



THE SONG OF SONGS | A THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

February 1, 2026

We are currently in the midst of a five-week sermon series focused on the Song of Songs. As we've seen, the Song of Songs is intended to be read as the greatest of all love songs — the song to end all songs. The song which celebrates the passionate, mutual, and exclusive love between one man and one woman as they progress toward marriage.

But how should we read it? We said that there is no explicit reference to God in the Song of Songs, and yet it is part of the canon of Scripture, therefore we have to avoid two opposite errors. One would be to secularize the Song and assume that it has nothing to do with God at all. The other would be to overspiritualize the Song; we might be uncomfortable with the evocative or sensual language of the Song of Songs, and therefore conclude that the Song is nothing more than an allegory to describe God's love for his people. But both of these would be mistakes.

So how should we read this poetry? Well, first and foremost, we should read this as a celebration — a positive, joyful celebration of human love and sexuality within the context of marriage. That is the song's primary emphasis. But that primary emphasis does not exhaust its meaning, because there are multiple layers of meaning to the Song of Songs. Therefore, secondarily, we should read the Song as providing us with a glimpse of God's committed, covenantal love for his people. So here's the roadmap we've been following during this five-week series. Based on the Song, our goal has been to explore a theology of the body, a theology of desire, a theology of identity, a theology of marriage, and a theology of love. So today we focus on a theology of marriage.

I recognize that this is a delicate topic. There are many here in our midst today who are perhaps longing to be married, but it hasn't happened yet. Perhaps you worry if it ever will. Others have witnessed firsthand the devastation of divorce, whether your own divorce or perhaps the divorce of your parents. Some of us may be married, but we're struggling in our marriages, so our relationship is anything but healthy. What might have started out as a passionate love has perhaps been reduced to nothing more than cold coexistence. And then of course there are those who have enjoyed both the duties and the delights of marriage but then lost their spouse all too soon.

And then there may be some who have an aversion toward marriage. You may think of marriage as nothing more than a ball and chain. Who would want to be tied down, or who needs a piece of paper to prove that you actually love someone? You may fear that marriage destroys good relationships, or that marriage stands in the way of you being able to achieve your life's goals. So there's much that we need to contend with today, and therefore we approach this topic with both God's Truth and tenderness.

I would also suggest that the intensity of feelings around marriage points us to the importance of the subject. Marriage. Relationships. Love. These burn a pathway to the core of who we are as human beings. But let me also encourage you from the outset that if you follow the arc of this sermon, there is a word of hope and encouragement for all of us, regardless of our position or station in life right now.

Now, let me remind you that this love song does not follow a straightforward plot in chronological order. Rather the Song is constructed using a number of cycles, and sometimes we move forward and then backward in time. And yet, while that is true, nearly all commentators would agree that the section that we come to today represents the culmination of this young couple's budding relationship on their wedding night. Most would refer to this section of the Song as the wedding cycle.

Up until this point, our young lovers have been betrothed to one another, and that's a technical term. They've been betrothed to one another, not unlike Mary and Joseph when we first meet them in the Gospels. Now, betrothal in the ancient world was much more serious, much more binding than even an engagement today. It might be relatively rare, but under some circumstances engagements can be broken off; not so with a betrothal. A betrothal could only end in a divorce, as even Joseph suggests in the Gospels when he first learns of Mary's conception of Jesus. A betrothal was a serious thing. There was no turning back, because everything had already been arranged. The dowry price had been paid. All that was left to do was to celebrate the wedding itself.

Now when we come to chapter 4 of the Song of Songs, the day has finally arrived. This is the first time (and in fact the only time in the Song of Songs) when the young woman is referred to as a bride, and though she once warned us (and in fact was cautioning herself) against stirring up or awakening love until it pleased, now is the time for love's fulfillment. What had previously been held back is now given full expression. So whereas before she said not to awaken love until it pleases, now the young man — or perhaps, I think, the young woman — sings in chapter 4, verse 16, "Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its spices flow." And our lovers in this section of the Song will use the image of a garden to reflect the consummation of their marriage.

So today, as we explore Song of Songs 4:9-5:1, I'd like us to consider what this section of the Song tells us about: 1) *the model of marriage*, 2) *the mystery of marriage*, and 3) *the meaning of marriage*.

Lover

4⁹You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride;
you have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.

¹⁰How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much better is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!

¹¹Your lips drip nectar, my bride;
honey and milk are under your tongue;
the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

¹²A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a spring locked, a fountain sealed.

¹³Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates
with all choicest fruits,
henna with nard,

¹⁴nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
with all trees of frankincense,
myrrh and aloes,
with all choice spices—

¹⁵a garden fountain, a well of living water,
and flowing streams from Lebanon.

¹⁶Awake, O north wind,
and come, O south wind!
Blow upon my garden,
let its spices flow.

Beloved

Let my beloved come to his garden,
and eat its choicest fruits.

Lover

⁵ I came to my garden, my sister, my bride,
I gathered my myrrh with my spice,
I ate my honeycomb with my honey,
I drank my wine with my milk.

Chorus

Eat, friends, drink,
and be drunk with love!

Song of Songs 4:9-5:1

The Model of Marriage

First, let's consider what the Song tells us about the model of marriage, meaning God's model and design for marriage. At the beginning of this section, the young man describes how he is smitten with love. Verse 9 says, "You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride; you have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes." And then he goes on to describe his beloved as a secret garden. A garden locked. A spring locked. A fountain sealed. You could picture a private walled garden, like a king might build within the confines of his palace, reserved for special guests. Or perhaps to bring it a little closer to home, you could think of Gramercy Park, a gated park that you can only enter if you happen to own one of the keys.

The first thing to note here is that this garden is filled with all kinds of choice fruits, exotic spices, and fragrant perfumes from an incredibly wide range of not only different climates but different continents — so varied that no actual horticulturalist would be able to sustain all of these plants in just one place. Therefore, from the very start, we're being told that this garden is meant to represent something else. This luxurious garden, supported by its own well flowing with streams of water, is meant to provide us with a visual image of God's model and design for marriage.

It's almost as if we're back in the Garden of Eden where the very first marriage took place. In Genesis 2, we read that God presents the first woman to the first man, and then the narrator of Genesis concludes, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." So Genesis 2 defines marriage as a permanent and exclusive covenant between one man and one woman in the eyes of God.

Now the words here in this verse bear out this truth. The word "leave" points to the exclusivity of the relationship. "A man shall *leave* his father and his mother." Literally that word could be translated "forsake." When you marry someone, you forsake all others. So it's exclusive. But not only that, it's a permanent relationship. And that's born out by the word "cleave," because the word "cleave" is a covenantal word. It means to hold fast, to cling, to bind yourself to another forever. So the marriage design from God's point of view is a permanent and exclusive covenant.

Likewise, here in the Song, there's only one man and one woman. The garden is exclusive. It's private, and it remains locked until she invites him to enter. Then the garden becomes their mutual possession. Notice how many times the word "my" is used. "I came to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gathered my myrrh with my spice, I ate my honeycomb with my honey, I drank my wine with my milk." There's not a hint of inhibition or prudishness here. Desire is mutual, consent is explicit, and sexual intimacy is celebrated without shame or apology.

Therefore this model, the biblical model of marriage, strongly calls into question both ancient and modern distortions of marriage. We could think of the ancient distortion of marriage as power without consent, and we might think of the modern distortion of marriage as emotion without covenant. But you see, the biblical model for marriage calls both of those distortions into question.

First, it challenges the ancient distortion, power without consent, which *is* ancient, but of course it continues with us today. In his book "Dominion," the English author Tom Holland writes that in ancient Rome, sex was tied up entirely with power. So Roman women were expected to pursue chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage, but not so Roman men. No, Roman men were free to exploit whoever they wanted to without consequence. The body of a free-born Roman man was considered sacrosanct — off limits. You couldn't touch it. But *he* could have sex whenever he wanted, however he wanted, with whomever he wanted — young, old, male, female, slave, free — without any repercussions or damage to his honor. Of course that wouldn't be the case if things were flipped around the other way.

But the sexual ethic that is espoused in the Song of Songs and in the book of Genesis, and which is then picked up and reaffirmed first by Jesus and then by the Apostle Paul, absolutely denounces any form of chauvinistic, male-dominated, or sexist views. In fact Tom Holland argues that the Bible introduces the very concept of mutual consent and mutual belonging into the world. Notice the invitation that this young woman extends in verse 16, “Let my beloved come to his garden.” And so it’s no wonder that women in the ancient world flocked to embrace Christianity in far greater numbers than men in the early centuries of the Church, because within Christianity, women discovered a newfound dignity.

See, Christianity not only purified the marriage bed; Christianity equalized the marriage bed. Christianity didn’t repress sex; it redeemed sex. Christianity got rid of all the double standards, because now men were commanded to be just as faithful as their wives, and therefore an ethic of mutual respect, mutual belonging, and mutual self-giving explodes upon the scene in the first century and completely overturns the domination and control that had preceded it.

So the biblical model calls into question this ancient distortion of marriage as power without consent, but it also challenges a modern distortion of marriage as emotion without covenant. We’ve reached a point in society, I believe, where there is almost no consensus on marriage and there is considerable confusion about how we should think about this relationship. You could say that in the past there was considerable overlap between the way in which the secular state might define marriage and how the Christian Church might define marriage. But over time, that overlap has begun to dissolve.

Now, the secular state can define marriage however it wants. That’s the job of the state. And so today the state might define marriage in a certain way, but it doesn’t necessarily line up with the way in which the Christian Church has defined it. So just because the state recognizes a relationship as a marriage doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s biblical or that it’s Christian. Therefore we need to be careful to define our terms.

So what we could call the modern revisionist understanding of marriage defines marriage essentially as an emotional bond. It is distinguished from other relationships for being especially intense. So under this modern revisionist understanding of marriage, your spouse is essentially your go-to emotional person — your number one person. It could be a man, it could be a woman, it doesn’t really matter. Sexual intimacy may enhance the bond between you, but ultimately the relationship is centered on personal fulfillment. For that reason, the relationship often lasts only as long as the feelings do. More likely than not, the relationship ends when one person, or perhaps both, say to one another, “I just don’t love you anymore.”

The first problem with this revisionist definition of marriage is that it doesn’t adequately distinguish between marriage on the one hand and companionship on the other. Of course, spouses should be good friends. Your spouse should be, or at least have the potential to become, your best friend. After all, Song of Songs 5:16 declares, “This is my beloved and this is my friend.” And in fact, that is the verse that my wife, Ashley, and I have inscribed on our wedding bands. “This is my beloved and this is

my friend.” So spouses should be good friends, but the point is that what it takes to be a good friend is not the same as what it takes to be a good spouse. To be a good spouse requires something more.

The other problem is that this definition of marriage doesn't really explain why marriage should be limited to just two people. Why is it exclusive? Why couldn't it include three or four people? And increasingly, I think, as we move deeper into the 21st century, there may be more people making a case for that. “Yes, there's no reason for marriage to be limited to just two people.” But let me suggest that there are important differences between friendship on the one hand and marriage on the other. If you widen the circle of friendship, that's a good thing, because it actually deepens the bond among all those involved. But marriage doesn't work that way. If you widen marriage, you destroy it. So why is that? I think it has to do with what marriage is at its core, from the standpoint of the Scriptures.

The Christian definition of marriage is not less than an emotional bond, but it is far more. It's a comprehensive union with another. In marriage, two opposite but complimentary people — a man and a woman — come together and they form, in the words of Genesis, “one flesh.” Now when we talk about becoming one flesh in marriage, the Bible is not suggesting that we lose our individual identity. That wouldn't be possible or desirable. The point is that this comprehensive union of two lives is so profound that we can say that in a very real sense, two distinct people have become one.

But notice how striking this is that the Bible does not define this comprehensive union as being a union of one heart or one mind or one soul, but one flesh. One body. And so that points to the fact that within this union, we don't merely see the coming together of two bodies in a general way, like holding hands or exchanging hugs. Think about it. The human body possesses one and only one organ that is specifically designed for a complement. When these two opposite but equal bodies come together, it not only unifies two lives but it creates the possibility of new life.

This is the only human relationship that actually carries the possibility of generating new life. It's almost as if the man has the right lung and the woman has the left lung, and they have to come together in order to take a single breath. Or it's as if the man has the left side of the heart and the woman has the right side of the heart and they have to come together in order to form a single beat. The point is that the exclusivity of marriage from a Christian standpoint is not arbitrary, but it's rooted in the fact that two and only two equal but opposite complementary bodies come together in this particular way.

Now some of you might feel like you've just stepped into a time machine, right? Have we stepped back into the 1800s? Well let me suggest that as much as our culture might mock some of the things I just said, I think we need the ancient wisdom of the Bible, because a permanent and exclusive covenant is actually not foreign to romantic passion. Just think about our love songs. All of the greatest love songs that have ever been written yearn for permanence. We say, “I'll love you forever. I'll love you till I die. I'll love you till the sun refuses to shine.” And we can't help but make exclusive promises. “You're the only one I'll ever love. If it's not you, it's not anyone.” You see,

it is in the very nature of love to make permanent and exclusive promises. We're not forcing something on love that doesn't belong. It's inherent. It's intrinsic to it.

Consider these words of a young woman from Brooklyn who wrote an award-winning essay that she submitted to the "Modern Love" column in the New York Times a few years ago. She writes,

When my friends and I started having a conversation about the nature of monogamy, I thought I knew something about monogamy. Because, despite the fleeting nature of most of my encounters, and despite my own role in their short duration, I think what I have been seeking in some form from all of these men is permanence. Sometimes I don't like them, or am scared of them, and a lot of times I'm just bored by them. But my fear or dislike or boredom never seems to diminish my underlying desire for a guy to stay, or at least to say he is going to stay, for a very long time. And even when I don't want him to stay — even when he and I find each other as strangers and remain strangers until we stop doing whatever it is we are doing — I still want to believe that two people can meet and like each other well enough to stay together exclusively, without the introduction of some 1960s rhetoric about free love or other noncommittal slogans. But noncommittal is what we're all about.

The Mystery of Marriage

So the biblical model of marriage is a permanent and exclusive covenant between one man and one woman before God. But let me turn from the model of marriage to the mystery of marriage. Earlier I said that we should read this song first and foremost as a positive, joyful celebration of human love and human sexuality within the context of marriage. But that does not exhaust its meaning, because there is a secondary meaning. This song is intended to provide us with a glimpse of God's love for his people.

In the fifth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul speaks at considerable length about marriage, but then after all he has to say, he concludes by saying "This is a great mystery." Marriage is a great mystery. And if you've ever been married, you would agree. "This is a great mystery," but then he goes on to say, "but I'm talking about Christ in the Church." Now, in the Bible, a mystery is not an unsolvable riddle. The word "mystery" means a hidden truth that cannot be known until it is revealed. And so what is the secret of marriage? What is the mystery that has now been revealed? The mystery, Paul explains, is that marriage is not ultimately about our relationships here on earth with each other. No, ultimately it's about Christ and his commitment to his bride, the Church. The permanent and exclusive covenant of marriage is meant to be a symbol of the relationship between Jesus and us as his bride, the Church.

All through the Old Testament, the prophets speak of God's relationship to his people like a marriage covenant. It's a relationship of mutual love based on promises. And that's why when people break this covenant, it is likened to committing spiritual adultery against God. So have you noticed that in the Bible, sometimes God is described as being jealous? That might strike us at first as being unbecoming of God. Wouldn't we think that envy and jealousy are vices? How could God possibly be jealous?

But there's at least one relationship where a kind of holy jealousy is entirely appropriate, and that's marriage. It's appropriate to be jealous for your spouse. And so when the Bible says that God is jealous, it shows us that he desires our exclusive devotion. That's what he wants from us. And it breaks his heart when we give ourselves to other lovers, either by dabbling in other religions or other forms of spirituality, or by chasing after other gods. When we pursue money, sex, power, status, comfort, control, autonomy, wealth, status, you name it as the ultimate source of our significance and our security — the ultimate source of our value and our safety — we are effectively cheating on God.

And what makes it worse is that he knows that none of these other rivals for our hearts will ever love us like he does. They're not just false gods, but they are false lovers. They take and they take and they take, but they can never love us in return. Your job will never love you in return. Your grades will never love you in return. Your money will never love you in return. And yet we give ourselves to them over and over and over again. But you see, the wonder of it all is that despite our fickle hearts and our unfaithfulness, God wants us back. And that's the whole story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation: God wants us back.

The most striking example of this comes in the book of Hosea. God calls a prophet named Hosea, and he tells him a rather strange thing. He tells him, I want you to go and marry a woman named Gomer, but I'm going to tell you in advance, she's going to be unfaithful. She's going to cheat on you. She's going to break your heart. But I want you to marry her anyway. And then after all this happens, I want you to take her back and bring her home. Because your relationship with Gomer is meant to be a symbol of my relationship to my people. And despite the ways in which they have broken my heart, I refuse to give up on them, and I'll stop at nothing to win them back and bring them home.

Even though, therefore, we have disgraced God and ourselves by falling into the arms of false lovers, he promises to forgive and restore us. No matter who we are, no matter what we've done, no matter how guilty or shameful we feel, no matter what has happened to us, he wants to take us back and bring us home. And so Hosea 2:19-20 may be some of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture. God says through the prophet Hosea, "And I will *betroth* you to me forever." There's that word again. "I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord."

And this promise is fulfilled in Christ. This is what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 5. He recognizes that Jesus is the faithful bridegroom. And so Paul explains beginning in verse 25, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

Jesus loves his bride, the Church so much that he was willing to give himself up for us in order to remove our guilt by forgiving our sin and to cover our shame by bringing us back home. And if we are only willing, he promises to both cleanse us and restore us. He will cleanse us by the washing of water with the Word. He will wash us with his very own Word, so that he might present us to himself in splendor without a single spot —

without even a wrinkle or any such thing. When he finishes the work that he will do in us by his Spirit, he will present us to himself as holy and without a single blemish.

The Meaning of Marriage

Very quickly, if that's all true, then what does this mean? Revelation 19 provides us with God's vision for the ultimate future. And how do you think the story of human history would come to an end? How do you think the story of the Bible would come to an end? It doesn't end with an explosion. It doesn't end with the sun dissolving into the sea. Rather, it ends with a wedding. What we see here is that human history ends with the marriage supper of the Lamb. John writes,

⁶Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

“Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.

⁷Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;

⁸it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure”—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

⁹And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”

See, this is where it's all headed. This is the culmination of human history. This is the conclusion to the Bible. This is where we're headed. “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”

So what does this mean for us? Well, if you are not yet a Christian, what I want you to hear is that in and through the gospel, you are being offered a love that will never use you and a love that will never abandon you, because he's made a covenant with you. Perhaps now you can begin to see, maybe for the first time, that you've been chasing after false forms of love that can never satisfy, whereas what you've always needed has been right here the whole time. “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” The invitations are already going out. This is my invitation to you now. All that's left is for you to respond. Now is the time for you to send in the RSVP.

But if you are a Christian, then I would suggest that this whole narrative answers the question of where true identity can be found. See, it doesn't matter if you're single or married or divorced or widowed. It doesn't matter if you're sexually experienced or not. If you are in Christ, if you have been united to Jesus by faith, if you are part of his Church, then you already know who you are according to the storyline of the gospel. You are, right now, in this moment, the betrothed. All that we are waiting for now is the final wedding day.

And that shows us, first of all, that the human body, human desire, human attraction, marriage, sex, these are all good things, but they're not ultimate things. From the very beginning they were always meant to point beyond themselves to something greater. And that shows us that our culture has it all backwards. Because our culture says that sex is necessary, but our bodies are optional. Our culture says that sex is essential — you have to have sex in order to truly live, in order to truly be alive — but our biological bodies are of secondary importance. They don't matter. They're optional.

But the Bible will have none of it. Because on the one hand, the Bible affirms our bodies as good. Jesus not only assumed a human body but a male body with a Y chromosome, which shows that our bodies and our gender are good gifts of God. They're given to us by his grace. But there's more to it than that, because Jesus is also the most fully human being who has ever lived. Jesus sets the standard. He defines for us what it means to be fully, truly human. And Jesus remained single and celibate his entire life, which shows that even if you never marry, even if you never have sex, it doesn't mean that you are less than. No, in Jesus, you bear his image. You are complete. You are whole. You are fully human in him.

But what I want to impress upon you is that regardless of your marital or your sexual status, all of us who are in Christ are in the exact same position. From the Bible's point of view, we are all the betrothed. The church is the only institution in the world that can bring people together — single, married, divorced, widowed — into one community as equals. Because it's not about us or how we've lived or what we've done or haven't done. It's all about what Jesus has done for us by his grace and the work that he will finish, because we're betrothed.

We've reached the point of no return. Everything's been arranged. Nothing more needs to be done. The ultimate price has been paid through the finished work of Christ on our behalf, and therefore, regardless of our particular vocation, age, or stage of life, we're called to be faithful to our groom as we await that great wedding feast. And we're faithful to him by honoring marriage without idolizing it. By affirming and embracing desire without allowing it to rule over us. And by letting every love in this life train and shape us for the greater love that we were made for. And so we celebrate the fact that Jesus not only made a covenant with us, he not only promised us with words, but he actually gave his life for us so that he might bind us to himself permanently and exclusively. Therefore let us receive the invitation as we await the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Let me pray for us.

Father God, we thank you that through the Song of Songs you have provided us with a biblical model for marriage, which calls into question both ancient and modern distortions of it. You've pointed us to the mystery of marriage. That marriage, as good as it is, is not an end in itself, but rather a symbol pointing beyond itself to something greater — your permanent and exclusive commitment to us. And therefore, regardless of who we are or where we might be coming from today, help us to see ourselves as the betrothed. We all share the same identity and status in your eyes once we receive your invitation, and therefore we are washed and waiting for the marriage supper of the Lamb. Help us in the meantime to be faithful. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.