for a godly man who would love, serve, and lead her toward a greater intimacy with Christ, not someone who was, for all intents and purposes, lukewarm about his faith. But the young woman ignored her friends’ advice and began dating the guy.

Once again, her friends appealed to her to reconsider pursuing the relationship, and once again, she refused to listen. Instead, she found a different group of friends who wouldn’t disagree with her choices, claiming all along that she could influence him for good.

Not long after they began dating, they started crossing lines she had never intended to cross, and the relationship turned almost entirely physical. And toxic. After about eight months, she discovered he was cheating on her, and her heart was shattered. She felt foolish and ashamed. In her brokenness, she nervously limped back to the friends who had warned her, pleaded with her, and prayed for her, fearing an “I told you so” or an “If you would have only listened …,” but instead she found grace, empathy, and compassion. This sweet sister is still struggling, still wounded, but she found a safe harbor in which to heal with the friends God has given her.

Proverbs 12:15 says, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” The men or women with whom you are doing life, the ones you have shared your struggles, hopes,
and dreams with, the ones who have prayed for you, encouraged you, and spoken into your life—what do they think about your relationship? Are they rejoicing or cringing? Obviously it’s your life, but God has given you these men and women as a gift for your support and protection. Our godly friends, family members, and especially our pastors, elders, and other spiritual leaders very often see things about our relationships that we can’t, or sometimes refuse, to see. As people who love us and who are accountable to God for caring for our walk with Christ, they should be honest about problematic relationships. So ask these people in your life for their perspective and counsel.

If they are not supportive of the relationship, fight the urge to find people who are more “supportive”—people who really just tell you what you want to hear—and instead heed the advice of godly counsel and let your relationship with the prospective partner be one simply of friendship, nothing more.

THOUGHTS OF YOU

Song of Solomon 1:12–14 is a bit tricky. The passage sounds erotic and sensual, and there is no doubt some of that kind of desire was building (as we will see shortly), but what’s happened immediately in this text wasn’t explicit. Our woman said this: “While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance. My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi.”

She was lying in bed and thinking of Solomon. She wasn’t having sexual fantasies about him, but she was “crushing” on him, so
to speak. In Solomon’s day, women who could afford it wore a little leather pouch, called a nard, around their necks, often filled with fragrant objects, like a substitute for perfume. In verses 12–14, our woman was speaking symbolically, saying that Solomon was the fragrant object around her neck. She was not saying he was actually there in the bed with her, lying between her breasts. She was saying that he brought “fragrance” to her life, to her spirit. When she thought about him, she was in her “happy place,” smelling flowers and strolling through the blossoming vineyards.

Solomon had just told her he thought she was a knockout (see 1:8–10), and she was swooning. They carried each other in their romantic daydreams. It was difficult for them to be apart without thinking of one another.

One important application from this line of thinking is remembering that where there is no mutual initiative, where there is no thoughtful concern and care for each other, the relationship is already dying. I have a story from my own life that, much to my shame, proves that point.

When I was in college, I was close friends with a young woman I liked very much. But that’s all we were—friends. I loved hanging out with her. She was godly, she was beautiful, but I just wasn’t attracted to her in a romantic way. The problem was that she didn’t want to stay in the friend zone. So one day, she gave me an ultimatum. She said, “Look, I like you. It’s apparent I like you in a way that you don’t like me. So we can’t be ‘just friends’ anymore.” In my foolishness and cowardice, I suggested that we date because I didn’t want to lose her companionship. But I knew she was way more interested in me than I was in her. This truth really became apparent when I went out of
town for about three days, and I hardly thought of her. I finally called her, but only because I knew I was supposed to.

This particular woman was not interested in playing games or hanging out in the “sort of dating, sort of not dating” category. When it came to the idea of our relationship, she was not thinking, *I could take it or leave it.* In fact, she sent me a letter at my hotel, and when I got home, I found a little package of my favorite candy waiting.

I felt sick to my stomach. And I remember thinking, *I am a horrible person.*

We were in an unfair situation where, as the man, I was not showing any initiative in the relationship, just being halfhearted and too lazy to be honest. She was showing all the initiative. And I knew that would hurt her heart in the long run. In the end, I finally manned up, sat down with her, asked for forgiveness, and ended the relationship. It was awful. I wounded her in some deep ways.

She deserved a man who thought about her as much as she thought about him, whose actions toward her were not careless and self-centered but purposeful and affectionate. As a father of daughters and as the husband of my wife, I think back on that situation with regret.

So I’ll say this to you: if you’re in a dating relationship and the other person is showing little to no initiative, the relationship is already broken and you’re on the clock. If you’re driving everything and the other person is driving nothing, you’re headed over the relational cliff.

Be honest with yourself. Do you think often about the other person? Are you considerate? Do you miss him or her when you’re away from each other? If there is an indifference on either side of the
relationship—if it seems like one of you could “take or leave” the other—downshift back into the friend zone.

SAFETY AND PURITY

In Song of Solomon 1:16–17, Solomon said this: “Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly delightful. Our couch is green; the beams of our house are cedar; our rafters are pine.”

On the surface, this may not sound like it has much meaning, but the scene our man set is a very important one, and it gives us further insight into the care given to their relationship, as romantic and affectionate as it was.

Let me set up the explanation of this text this way: Nearly every Christian dating couple knows the inherent foolishness of “movie night.” This happens over and over again, more times than any of us can count. I’ve had this conversation so often that I can rehearse it easily. A young man and woman are dating, and one asks, “What do you want to do tonight?” The other replies, “I don’t know; let’s go grab something to eat.” So they grab something to eat. Then one says, “Well, why don’t we just go to your place and watch a movie?”

Now, can we all just be honest here? Nothing good and godly ever happens between dating couples when they lie on a couch together late at night to watch a movie. It has never in the history of humankind led to discussions about cinematography or the symbolic resonance of the director’s body of work or whatever. It starts with snuggling, and then it turns into mouth to mouth, hands to body, and then progresses until one of you gets a cooler head, or you both lose your heads altogether.
But Solomon and his bride knew enough not to trust one another’s impulses. They were very attracted to each other, and they knew this. What was actually happening in 1:16–17 was indicative of the safety and purity in the couple’s physical relationship.

A deeper look at where they were hanging out shows us they were outside: “Our couch is green,” he said (1:16). They were in the park. They were in public. “The beams of our house are cedar; our rafters are pine” (1:17). And Solomon was the one initiating this public setting.

So often in dating relationships, it is the man who pushes, tempts, and leads the way into lust—not always, but very often. But here in the Song, Solomon took the initiative toward purity and safety.

As you date, there will naturally be a growing desire for physical intimacy with your partner. Please understand: this is not a bad thing! It doesn’t make you gross or evil or perverted or wrong. You have a desire for physical intimacy because God instilled it within you. Desire is not in itself bad, but it must be held in check until marriage.

Remember, God is the creator of sex; he invented it. And it is not God’s desire to keep from you any pleasure but rather to lead you into the fullest pleasure possible. So with that said, be careful not to put yourself in harm’s way.

Ten o’clock. The two of you alone in an apartment, cuddled on a couch, watching some movie—this is not going to lead to righteousness. It’s just not safe. The dating relationship should be safe, and there should be a pursuit in it for purity, led intentionally by the man. Therefore, men, don’t put the burden on your girlfriend
or fiancée to keep turning down your advances or reminding you of God’s design for sex. Don’t put her in that position. You lead, and do so in a way that protects you both from sexual temptation.

**PROMISE OF A FUTURE**

Next, we enter the second chapter of the Song of Solomon, which continues with the woman’s declaration: “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.” And he responded, “As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young women” (vv. 1–2).

Here is a woman who had a growing sense of her own identity because of the progression of the relationship. She wasn’t left confused, doubting, wondering, or lost. Solomon did not give her mixed signals or a broken heart. She didn’t compromise her beliefs or question her faith. She did not worry about his intentions or try to decipher his advances.

In so many dating relationships today, we see how the mishandling of a woman’s heart ends up withering and wearying her, how emotional (and physical) mistreatment makes a woman feel less herself. But this doesn’t happen with Solomon’s betrothed. The way he led their relationship and the way he poured into her heart left her confident and self-assured. She blossomed.

They were out in public, going on dates. He said, “You’re beautiful; you’re delightful.” He created clarity in their relationship about his feelings, his intentions, and his pursuit. She could only respond then by basically saying, “There’s no question that I am above the other ladies, that I am yours, that you are mine, and that there’s something sweet going on here.”
It is a dangerous thing to surrender the deepest parts of your heart to someone who has not provided this kind of clarity for you. If your dating relationship is going to move forward, if things are going to get more serious, there must be clarity.

Look at verse 3: “As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” Not only was their relationship safe and pure, not only was there clarity, but she had a growing sense of ease and safety around him. She was comfortable in his presence, not nervous or frightened. The way he handled her, the way he walked with her, the way they talked, the way they spent time together all gave her the evidence she needed to know that inside of him lay a desire to protect her physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

“He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love” (v. 4). What a thing to say! She exulted in the way he wooed her. The “banqueting house” speaks to the way she felt nurtured by him, fed by him as it were. He gave her the royal treatment. And over their relationship waved not the banner of lust but of love—selfless, sacrificial, spiritual love.

“His banner over me was love.” This also indicates that Solomon was not in denial about their relationship. He wasn’t trying to keep her on the down-low. He proudly declared his love for this woman. He didn’t say, “Hey, this is my buddy, the Shulammite woman.” He said, “Hey, everybody, this is my girl!” He changed his Facebook status, and he let the world know he was off the market.

Thus, their relationship was moving forward.
If you are in a relationship where the other person refuses to acknowledge openly that his pursuit of you, delight in you, and enjoyment of you goes beyond how he feels about the nine other women you see him with, then you are not really dating. You are being played. You are caught in a game in which your heart is going to lose.

But for those relationships where the appropriate boundaries are in place, where dating is giving way to something more intentional and serious, the heart becomes fuller and more overflowing with love and affection.

We see in the progression of the Song more and more affirmation that sexual desire is good for couples pursuing marriage because it bodes well for their sexual health once the marriage covenant has sanctified their sexual expression with each other.

I love that the Bible never pulls any punches but is always honest with us. “Sustain me with raisins,” the Shulammite woman said. “Refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me!” (vv. 5–6). Because of all of his kindness, his clarity, and his godly pursuit, she has an acknowledged and growing desire for his sexual touch.

In this time in Israel’s history, raisins and apples were considered sensual foods; they were even thought to help women get pregnant.

David was said to have given apples and raisins to his men who were returning home from war as a great reward for them and their wives. It was a way of saying, “Go home, brothers, and make babies!”

The Shulammite woman was basically saying, “I’m in. I need some raisins! A girl needs some apples right now!”
Because she trusted Solomon’s intentions and they were committed to “not stir up or awaken love until it pleases” (v. 7), she was free to acknowledge her growing desire.

It’s important for me to repeat this to you because of the mixed messages the church has historically sent young people about sex: it is not wrong to have a growing desire for sexual touch. I’m going to keep coming back to this truth before our study of this book is over because we are told so many times that sex is bad, wrong, sinful, gross. And then we are expected to embrace it fully when we marry. That message is not a great way to set a couple free to marital intimacy. And the couples who desire help many times have to go to the world to find it. But the world doesn’t know how to correctly handle something God designed because it doesn’t know God.

Sometimes I meet young men who despair of their sexual appetites and say things like, “I just want God to take this away from me!” And I always say, “You really don’t.”

What they should want God to do is empower their discipline and strength to be obedient, because sexual desire is a gift. We shouldn’t ask God to take one of his gifts away from us. Rather, we should ask him to help us steward it well, and lead us into the covenant relationship where we can enjoy it according to his design.

Now, look at the next part of the verse—a word of caution: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does, of the field that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases” (v. 7).

I think my friend Tommy Nelson was the first person I ever heard teach through this wonderful book, and in one of his most profound insights into the text, he compared the desire for sexual touch to a fire:
Keeping a fire going requires boundaries and appropriate fuel. In marriage, that fuel is growing respect, tenderness, admiration, mutual desires and dreams, mutual Christlike relationships with others (extended family, children, friends, business associations, community relationships), memories and traditions established over time, romance and ongoing expressions of affection, and so forth.\(^4\)

What he was saying is that the fuel of sexual zeal within the confines of marriage arrives out of a growing knowledge of each other, a deepening understanding of each other, a study of how you can bring grace to all the ways your spouse is different and uniquely himself or herself. In some ways, watching your spouse be who God designed him or her to be, through the lens of the gospel, becomes *arousing* to you.

Women, watching your man be disciplined, watching him love your kids, watching him succeed and flourish in his work—are these things attractive? When you consider these things through the work of Christ, don’t they make your husband seem manlier, more alluring to you?

Men, watching your wife serve you in tender ways, watching her tend to the home or pursue her gifts and interests, seeing her flourish as a creative or enterprising woman of God—isn’t that sexy?

Service and godliness, seeing how your partner interacts with family members, business associates, and church communities, create respect for your spouse that goes beyond the physical. Sex within marriage can take on an entirely new dimension—that of giving to the other, including those times when sexual desire may not be so strong.
Sexual intimacy outside of marriage, however, does not have these liberating boundaries or healthy fuel. Outside of marriage, sex becomes about self-gratification and fulfilling personal desires.

Therefore, the Shulammite woman pleads with us to not awaken love until it’s time (see Song of Sol. 8:4), because if you enter into the physical too quickly, you crush the ability to actually grow in legitimate intimacy.

Don’t awaken love until it’s time, because if you do, you will stop talking, stop digging around in the depths of each other’s souls, stop trying to figure out how to communicate better, stop trying to figure out what makes the other person tick. Instead, you use each other physically. It may be enjoyable for a while, but I guarantee it will leave you hollow.

If the dating relationship is moving along and you see these healthy things we’ve looked at in the Song of Songs, it’s important to apply a healthy dose of grace to your evaluations. Nobody is perfect at all of these things. When you are navigating a dating relationship, part of getting to know each other means working through misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Don’t try to hold out for perfection, because only Jesus can offer you that. Instead, what you should ask yourself is: Does he show a trajectory of health and godliness? Is she willing to repent when she does wrong? Is he a faithful follower of Jesus Christ?

Where there is repentance and confession and seriousness about walking in the ways of the Lord, it is worth it to continue working at your relationship. But if you do, realize that dating moves forward. Dating for Christians has a specific trajectory.

When the trajectory for both partners is mutual Christlikeness, the next step is to chart the trajectory of your path as a couple. As
you move from simply dating into a more serious version of dating, you arrive at what we might call courtship.

Courtship is when you’re not just “dating to date” anymore, but you’re dating to move toward marriage. The courting couple ask themselves and each other, “Are you and I going to be together for the rest of our lives?” As the relationship progresses into courtship, the answer is, “Yes, we believe so.”
When I began dating my now-wife, Lauren, I lived in Abilene, Texas, and she lived in Longview—about five and a half hours apart by car. At that time I worked at a church, was in school full-time, and traveled occasionally for speaking engagements. On a typical weekend, I would finish speaking Friday night around eleven o’clock, get in my car, and drive to Longview. I’d arrive at the house of Lauren’s parents sometime in the early morning, sleep for a few hours, then wake up, spend time with Lauren through lunch, get back in my car, and drive home to Abilene so that I could be at church Sunday morning. I did this for a year.

It was not a very healthy or convenient schedule. But it never felt crazy to me—never. Looking back on it now, though, I think, Man, that girl had some voodoo on me or something. I was in the car
fourteen to sixteen hours in a thirty-eight-hour period every week just to spend four or five hours with her.

Solomon and the woman he loved were in a very similar stage in their relationship. We see this in chapter 2, verse 8: “The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills.”

There was excitement in her voice about the way Solomon treated her. He couldn’t get enough of her. Every spare moment he had was spent making his way to her.

This was beyond infatuation, beyond puppy love and initial attraction. There was magnetism here. “This just might be it. I think this person is ‘the one.’”

Before I met Lauren, I was always the guy who thought, Is there really a woman out there who’ll get to know the real me and still say, “Yeah, I’ll spend the rest of my life with you”? I had serious doubts about whether that woman really existed. And then all of a sudden, I met her. The kind of excitement that resulted was the kind that had me driving long distances for long periods of time as often as I could, and I never felt bothered at all by it. In fact, I felt eager and energized at the prospect. That’s different from the kind of excitement I had being merely infatuated by a girl.

When you enter the “I think this is ‘the one’” territory, you will leap over mountains and bound over hills to be with each other. Part of that excitement and eagerness is about more than “hanging out.” It becomes more and more about “sorting out.” When the excitement in a relationship moves beyond the fun of the here and now into the realm of being together for life, you start having deeper conversations—marriage conversations. Not all of these discussions are easy to
have. Some can be very difficult. But when the dating stage begins to get more serious, there is no longer an avoidance of the difficult stuff. A couple will begin having conversations in categories such as these:

- **The Past**—What was her upbringing like? What events have shaped her, influenced her, helped her grow, or frustrated her growth? What sins were hardest to repent of?
- **The Present**—What are his ongoing struggles? How does he handle daily stresses? Who holds him accountable, and who is accountable for his spiritual growth? What does he fear?
- **Hopes**—What does she want for herself and her future spouse and family? What does she want for her church? What is her sense of God’s mission in the world and her place in it?
- **Dreams**—What fulfills him? Where does he see himself in the future? What is his vision for your relationship?
- **Wounds**—What baggage is she carrying? What sins committed against her are still difficult to recover from? Who has hurt her, and how? What still haunts her?

This is why I say the excitement at this stage in the relationship is not simply about attraction and hanging out. It is the excitement about the prospect of beginning a real life together. That decision has not necessarily been made yet, but the potential is there and agreed
upon by both parties. Others have confirmed you have potential to be together, and so the conversations you have become less about getting to know each other and more about understanding each other. This is a period before official engagement but more serious than merely dating. This is the stage I would call “courtship.”

THE SERIOUSNESS OF COURTSHIP

Tommy Nelson defined courtship as “the time when you begin to date one person exclusively, frequently, and with the purpose of determining if this is the person with whom you truly want to spend the rest of your life.”1 Joshua Harris said it is “that special season in a romance when a man and woman are seriously weighing the possibility of marriage.”2

What we see in Song of Solomon 2:8–9 is that Solomon got to know what made this woman tick, and he was fired up about knowing her on this deeper level. The zeal of the initial attraction was still there, but it was fueled by a deeper fire: “My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, looking through the lattice” (v. 9).

Okay, I know this sounds a bit creeper-ish. Guys, don’t take the literal reading of this text into your application, all right? This is not a license to stalk a woman. This is a poetic description of something much more appropriate, and it continues in verses 10–13:

My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away,
for behold, the winter is past;  
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtledove  
is heard in our land.
The fig tree ripens its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my beautiful one,  
and come away.”

First of all, he was not literally peeking through her window to watch her. Instead, what is meant by his standing behind the wall, gazing through the window, and looking through the lattice is that, although his relational position to her was still outside the covenant of marriage, he nevertheless saw beneath the surface. He took stock of her interior life, saw beneath the relational facades, and considered the parts of her she kept hidden.

These verses, then, reveal that she knew he was not running away. Instead, he held out hope to her. “The winter is past; the rain is over” in verse 11 speaks to his optimism about their life together, despite the more difficult things he learned in the deepening of their romance. This is why in verse 14 he said this: “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.”

One reason he is described as peering through the lattice to consider her interior life is that she was still dealing with some insecurity. It
is even possible that something came up as they grew in intimacy that caused her to hide. Some kind of information came to light, something in the past reared its head, and it disrupted the romantic euphoria.

But whatever the issue, it didn’t dissuade Solomon. He did not pull away; he continued to pursue. She was perhaps still dealing with insecurity, and he was respectful of her feelings so as not to burden her or to pry, but he demonstrated the authenticity of the gospel of grace by refusing to distance himself. He drew nearer.

“Let me see your face,” he’s saying. “Talk to me. I’m still here. I’m not going to leave. You can tell me anything. I’m still bowled over by you.”

Isn’t it a deeply satisfying and steadying thing when someone gets a glimpse of our “crazy” and basically says, “I’m not going anywhere”? This kind of response to less-than-perfect is the greatest indicator that a couple has moved beyond the recreational, curious dating stage and into courtship. It is the first great indicator that they are preparing for a life together; things have gotten substantively serious. If someone is willing at this early stage, before the lifelong covenantal commitment has been made, to cover guilt, shame, hurt, or other difficulty with grace, it is a reasonably hopeful sign that he or she will continue to do so after the commitment is made. And as the relationship moves into the deepening seriousness of courtship, this grace will continue to be tested.

**SORTING THROUGH YOUR ISSUES**

In the courtship stage, a couple must have conversations about his and her pasts. Back in those days for Lauren and me, we began many conversations with “Here’s what you need to know about me …”
“Here’s what you need to know about my background …” “Here are some things that happened to me growing up that have left marks on me …” “These are the reasons I act this way …” “These are the reasons certain things bother me …”

We had a lot of questions for each other, and we had a lot of insights about ourselves to share.

This kind of openness obviously creates a risky season in the relationship. But as the relationship progresses—and remember, we’ve already established safety with each other; we already trust each other—we enter that season when we describe our lives with depth and sincerity reserved only for those who know us most closely.

“Here are my concerns …” “Here’s where I’m growing …” “Here’s where I’m afraid …” “Here’s where I’m struggling …” The conversation is growing in depth, growing in meaning. There is more honesty. There is more risk. There is more willingness to expose our hearts, even though we know that it could still go bad. We’re not covenanted yet, and we haven’t fully locked in. We haven’t said, “Till death do us part.” We haven’t said, “For better or for worse.” But we are moving toward saying those sacred words.

This is why courtship is deeper than dating—because it is dangerous, vulnerable, and awesome all at the same time. We are testing the waters of grace, trying to see if the attraction is evidencing real love, the kind of selfless love the Bible calls married couples to embrace. And precisely because in courtship we show more of our hearts to each other, including the darker parts, courtship can go badly.

My wife and I are dear friends with a single woman who cannot have children. It’s just not physiologically possible. Revealing this about herself is part of a conversation in her relationships as they get more serious,
and there have been men who walked away because it’s something they can’t see themselves getting over. As you can imagine, this is extremely hurtful and disappointing to our friend. But she knows she has to bring it up, as risky as the conversation is, as things get more serious.

Obviously, sharing this kind of issue puts a person in a very vulnerable position, but to “save” it until after he or she gets married can make both feel even more vulnerable. It can provoke a feeling of betrayal. Issues like this must be addressed before a lifelong commitment is made so that no one feels misled.

And as painful as it can be to have people confront the reality of your issues only to walk away, imagine how confidence building and hope giving it will be when you enter marriage with one who has confronted the reality of your issues and says, “I’m all in. Nothing could stop me from marrying you.”

When I was dating Lauren, I had a developing sense of God’s calling on my life to serve him in ministry, and it was getting stronger and stronger. In my head, as I considered what this kind of service would entail, I assumed that if we got married, we were going to be broke. And I was thinking God could call us to go overseas. I was thinking that he could send me anywhere to do anything and require me to give up all sorts of things to do it, and I certainly wasn’t going to hide any of these thoughts from the one considering spending the rest of her life with me.

We had that conversation at a Chili’s restaurant in Longview. It wasn’t a very romantic location, of course, but I just put it all out on the table. I said, “Here’s where I think the Lord is taking me …” “Here’s what he is calling me into …” “I don’t know how this is going to end, but I need to go. Despite all the uncertainty and the risk, can you come along?”
I’m glad we had that conversation, because I made three transitions before I became the pastor of The Village Church, each of which was at a smaller place and for less money. Lauren knew those kinds of transitions were possible, though, because we had that conversation before we even got married.

Each time I felt the Holy Spirit leading me to consider a smaller ministry and a smaller paycheck, I’d lay it out in front of her and say, “Let’s pray about this together. If I sense this is where God wants us to be, can you follow?”

These are the kinds of conversations that you have when you are in courtship. In this stage it’s also time to have a conversation about your wounds, about where you’ve been deeply hurt, whether you were abused or underwent another kind of trauma that makes trust difficult for you. Most of these things will have already started to reveal themselves in your relationship by the time you get to courtship, but now is the time to discuss them. You’ve probably seen some crazy and wondered what to do with it. It hasn’t been enough to make you want to hit eject, but you have thought, Well, that was weird. Maybe you can’t think of an explanation for what happened; maybe the behavior seemed sudden or out of character. In courtship, you’ve got to sort those things out, though.

Ask questions such as the following: “Where did that come from?” “Why did you do that?” “What were you feeling and thinking when you reacted that way?” “How can I help you?”

Your significant other may retreat in response, so it’s important to stay tender, to stay patient, because his or her inclination to open up to you will largely depend on how kind and gracious you are. She may be used to people glimpsing at her emotional dysfunctions
and bailing. So it may be difficult for her to trust you won’t do the same. Or it could be that nobody has ever even asked her about these things! Maybe she’s surprised by the interest and unsettled by it.

Many of us are wounded and don’t even realize it. Others of us know we’ve had moments that marked us, but we haven’t fully grasped the damage. Some wounds won’t even come out until later, after becoming married. But as much as we are able, before marriage, we must have these conversations.

One thing I learned about myself is this: I desperately wanted to earn the approval of my father. And I found it to be impossible. I just couldn’t do it, and that marked me. It embedded in me a terrible insecurity, and that insecurity at times caused me to act like an idiot with Lauren. I’d get frustrated and angry, and it all came out of this “father wound” I was carrying around. If you’re familiar with my ministry, you might appreciate my sarcasm and wit, but let me tell you: it’s a nightmare when I’m operating out of insecurity. I can cut deep.

In courtship you see each other’s wounds, and you also see how you each respond to woundedness. In my life, as things are revealed about me that I wish weren’t true, my natural desire is to hide, to not let these things be seen.

In courtship we have conversations about our wounds as best as we understand them. We end up providing insights into ourselves that make our partners either run away or draw nearer. Solomon was a man of God, and he was being called into a relationship of true love for his partner, so he chose the latter.

He was operating under the banner of the kind of love that doesn’t leave (see 2:4). The Hebrew word for “love” in Song of
Solomon 2:4 is *ahava*, which describes “love of the will.” It’s the “I’m not going anywhere” kind of love. It’s the love that says, “I’ve seen the crazy, and I’m going to stick around.”

Courtship reveals the presence or lack of *ahava*. Because, as we’ve said before, isn’t everybody on his or her best behavior the first few months of dating? But as we move into courtship, the guard comes down a little. The couple are more relaxed with each other, more at home with each other, so their real selves are coming through.

Solomon peered through the lattice; he’s seen her malfunctions. He’s made a note to himself: “Okay, that’s going to come up again.” Right? He thought, *We’re going to be dealing with that one for a while.*

But he didn’t run.

Look at chapter 2, verse 15: “Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom.” The little foxes are representative of their recurring issues.

In courtship, all of a sudden the “little foxes” start coming out, and instead of ignoring them and trying to pretend like they’re not there, you work through them together and sort them out. They will ruin the vineyard of your relationship if you don’t work together to catch them before they do serious damage.

I’m always worried about people who don’t think there are issues to deal with at the levels of courtship and engagement. Have you ever met these people? They are so infatuated with the romance that they forget they’re in relationship with a sinner. They especially forget that their partner is in a relationship with a sinner. I’m always telling people at The Village, “Look, marriage is difficult,” and I’ve got about two thousand engaged couples out there in the congregation
looking at each other saying, “Not us, baby, not us. It won’t be that way for us.” Because when you’re young and in love, you’re kind of oblivious to the storm of dysfunction lying in wait for you.

You’ve got to start opening up, start being honest with yourself and with each other. Solomon and his woman were honest enough to admit, “Hey, we’ve got issues.” They had a vineyard full of little foxes eating away at their ability to walk in intimacy, eating away at their ability to communicate effectively, eating away at their ability to trust God. But they were committed early on in the courtship stage to catch the foxes before they did too much damage.

Notice the perspective of the statement in Song of Solomon 2:15: “Catch the foxes for us.” There is an implication of third-party help. They asked for help together, possibly from someone else who loves them. By way of application, I would strongly recommend for every couple in courtship, as you come across the “little foxes,” ask for outside help. For some couples, this may mean simply seeking out good premarital counseling. For others, it may mean more intensive gospel-centered counseling individually and as a couple. It certainly means engaging in a discipleship relationship and submitting to spiritual leaders in the church and family.

If you are in a courtship, you’re considering uniting with someone for the rest of your life. Why not seek help? Why not ask a wise, godly third party to peek through the lattice too, to consider your interior lives and relationship dynamics and help you navigate with wisdom and godliness through the potential difficulties ahead?

The couple in this Song was doing that. They were prayerfully working through deep heart issues, and part of that meant they were asking for third-party help.
The result for them was continued affirmation of *ahava* love. “My beloved is mine, and I am his; he grazes among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains” (vv. 16–17). Through all of this consideration, he continued to pursue her.

It probably bears mentioning here that when I talk about navigating hard issues and continuing to pursue, I am not recommending (to women in particular) that you seek to be the savior of a violent person. That’s not your job. You don’t need to put your body on the altar of an abusive person’s redemption. Christ has done that.

I know that often this is where third-party help is most important. It unfortunately often takes a third party to counsel victims away from offenders. So I want to be clear about this: If you’re in an abusive relationship—whether it’s physical or sexual or verbal or spiritual—you need to get out and get help. If you’re being victimized, tell the police. Talk to your pastor or elders. Talk to a counselor. But don’t think it will get better on its own, and don’t think that showing grace means subjecting yourself to abuse. That’s not *ahava* love.

Nevertheless, in courtship, *ahava* is affirmed through the joint confrontation and consideration of all the dark spots hidden in the heart. If you don’t sense *ahava* is there in your partner for your imperfections, it’s a sign that it’s probably time to move apart rather than forward. Once in college, I was sitting on my balcony with a dear friend on the night before his wedding, and he said, “Man, this is a mistake.”

I said, “Hey, brother, you should cancel this thing.”

And he replied with, “Well, her dress cost this, and the dinner cost that.”
And I said, “You can’t get married because you spent money on a wedding. You should cancel it.”

He protested further. “No, we’ll work at it.”

So I asked him why he said it was a mistake, and he went deep into the dynamics of their relationship and outlined many deficiencies and incompatibilities.

“We don’t know what to talk about anymore, we’re not connecting on any real level, and I think we’ve both just thought that if we just get married, these things will work themselves out.”

I have to tell you that if in the course of courtship you hit this same ceiling, it is not wise to keep walking together. If, as issues come up, you can’t graciously sort through them together and commit to bold love of each other despite them, then you probably shouldn’t press on to engagement and marriage.

MOVING TOWARD THE COVENANT

When a relationship deepens, weaknesses come to light, and heart-level issues are raised, many couples pretend those issues aren’t there. They turn to something to mask the pain and to help them avoid dealing with the growing seriousness of the relationship. They may medicate with sexual intimacy, getting more and more physical until there’s no longer any real conversation at all. Or they may spend most of their time in passive activity—outdoor stuff that involves no opportunity for talking or indoor activities such as watching movies. Medicating away the difficulty and avoiding it provide an illusion of intimacy because a couple is spending time together and remaining physically connected. However, it is a false sense of intimacy because
it is outside the biblical boundaries for a couple in this stage. People in this situation aren’t really learning about one another anymore; mostly, they’re just using each other, pretending to be adults, trying to do adult stuff, including the stuff that comes with the privilege of the marriage covenant without actually making the commitment and doing the real work of a relationship. The results are absolutely devastating.

Solomon and the Shulammite woman realized this is a real danger. They realized, “Hey, we’ve got issues we need to work through. Before we’re free to turn on the physical side of our relationship, let’s pull back on the reins.” They wanted to make sure growth was in place so they didn’t wind up using and hurting one another.

The trajectory they followed was sound for them, and it remains spiritually and therefore relationally sound for us today. They respected each other, cared for each other, spent time getting to know each other, and ministered to one another. They sought outside counsel. They were submissive to God’s Word. When difficult things came up, they persevered through them and committed to bring grace at each place of tenderness.

So the relationship kept moving forward, and the second chapter of the Song of Solomon ends like this: “My beloved is mine, and I am his; he grazes among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains” (vv. 16–17).

Here’s what happened: Specifically on her part, there was deepening trust for Solomon because as issues arose, he didn’t run but instead said, “Let’s deal with them.” He didn’t medicate; he didn’t try to take advantage of her when she felt weak and vulnerable. They
slowed things down, they worked through their issues, and look how she responded:

On my bed by night
I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not.
I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves.
I sought him, but found him not.
The watchmen found me
as they went about in the city.
“Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”
Scarcely had I passed them
when I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him, and would not let him go
until I had brought him into my mother’s house,
and into the chamber of her who conceived me. (3:1–4)

Her desire for him continued to be kindled. She longed to be with him and dreamed of him. And then? She brought him home to meet Mom. “I … would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother’s house.”

Ideally, even for adult-aged couples living on their own, as the relationship becomes more serious, they should meet each other’s parents, if possible. In this stage of courtship, time with each other’s
parents has a greater seriousness. Mom and Dad are considering the inclusion of a new son or daughter to the family. When you marry someone, you are joining his or her family, so beginning to experience family life together becomes more important.

This is a necessary step in courtship, and it’s something that must be ongoing, assuming you don’t live so far away that it’s impossible. Time with family is also about more than getting to know each other. On the role of parents in courtship, John Thomas wrote:

[It’s] much more than just saying, “We bless this relationship.” It’s offering guidance, within proper boundaries, and modeling the kind of relationship you’d like to see your children experience. It’s helping them avoid the pitfalls you have experienced or seen others experience. It’s cheering them on and helping them gain confidence as they navigate new waters.

As for specifics, think about what you wish someone had asked you, now that you have the benefit of hindsight. Ask him some questions that get him thinking, like, “What is it about our daughter that attracts you to her? What are some of the qualities you admire most about her? What do you hope to accomplish or discover during the courtship season? What steps will you take to seek God’s guidance through this season? What are the things you are looking for to confirm that she is who you want to spend the rest of your life with? How will you be held accountable for purity during this season?”
His answers to those thought-provoking questions should give you a fairly good idea of his seriousness, and at the very least it will get him thinking about things that matter. And yes, you should make sure your daughter is on board, and that she too is being asked some of the same questions.\textsuperscript{3}

In courtship, a couple are moving more and more toward entering the covenant of marriage, even if they are not engaged yet. In a weird way, they are perhaps “engaged to be engaged.” In any event, the idea of marriage becomes a growing reality ahead of them, and because biblically speaking, marriage is a covenant between two people in the grace of God in Christ, it necessarily has the communal context of church and family. The reason Christians get married “before the church” is not to give a religious appearance to the ceremony but because Christians hold the marriage covenant in the context of the community of the body of Christ. Seeking the support and counsel of family is an extension of this.

I know this kind of family involvement can be difficult for all kinds of reasons, not the least of which may be because many young Christian couples come from non-Christian families. But as much as you are able, ground your marriage in the greater fabric of family life and legacy because it can strengthen your relationship, increase your wisdom, and enhance the sense that you are part of something greater than yourselves.

The church context is also important. A couple seeking to do married life apart from the teaching, discipleship, community, and
grace of a local church is making things much harder than they have to be. Yes, your relationship is yours. You are not going to be married to anyone but your future spouse. But your marriage does not exist in a vacuum. Because marriage is meant to reflect the great sacrificial and sanctifying love Christ has for his church, it makes sense to connect your married life to a local Christian congregation.

When a couple are making an effort to take these steps in courtship, they are making it more obvious that they are ready to enter the covenant of marriage.

DEALING (STILL) WITH GROWING SEXUAL DESIRE

After our gal has brought Solomon home to meet Mom, we come to this refrain: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases” (3:5).

Now, that sounds very familiar, doesn’t it? We’ve heard this before. Twice, as this relationship grew to another level, this young woman pleaded for things not to get overly physical.

We’re going to keep coming back to this because the reality of sexuality is all over the Song of Solomon. Some commentators have noted that the Song is primarily a manual to sexual intimacy. While their emphasis may be a little heavy, they aren’t necessarily misreading the sexual resonance throughout the entire song.

This recurring refrain—“do not awaken love until it pleases” (or “until it’s time”)—is a reminder that for our sexually interested couple, only the covenant of marriage will sanctify sexual consummation.
If you are in a growing romantic relationship, you should read this text as directly applicable to you. The woman is pleading with you. Don’t let your relationship get too physical.

When you remove the relational element of sex—even if you’re married—and sex becomes just physical, what you’ve done is undercut the ability to create and nurture genuine, legitimate intimacy. Sex becomes this weird pill you can take that makes you feel intimate with one another but actually facilitates the opposite of intimacy.

Have you ever wondered why every magazine in the grocery store checkout line has an article on sex that always has something to do with technique?

“Nine Ways to Be a Better Lover,” “Seven Spots She Wishes You Would Touch”—that kind of thing. Why are the magazines always pushing technique? Well, if you’re having sex with different men or women and it doesn’t bring you lasting joy or fulfillment, the only hope you have for intimacy and sexual fulfillment is to improve your technique. “And maybe, just maybe,” the magazines implicitly promise, “if you become a better lover, then this aching in your soul will go away. Maybe if you become a better lover, you’ll be satisfied.”

Incidentally, this is why porn is unbelievably devastating. It holds out an ever-increasing promise of satisfaction while simultaneously, gradually *removing* the ability to be intimate. Porn makes sex purely physical, and when it becomes purely physical, it loses the glory God has designed it to have. You lose that glory even in marriage when sex becomes purely about the physical act of intercourse, and you certainly forfeit this glory when you engage in sex outside of marriage. Sex outside of marriage is deliberate disobedience of God’s commands, which are for your good, and therefore it is a deliberate
forfeiture of your own spiritual well-being, as well as your own sexual well-being!

The repeated warning in Song of Solomon 3:5 is well-timed, because the good desire for physical intimacy will likely only grow as a couple approaches marriage. Even as a couple nears the commitment, the temptation can become greater to begin “bending” some rules, assuming that the intention to commit authorizes some things and blurs some lines. The pull toward physical intimacy will feel almost overpowering at the courtship stage, and the lie that “We are going to get married anyway” will be one that must be addressed and confessed often.

This temptation is one that anyone who has been married and spent a considerable time engaged is familiar with. Maybe they suppressed it, maybe they fought it, but it certainly came up. The longer the engagement lasts, or the closer the wedding day comes, the greater the temptation becomes. “Hey, we’re only two weeks out. What’s two weeks?” But this seemingly compelling logic is exactly what Solomon’s woman “adjures” (or “pleads with”) us to reject. She wouldn’t be pleading if the temptation was weak.

It’s important for us to understand that when the Bible says to “keep waiting,” it’s not trying to take anything from us. God’s not trying to rob you of an experience but rather lead you into a greater one, and the arguments of our culture are absurd. For instance:

“Well, how will you know if you’re sexually compatible?”

*Because I’m a man and she’s a woman.*

“How do you know that you’re going to work out well together?”
Well, we don’t! That’s the importance of the covenant of grace. We’ll figure it out. We are making the promise to figure it out with God’s help, whatever happens.

Before we make the vow before God, we don’t want to derail the good pleasure God has designed for us. We don’t want to get in his way. He’s leading us toward a greater reality than sexual gratification, wooing us into what will be best for our joy and for his glory.

So, please, don’t think that God is sexually repressed. Wait till we get to the fourth chapter of Solomon’s Song! We’ll cover that portion of the text more closely in the fifth chapter of this book, but there’s no way a reasonable person could read the Song of Solomon and come away thinking that God is a prude or that his Word is somehow embarrassed by sex.

The world is certainly not embarrassed by its sexual activity, even though it should be. God, who designed the act of sexual intercourse and wired us to be sexual beings, should absolutely not be. He has every right to explain all we need to know in his Word to find the kind of sexual satisfaction that will bring us joy and him glory. That kind of sexual satisfaction is reserved for a man and woman in the covenant of marriage as a recurring consummation and “ratifying” of their union. That is the godly, wise way to live out our sexuality.

But the biblical way of wisdom is not the way most of us live our lives. If you’re a single person reading this book, statistically speaking, you are not a virgin. It’s quite likely that you have, in the words of Solomon’s Song but contrary to its admonition, “awakened love before its time.”

Rules of behavior are not the only kind of wisdom God gives us in his Word, nor are they even the best kind, especially if 2 Corinthians
3:9 is to be believed. The gospel is better than the law, and for those who have engaged in sexual sin, there is much gospel to be had.

There are two stories in particular in the Bible that radically reorient how we see and understand who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Both stories involve sexually promiscuous women.

The first is about a woman caught in adultery. An angry, religious mob grabbed this poor, naked woman—leaving the man behind, for reasons probably having to do with misogyny and prejudice—and dragged her to the feet of Jesus, hoping to catch him in a tricky situation. They said to him, “The Law says that this woman caught in the act of adultery should be stoned to death. What do you say?”

Just imagine for a moment that God sent an angry mob after you when you engaged in sexual sin. Imagine the shame of being busted publicly in your sin, of being exposed spiritually and physically, of being dragged naked in front of a crowd of hateful people yelling at you and accusing you, taunting you, teasing you. Can you feel the fear? The vulnerability? Can you feel the hopelessness? The despair?

Imagine they have thrown you at the feet of a highly respected righteous man. And the law of the land is that the penalty for your sin is death.

The storm of emotion inside this woman must have been suffocating. Regret, fear, shame, desperation, shock—all at once.

The Bible, in John 8, says that Jesus bent down and started to draw with his finger in the dirt. I don’t know why, but I’ve always thought it’s the coolest thing ever. Nobody knows what he wrote in the ground, but after he doodled in the sand, Jesus stood and said, “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.”
From oldest to youngest, the accusers dropped their rocks and walked away. But that’s not the part that gets me. The part that gets me is when Jesus walked over to the woman, took her face in his hands, maybe wiped away all her tears and dirt and shame—and if there were any eyes she didn’t want to look into, they would be the eyes of Jesus, the most holy man who ever lived—and said to her, “Where are your accusers, woman? Has no one condemned you?”

She replied, “No one.”

And the holy king of Israel replied, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

After reading this, can you doubt there is abundant grace for the most ashamed of sinners?

In another encounter, Jesus was walking through Samaria when he stopped at Jacob’s well at noon. A woman approached the well, and what’s interesting is that this was not a common time of day for women to come to the well. Most came early in the morning or later in the evening to avoid the heat, but this woman came in the heat of midday. It is suspected by most scholars that she wanted to avoid people. Maybe she was carrying shame and didn’t want to deal with scolding looks and turned-up noses from other women.

In the dialogue that ensued between this woman and Jesus, he revealed that she was married multiple times and the man who she was living with at the time was not her husband. It appears to be kind of a “sex for rent” arrangement. Jesus began the conversation with the topic of worship, but through that, Jesus revealed to her the reality of his kingship. Part of this reality, part of the breaking in of God’s kingdom through him as Messiah, was the invitation he gave to her: “I want to give you water so that you’ll never thirst again” (see John 4).
We have to wrap our minds around the fact that this woman had been treated very cheaply, and as a result, she treated herself very cheaply. And then a Jewish man, who should have been the most judgmental toward her, offered her eternally satisfying refreshment.

I’ve been a pastor long enough to know the effects of sexual abuse. I know that women don’t become strippers or prostitutes because they aspired to these careers as little girls. It’s a long, dark road that leads women into circumstances like these. It is often the result of desperate choices made in the wake of abuse and oppression. They’ve been taken advantage of by people they trusted. Any woman who is trying to avoid prying eyes and mocking lips also has the opportunity to stand before the sinless Messiah, the one who will judge righteously. And Jesus’s response to her will not be, “Clean yourself up.” Or, “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

It will be, “I want to give you water so that you’ll never thirst again.”

To the woman at the well, Jesus was basically saying, “You are trying to quench your thirst with these men. This desperate thirst you have coming out of the emotional and spiritual desert of your life … I want to give you water that quenches that thirst forever.” Christ’s response to her was sorrowful, broken, tender, and redemptive.

So if you’re in a place of having been made to feel shameful, you should know there is good news. You don’t have to surrender to shame. You don’t have to be owned by regret. You don’t have to live forever under a dark cloud of guilt. The holy God of the universe who has condemned your sin and promised wrath for the unrepentant workers of disobedience offers you—freely, abundantly, mightily—total and absolute forgiveness, forever. To all who trust in
Jesus Christ for salvation, his righteousness becomes theirs, his holiness becomes theirs, his security in the Father becomes theirs. And if you are repentant and believe in him, his grace is yours.

Christ has brought about the redemption of our past and a recognition that he is able to make all things new. So what can happen right now, even as you read this book, is that by his grace you can lay down your sin, ask for his forgiveness, and walk away completely blameless (see Col. 1:22; Jude 1:24).

This is possible even if you’re in the midst of sexual sin right now. Maybe it is God’s will for you to be married, and your relationship has great potential for godliness, but it is marred by physical intimacy before its time. You can both repent.

Men, you should lead the way by apologizing to your woman, asking for her forgiveness and promising to pursue her heart in godly ways. It’s never too late to repent and start anew by God’s grace.

You must believe that God is not holding out on you, that he isn’t withholding sex from you to make you miserable. He has something greater in store for you. And if you as a couple can trust him together and believe in the wisdom of his Word and the godly counsel of his servants in the church, your relationship will go to better places than sexual intimacy can take you.

If you are willing to repent in this area and cling to the gospel with desperate abandon in order to honor each other and work toward each other’s sanctification, the day of marriage will be that much sweeter.