



*"As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you." ~Isaiah 62:5*

A study in the greatest love song of all time.

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When I was growing up kids were made to sit in church with their parents on Sunday mornings. We had Sunday School hour and then church. Period. And I grew up in the “kids should be seen and not heard” era—*especially* in church! If I fidgeted so much as a twitch Mrs. Edelblute would stare me down like a bull would size up a matador. More than once I was rapped on the back of the head by some church lady unfortunate enough to sit behind me.

So, what does a bored 11-year-old boy do in church? The pew was solid oak, the sermon long, and my tie (Yes, I had to wear one of those fake ties that clipped onto my collar.) choked off the circulation to my brain. Back then, before the invention of the Gameboy, young guys like me dug through the pew Bible to find the Song of Solomon. If you think the language is graphic in your NIV, try reading it in the King James! It seemed hard to believe that such things would be found in the Bible, yet there they were! My middle-school eyes found it all fascinating. Something about it made me feel like I was breaking the rules. I felt mischievous!

Sadly, this is all that most people get from this wonderful book. Like many, you might find it hard to believe that such a book would be included in the Bible. It never mentions God and it is salacious, dripping with language that makes you blush. Its inclusion into holy scripture must have been some sort of mistake, right? Perhaps some lonely monk in the middle-ages thought it would be funny and somehow it stuck? Wrong.

Over the years people have struggled to figure out the reason why Song of Songs is in the Bible. Through the centuries three main approaches have developed as people and scholars grappled with its contents:

#1. Some see it as the culmination of Solomon’s wisdom literature. King Solomon is considered to be the wisest person who ever lived and there are three books attributed to him: *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes* and *Song of Songs*. In Proverbs we discover the practical value of wisdom as it is applied to our everyday lives. In Ecclesiastes we learn the supremacy of wisdom over all else in life. And in Song of Songs, we find wisdom about the one thing that affects all of us...love. Our greatest highs and our greatest lows typically rise and fall based on receiving or not receiving love. It is fitting then that Solomon’s greatest wisdom is offered to us on this subject.

#2. Others see it as a great example of ancient Hebrew love poetry. There are many examples from the ancient world of non-Hebrew love poetry and, let me tell you, they make your face flush! If you’re married and want to turn the heat up tonight try reading the songs of an Egyptian poet named Nakhtsobek...spicy! Our Song of Songs is tame by comparison. While Hebrew love poetry feels awkward, it stands in contrast to its secular counterparts in that it celebrates fidelity in marriage. This makes it stand superior over the other samples that have been discovered. Many preachers approach it this way and use it as a primer for marriage. There are certainly many great lessons that can be drawn from it and applied directly to married folks.

#3. Lastly, the book has been viewed allegorically. In ancient Israel scholars often interpreted it this way, believing that it represented the relationship between God and the people of Israel. Since the coming of Christ many have continued this line of thinking with the exception that we now see it as depicting the relationship between Christ and the Church.

Which approach is correct? This will be for you to decide! In our brief study we will explore all three approaches in the order that has just been outlined. By the time we finish you may decide that you like all three approaches! Honestly, it is my prayer that you discover the rich joy that is offered to you in this book. It is the Word of God and it is timely for people living in our present culture.

When we capture the overwhelming tsunami-like love that Jesus has for us the feeble (and often fickle) praises of men will come to mean nothing to us. The title of this book is taken from its very first line which reads in Hebrew, “Sir hassirim, sir lislomoh”. It literally means, “Song of ALL Songs, of Solomon”. We see similar language sprinkled throughout the Bible. Jesus is called “The King of Kings” and “The Lord of Lords.” The inner sanctum of the Temple is called the “Holy of Holies.” Solomon called this song, “The Song of Songs.” It’s a Hebrew way of saying, “This is the greatest of all songs”! John Wesley called it, “The most excellent of all songs.” And hey, why not? Who doesn’t love a good love song? Even the toughest guy softens up at the sound of the right tune. The right song melts machismo like an ice cube on a hot sidewalk in the sun. There is nothing like a smooth love song to set the mood and melt the heart. So, if you think about it, it is fitting that God would place such a song in the middle of the Bible. After all, He is the original Lover!

This is not a hard book to read but it is a hard book from which to get any kind of devotional benefit. If you have read it before you probably have not tried to memorize any verses from it. It is not very quotable. As a piece of poetry we cannot read it literally. It is loaded with ancient imagery which makes it hard for us to relate to it. We do not talk to each other this way anymore. I love my wife dearly and I have written her a lot of cards and love letters. I have never, and I mean *never*, likened her to a “*mare harnessed to one of Pharaoh’s chariots.*” (1:9) A comment like that would ruin any hopes I could ever have for romance again! Yet there it is in the Bible. The Lover of Solomon’s song compares his darling to one of Pharaoh’s horses. How do you possibly translate that into our modern context and learn anything from it?! This is the challenge that is set before us!

Because this is poetry the reader needs to constantly ask about the meaning of the imagery. Take the example that I just mentioned. Obviously, the Lover is not saying that his special love is a horse. However, can you imagine how beautifully adorned Pharaoh’s royal steeds would have been? They would glisten with gold buckles probably studded with diamonds and other jewels and were draped in the finest red and purple cloth. They would have been perfectly groomed. There would have been a beauty and a majesty in their stately stride. Comparing his beloved to one of these expensive, exotic and majestic creatures was a way of saying, “Baby, you are F-I-N-E, fine!” While this might not move modern women, for an ancient woman it was velvety smooth talk. This Lover of Song of Songs was suave!

In my study, I came across the Passion Translation of Song of Songs written by Brian Simmons. He has taken the original Hebrew text and rather than translate it literally he and a team of scholars have taken the figurative meaning of the imagery and translated it into English. He also provides many helpful comments about the actual Hebrew words used in the original poem. Because this translation has impacted me so profoundly our Elders and Servant Team approved the purchase of 65 copies for people in New River Church to enjoy. I believe you will find that it benefits your study too.

By far the most meaningful part of this study is to learn how Jesus truly feels about you. He really likes you! I mean He is really, REALLY into you! The two main characters of this love poem are the Beloved and the Lover. They are also called the Shulamite and The Shepherd-King. The Lover is Jesus and you are the Beloved. A quick read through the poem and you hear the way Jesus gushes over you. He is such a romantic! He says to you, “*You have stolen My heart, with one glance of your eyes.*” (4:9) Did you ever think Jesus Christ feels this way about you?! He clearly does and it’s recorded in the Bible to prove it!

One quick word to the men: It is a stretch for us to picture ourselves as a bride. I mean let’s face it. As I write this it is noon and I haven’t even brushed my teeth yet. I’m in old sweat pants and a flannel shirt. I’m only a few steps above a troglodyte in the evolutionary chain. I don’t feel very bride-like! I pride myself in being a man so I recoil at any attempts to feminize me. Yet even for me, with unbrushed teeth and whiskers, Jesus

has a way of loving me that melts me. Men, if you will lay down your club, stop dragging your knuckles and give yourself a little slack, Jesus will speak to you through this book. You do not have to stop being a man to allow Jesus to love you. He can meet you in whatever cave you find yourself. And heck, who knows? You might even learn a thing or two from Jesus about how to love your own girl! Please stick with us men. There's stuff in here for you too.

Three of the most helpful things you can do to get the most from this study are:

- 1) Read each chapter of this journal in preparation for our Sunday celebrations and interact with the questions.
- 2) Join a Life Group so you can benefit from some Christian friends.
- 3) Connect with a discipleship partner each week to discuss your responses to the questions in the journal.

Christianity is a team sport. We were not meant to go it alone! We need you and you need us. So, let's do this together.

Here is the outline for our time together:

"The Song of ALL Songs"

June 4- The Zenith of Wisdom



In this lesson we will follow approach #1 and study the book as the culmination of Solomon's wisdom; it is Solomon's magnum opus.

June 11- The Secret of Attraction

June 18- The Power of Clarity

June 25- The Power of Resolving Conflict

July 2- The Power of Devotion



In these lessons we will follow approach #2 and study the book as an example of Hebrew love poetry. We will learn great principles that apply directly to our own relationships.

July 9- The Cry for Deliverance & Assurance

July 16- When Deliverance gets hard

July 23- Give me the Deliverer!

July 30- Reigning with the Deliverer

August 6- Epilogue: You are Wanted



In these lessons we will follow approach #3 and study the book as an allegory of the relationship between Jesus and the Church. This will rock your world! You've never seen Jesus like this before!

Week 1: THE ZENITH OF WISDOM

“Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice?” Proverbs 8:1

Before we dig in, let’s agree that from here on out we will just refer to “The Song of All Songs” as simply “*The Song*.” It will help our journal to flow smoother and save my fingers a few extra keystrokes!

Our first stop in *The Song* will be to study it as the culmination of Solomonite literature. Many scholars view this book as Solomon’s magnum opus, the capstone of everything that he knew about wisdom. This is odd considering that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines which brings his “wisdom” into serious question! *The Song* itself is a love poem about monogamous marriage. Unless Solomon is teaching from the book of “lessons I should have followed, but didn’t”, it seems strange that a poem like this would come from a man like him. What does all of this mean and why should we care? Great questions!

When you want to listen to your favorite jam you can just tap your phone or search for it in Spotify or some other app. In 1000 BC, how did people listen to their favorite songs? If you were an ordinary person you only listened to music at parties where your Uncle Larry pulled out his lyre, your Aunt Betty whipped out her harp or your cousin Eddy fired up a few cymbals. Then you could dance and have a good time. However, if you were a rich king like Solomon you employed court musicians whose full-time job was to play music for you.

Try to picture it: The evening is just right. Solomon and his lady are in the mood for love. They settle in, get comfortable and with a few claps of their hands they call the court musicians into their palace. Now, you and your honey probably have a favorite song. Karis and I dated in the 80’s so for us there’s nothing like a good Bon Jovi “*Never say good-bye*” to set the mood. Solomon and his girl had a favorite tune too. Look at the first line of *The Song*. It says, “*Solomon’s Song of Songs*.” In other words, when Solomon clapped his royal hands and asked the musicians to play him a tune this is the song that he requested the most. And that’s saying something because according to *1 Kings 4:32*, he wrote 1,005 songs! Besides this one, the Bible also includes two other songs written by Solomon, *Psalms 72* and *Psalms 127*. However, as good as those are, THIS one was his favorite!

Why do we need to know that Solomon likes this song? Open up your Bible and take a look at where the song is located. (Go ahead, I’ll give you time...) You’ll notice that at the very center of your Bible there are five books: ***Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs***. These five books are often called “The Books of Wisdom”. So, what is taught at the heart of the Bible? Wisdom. And what do we reach for when looking for answers about injustice, brokenness and suffering in the world? Wisdom. When our kids are fighting, the dog’s fleas have invaded the couch, the cable bill is more than we expected, the boss is a jerk and we are struggling to find solutions, what do we wish we had more of? Wisdom!

Isn’t it cool how God placed wisdom in the heart of the Bible so that in our moments of questioning it would be easy to find? In *James 1:5* anyone who lacks wisdom is encouraged to simply ask God for it because He gives it liberally to anyone who asks. God is good like that!

In these five books of wisdom we find answers to the biggest questions that life throws at us:

In *Job* we learn about suffering and get answers to “Why bad things happen to good people.”

(The answer is, “We don’t know why, but we can know God and He can satisfy us in the questioning.”)

In *Psalms* we learn about worship and get answers to “How do I engage/interact with God?”

(The answer is, “We worship with all our heart and soul.”)

In Proverbs we learn about wisdom and get answers to, “How do I live life well?”

(The answer is, “By living it in the fear of the Lord.”)

In Ecclesiastes we learn about purpose and get the answer to, “Why am I here?”

(The answer is, “To honor God.”)

Lastly, in *The Song* we learn about love and get the answer to, “What is the meaning of love?”

(The answer is, “Love is a gift from God and when expressed as He intended, it is life-giving.”)

Now, three of these five wisdom books are attributed to Solomon: ***Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs***. And notice which book finishes the books of wisdom in the Bible: *The Song*! So, the last three books of wisdom were written by Solomon and the last book is Solomon’s favorite song. Many scholars see this order as significant. *The Song* is last because it is the zenith of Solomon’s wisdom. It is his favorite song because of everything that he wrote this one communicates the heart of God better than all the others. How does one capture the love of God and the wisdom of God about love? Solomon writes a song depicting love in such a way that we can feel it and soak it in. *The Song* is meant to impact us and to change something inside of us. It is meant to change the way we receive love, are in love and do love. This makes sense because if there is one thing that affects every human in any era, it is love. Love can make our lives worth living or make our lives a living hell. Solomon has poured his absolute best into this song so that we might gain the most from it.

This is a great way to look at it. However, there is another way to look at this and it is more interesting in my opinion. In our English Bibles, the order of these wisdom books is as mentioned (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, & The Song*). However, in the Hebrew Tanakh (their Bible) these books are in a different order. In their version, *The Song* comes after *Proverbs* and *Ruth*. So, their order is: *Proverbs, Ruth, and The Song*. This is cool because when you think about it, *Proverbs* is a general collection of wisdom sayings. And, if you recall, *Proverbs* 31 ends with the description of a virtuous woman. This is immediately followed with *Ruth* and *The Song* which are both stories about wise women who not only impressed their men but also left a gigantic mark on history.

Is this coincidence? I don’t think so! *Ruth* is a story of non-romantic love. She was a Moabite widow who devoted herself to caring for her depressed mother-in-law. (Seriously, if you read it, Naomi was a wreck! Ruth’s love for her was truly amazing.) Through her undaunting devotion (aka. “love”) Ruth pulled her mother-in-law out of the doldrums, became the wife of one of the richest guys in the region and became the great grandmother to King David! Hers is a true rags-to-riches story and it serves as an inspirational example of love that defies the odds.

The Song tells the story of romantic love about a peasant woman who is simply called “The Shulamite”. She is a virtuous woman who wins the heart of King Solomon. She is chaste and she is beautiful in character as well as in form.

This is why the 11-year-old me who sat google-eyed in church giggling over the graphic language missed the meaning of this book. It is why so many church people who only think of this as biblical erotica and hide it from their kids have also totally miss the point. It is like the devil knows the power of this song and he has twisted it in our minds so that we continue stumbling over it. The culture in which this was written obviously did not feel as squeamish about body parts or the consummation of marriage as we do. But my friends, there is a way to read this that will draw you into the heart of God and it will change your life!

As you may know Solomon is considered to have been the wisest king who ever lived. His name is almost synonymous with “wisdom”. He is practically the poster child for all things wise. The three books attributed to him rank as some of the best examples of ancient wisdom literature that the world has ever known.

To fully appreciate his wisdom writings, we need to compare/contrast them with other non-biblical examples of ancient wisdom literature. The primary difference between the wisdom of the Bible and the wisdom writings of other ancient sages is that biblical wisdom is rooted in the fear of God. Hammurabi and Zimri-Lim were both contemporaries of Solomon. A quick comparison of something Hammurabi said helps us to see the difference. He wrote, “I am old, so give me your peace. Wisdom comes with age.” This is in stark contrast to Solomon’s writing where he makes it solidly clear that *“the fear of the Lord is the foundation of wisdom.”* (Proverbs 1:7) Yes, he also said, *“Grey hair is a crown of splendor”* (Proverbs 16:31) but genuine wisdom comes from a pursuit of God.

For Solomon and the other biblical writers people are not the source of wisdom, God is. As a young and newly anointed king, Solomon was deeply impacted by the daunting task before him. In 2 Chronicles 1:10, God appeared to him and offered him an answer to any prayer. In response, Solomon prayed, *“Grant me wisdom and knowledge so that I may lead this people...”* What we find in Solomon’s writings are lessons from Solomon’s own mistakes and successes. Much of this wisdom was birthed out of his own experience in depending on God as he led the nation of Israel.

Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 1:13, *“I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men!”* We will explain the heavy burden part in a moment but notice that Solomon pursued wisdom and devoted himself to learning. What we have in his three books is the journal of all that he learned.

Dr. Tim Mackie and the biblical researchers at Bible Project point to strong overtones of the Garden of Eden in much of Solomon’s wisdom writings. If you recall, the Bible begins in Genesis and the account of God’s creation of the world. God created the Garden of Eden and then placed Adam and Eve in it. They were to work it and enjoy it in perfect union with Himself, each other and the world around them.

In these first pages of the Bible, we learn that God’s wisdom has boundaries. The man and woman were free to eat from any tree in the Garden, except one. This is wisdom. Every blessing in life can be fully enjoyed within its proper boundary. Removed from its boundary that blessing becomes a curse. For example, would you stack up a pile of wood and light it on fire in the middle of your living room? No. But if you had a fireplace you could enjoy a crackling fire. A fireplace provides a boundary for the heat, light and warmth of the fire to be enjoyed. Violating the boundary would burn your house down! This is wisdom. Kept within its boundary a fire is useful. Removed from its boundary a fire becomes destructive. Wisdom is understanding truth and then properly applying it within the boundaries set by God. When Adam and Eve committed the first sin they not only disobeyed God, they were attempting to get wisdom without God. They saw that the *“fruit was desirable for gaining wisdom.”* (Genesis 3:6) so they took it and ate it.

This one act set forth in motion a human history filled with people seeking wisdom on their own terms rather than in God. We became *“wise in our own eyes”* (Proverbs 3:7) but stumbled along in foolishness. In our chasing after wisdom God gets shoved to the periphery and pretty soon nothing in life makes sense. We persist in misusing God’s blessings and bring destruction to everything around us. The five biblical wisdom books repeatedly call us to return to God. He is wisdom. Their central message is, *“the fear of the Lord is the foundation of wisdom.”* (Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 9:10)

Can you think of examples in your own life when you used one of God’s blessings outside of the boundary that He created for it? What happened?

We often treat Solomon's books as separate works but what if they were intended to go together? What if Solomon wanted us to see them as a unified collection? When seen this way there is a clear progression of thought between them. Check this out:

In **Proverbs**, we find hundreds of short sayings that teach us to live by God's wisdom. Solomon tells us to *"trust in the Lord...lean not on your own understanding."* (Proverbs 3:5) When people take hold of this truth they enjoy a unified relationship with God and one another. In fact, Proverbs 3:18 tells us that wisdom will become a "tree of life" for us which is a definite call back to Eden! In Proverbs 8 wisdom is portrayed as a woman who calls out to simple humans urging them to listen and learn from her. She assures us that knowledge, discretion, counsel and sound judgment belong to her and she promises that if we will listen, much blessing will be sure to come. In Proverbs 9, folly is also portrayed as a woman and she is the antagonist in the story who seduces humans into self-destructive behaviors. These two women are in constant tension throughout Proverbs. The message of Proverbs is *"Wisdom is supreme: therefore, get wisdom!"* (Proverbs 4:7) We pursue Lady Wisdom and flee from Lady Folly. Having a respect for the Lord and making Him the foundation of your life is the beginning of finding wisdom. A life with God at the center is wisdom. A life apart from God, due to following our own hearts, is folly.

In **Ecclesiastes**, Solomon continues by offering us reflections from his own life and more specifically his failures. He candidly shares from his own failed pursuits that a life spent on folly leads to hopelessness. In his words - *"Everything is hevel"* (the Hebrew word for "vapor", or "meaningless"). He teaches that *"life under the sun"* is a life apart from God. It is toiling by the sweat of our brow which is a reference to life outside of the Garden of Eden. (Are you starting to catch Solomon's constant callbacks to Genesis? Cool, eh?!)

A foolish life is defined as a life without God because even the pursuit of wisdom is a fool's errand if the wisdom one seeks is not firmly anchored in God. The Teacher says, *"I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this too, is a chasing after the wind."* (Ecclesiastes 1:17) The pursuit of wisdom without God is a waste of time. After twelve depressing chapters, he finishes with: *"Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."* (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14) Why is this important? Because this is our only way back into the Garden and back into relationship with Lady Wisdom. To fear God is the opposite of doing our own thing.

In **The Song** Solomon brings his wisdom message full circle by beautifully illustrating the joy of a life lived in connection with the very source of wisdom, God Himself. The couple portrayed in *The Song* enjoy a communion and blessing that is unrivaled. It is as if Solomon is trying to whet our appetite for wisdom by giving us a picture of what life and love could look like with godly wisdom at the helm.

This is all a callback to the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve lived in harmony with God. Everything in the world was as it should be. Husband and wife enjoyed perfect union - they were "naked and without shame", meaning they had nothing to hide. This sweetness was shattered on the day they sinned against God by deciding to pursue wisdom on their own terms. The central thrust of Solomon's wisdom message is that we can return to Eden if we will once again submit to the benevolent rule of God.

The Song paints the picture of our journey back to God. The first person to speak in *The Song* is the woman who cries, **"Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth!"** **Let Him....** If you think about it, these two words summarize the message of the entire Bible. The whole reason we got into trouble was trying to do life on our own. How do we begin to flip this capsized ship and bring her right side up? **"Let Him..."**. We come to Him, hands overflowing with the broken pieces of life that we have shattered in our own "wisdom". We **let Him**

put the pieces back to together. This is where we all begin our return to Eden. The journey ahead, while exhilarating, is a bumpy one.

We come with insecurities. In *The Song 1:6*, the woman shies away from her Lover, *“Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun.”* We are often riddled with shame because the sins of our past are so great. We feel deeply unworthy. Why would God want us back? Why would God ever accept us? This is one of the first barriers to overcome in our return to Eden. When we bring our shame and insecurity to Jesus we discover that He is not hung up on it like we are. The Lover calls us His *“darling.”* (*The Song 1:9*) In fact, this is His favorite nickname for us. He uses it NINE times throughout *The Song*!

*“I am dirty!” I protest.
 “You’re My darling!” He assures.
 “I am broken!” I confess.
 “You’re My darling!” He declares.
 “I have made a huge mess of my life!” I cry.
 “You’re My darling!” He sings.*

Through His repeated and gentle reassurance our cold hearts begin to warm up and our fearful souls quicken. He draws us in with His kindness. This is the plot line that threads throughout *The Song*. And how does it end? What is the grand crescendo of this song that leaves its listeners in a standing ovation, wiping tears of joy as we clap, cheer and chant for an encore?

“Who is this coming up from the desert leaning on her Lover? Under the apple tree I aroused you...Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death...” (*The Song 8:5-6*)

We are only beginning our study and we will be returning to these words in later chapters but for now, let’s take it in as the zenith of wisdom. Remember that our Bible has placed *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes* and *The Song* in their order because God wants us to see something important. What begins in *Proverbs* as a random collection of pithy sayings pointing us to God for wisdom leads us to *Ecclesiastes* which is a series of failed pursuits ending in a desperate resignation that to fear God is what life is all about. The three books are brought to a climax with *The Song* which portrays the pursuit of the Lover for His beloved. As *The Song* begins, the beloved is an insecure young woman but when *The Song* ends, she is a beautiful bride leaning on the arms of her man. Through her whole journey of ups and downs she has learned that His love is “as strong as death”. In fact, spoiler alert: His love is stronger than death when you think about Easter! She has found the security that comes with being placed “like a seal” over His heart. And there is even an apple tree, which is a vague callback to the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life.

And why is this important? First, after marrying 1000 women Solomon declares God’s ideal in *The Song*. He is clearly telling us, “Don’t do what I did!” There is a grace and beauty in a life-long monogamous covenant between a man and woman that is unrivaled by anything else in creation. And second, each of us must make a choice. Will we continue to seek wisdom on our own terms or will we surrender to God’s loving advances and trust Him again? Will we continue to build our own nest eggs pretending to be secure or will we rest on God’s arms and find genuine security?

In *The Song*, the beloved makes her choice clear. The very last words are hers and she boldly invites her Lover to have all of her: *“Come away, my Lover, and be like a gazelle on the spice-laden mountains!”* (*The Song 8:14*) Those who trust in the Lord will not regret it. *“Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord!”* (*Proverbs 16:20*)

Alrighty! Let's talk about this for a bit. Work through the following questions with your Life Group and with your Discipleship Partner.

#1. In your own words, quickly summarize what we mean by saying that *The Song* is the zenith of Solomon's wisdom writings.

#2. In your experience with *The Song*, what do you find most difficult about reading it and learning from it? (It's ok for you to admit that it's weird! You won't get struck by lightning. I promise.)

#3. Do you agree/disagree with the statement that God is the only source for wisdom? Why?

#4. We noticed on page 6 that our English Bibles and the Hebrew Tanakh have the books of wisdom in a different order. Which order do you think has the most meaning? Why?

#5. READ *James 1:5*. Talk about a time in your own life when you wrestled to know what to do and you asked God for wisdom. How did it turn out for you?

Before answering these next few questions, you will need to quickly skim *The Song*.

#6. Scanning through *The Song*, you will not find the word "wisdom" used anywhere. So, how can we include it in the Books of Wisdom? In what ways does *The Song* offer us wisdom?

#7. Imagine Solomon as an old man listening to this song. Knowing about his many sins, what kind of effect do you think this song would have on his soul?

#8. Scan *The Song* noticing the different characters: the beloved, the Lover, the friends. This is a piece of music that was sung live for Solomon. Each of these parts was sung by a different singer. Picture a small stage. There's a woman singer and a man singer. And they have a back-up choir behind them. Imagining the different parts as you read *The Song* will help it to make more sense.

#9. READ *Proverbs 8-9*. What promises does Lady Wisdom make to us? What does Lady Folly promise us? What are the differences between these two women? (You will need to make a list.)

#10. Is there anything right now in your life for which you need wisdom? Write it down here, and let's see if God gives you insight about it through the course of our study.

#11 One more for fun! READ *Psalms 72* and *Psalms 127*. Psalm 72 is a coronation Psalm and many believe he wrote it in honor of the Queen of Sheba who came to visit him. Psalm 127 is especially powerful when you consider all that Solomon accomplished in his lifetime: "*Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who work in it...*". What a sobering reminder of our dependence on God for everything!

ANCIENT HEBREW LOVE POETRY is totally outside of our modern box. For starters, we think poetry needs to rhyme or at least have a rhythm. Ancient people did not think that way. They used alliteration and they used parallelism but they did not confine themselves to the same rules of poetry that we do. We are influenced by Greek thinking so we move in straight lines from beginning to end. We start at the beginning and build to a climactic ending. Ancient people saw life happening in cycles. They literally thought in circles. We read *The Song* and think that it begins with *chapter 1* and ends with *chapter 8*. That's not how Solomon heard it. To Solomon, the center of the song is the heart and the rest of the song builds from there.

This helps explain *chapter 1, verse 2*. From our perspective the woman begins *The Song* by asking for a kiss. We think, "Woah girl, slow it down! Don't you want to get a coffee first?!" To us, she appears to be jumping to second base. But not really because ancients saw the middle as the beginning.

The center of the song is the word of the Lover to His beloved in *chapter 4*. And, oh my goodness, is this guy romantic! Hubba, hubba, this guy knows how to pour on the sugar! At first blush, you might wonder where this dude is coming from. He compares her hair to a flock of goats coming down from Mount Gilead. He says her teeth look like a flock of sheep! This is weird for us but it points to another very important thing to know about ancient love poetry. They used images to convey feelings. We are pictorial in the way we think. We hear "*your eyes behind your veil are doves*" and wonder how her eyes could *look* like doves. But that is not what ancient Hebrews thought. They hear it and think about how it makes them *feel*. Think about the innocence associated with doves. The Lover is not saying her eyes look like birds. Rather, he is praising her innocence, her sweetness, her gentleness.

Because this is poetry, the odds are good that this is not a real couple. They are an idealized couple. It's like watching a Hallmark movie where the producers find a really handsome man and a really pretty woman and place them in a beautiful setting. We all know that nobody's romance looks like a Hallmark movie but something deep inside of us wishes that it would. *The Song* is what would happen if a Hallmark movie had a baby with a Harlequin romance novel. It's romantic, it's saucy and it's something that strikes a chord inside all of us. We wish it were real because we wish it was us.

This is not meant to be read, dissected and evaluated. Like any other love song, it is meant to be enjoyed and to move us. We will spend the next four weeks simply enjoying this love poetry and picking up some pointers for our own experiences of romance, love and marriage.

If you are not married, take good notes. This could be you someday. If you are married, toss the notebook and get busy putting these lessons into practice! (You'll be glad you did.) 😊

Week 2: THE SECRET OF ATTRACTION

"This love is no mild, tepid thing...This love is neither nice nor prissy nor fragile nor coy-this love is fierce and wild and dangerous and unbreakable...it is nothing less than the love God has for you, to bind you and to loose you, to take you captive and then set you free." ~Mark Buchanan

When I sit down to do pre-marital counseling with couples one of the first questions I ask them is "What attracted you to one another?" It is interesting to hear how they answer! Many couples dance around the obvious. They want to say something deep and meaningful like, "I was attracted to his love for Jesus!" or, "I was drawn by the sweetness of her personality." These are good things of course but let's be honest, rarely are those the *first* things that attract a couple to one another.

Usually after an awkward pause for effect, I will ask the obvious: "Do you think she's hot? And what about him, is he a stud muffin?" After a little nervous laughter they admit that "yes" they think one another is physically attractive. Great! Now that we're being honest we can get somewhere! Being physically attracted to one another is an important aspect of any healthy romantic relationship. It's not something about which to be embarrassed. It cannot be what your whole relationship is built upon but it is definitely something to celebrate.

The attraction that our star couple in *The Song* shares is pretty clear. These guys are into each other! Their attraction is more than skin deep but they absolutely feel strongly about the way one another looks. In this chapter we want to talk about the secret of attraction and what it means for our relationships. The Lover and his beloved serve as excellent examples for us to follow.

Let's start with their obvious physical attraction. This is probably the most awkward aspect of *The Song*. They are not shy about praising one another's bodies! In 1:10 the Lover says, *"Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with strings of jewels."* In 7:2, he praises her navel, *"Your navel is a rounded goblet that never lacks blended wine."* In 1:16 she is straight-up turned on by his appearance, *"How handsome you are my Lover!"* In 5:14 she says, *"His arms are rods of gold...his body is like polished ivory."* They do not stop here. Nearly every body part is inspected, enjoyed and praised.

They also enjoy the way one another smells: *"Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes"* (1:3) is what she says about him (good-bye B.O.!) And he says, *"How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!"* (4:10). In 4:13 he says that she is wearing Nard. Pure nard was a fragrance native to the Himalayan regions of India. Its scarcity made it highly valuable and exotic. It was the most expensive kind of perfume they could purchase which means that only a king could afford it. Because of its scarcity it was thought to be a "love-potion". Their breath smells good, their hair smells awesome and their skin smells delicious. He is smelling fresh and she is smelling fine and they are both feeling good!

Incidentally, have you ever noticed how powerful the sense of smell is? Some of our oldest and best memories are connected to smell. Scientists say that your olfactory glands (its where your sense of smell comes from) have the best memory of any body part. Our memories of smell will induce positive or negative feelings. For example, the smell of cookies baking is something that you likely associate with positive memories and it makes you feel good. The smell of vomit gives you the opposite feeling. I'll never forget the time my friend Phil Sanders threw up on the bus when we were in kindergarten. I can still smell it! Smell is that powerful. I love the way Karis smells like vanilla. I can smell it on her clothes when I do laundry, I can smell it in the car she drives, I can smell it in our bedroom and it is NICE! My point? Smell is essential to your bonding as a couple and these guys in *The Song* liked the way each other smelled! They obviously have taken

the time to look one another over carefully because they go into detail about the way one another looks. He has noticed everything about her body and he likes it! She has done the same with him. If they have any moles or warts they don't notice. They are both so caught up in the moment with one another's bodies that any imperfections are totally overlooked.

They have even tasted each other: He says, *"Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride."* (4:11) In response she invites, *"Let my Lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits."* (4:16) She says, *"His mouth is sweetness itself; He is altogether lovely."* (5:16) In chapter 2 she compares him to an apple tree and how much she loves to *"taste his fruit."* (2:3)

Their appreciation for one another's bodies was not without insecurity, especially on her part. In 1:5-6 she compares her skin color to the tents of Kedar which were made from the skins of black goats. These tents were a deep dark brownish color. She urges people "not to stare" at her because of her skin color. She is clearly self-conscious about this aspect of her body. This is not a racial reference. It is a social reference. In those days peasants worked outside in order to feed themselves. This meant that a peasant's skin was leathered by the sun. Therefore, people considered pale and plump ladies to be more attractive because it implied that they were wealthy and had other people who could do their outside dirty work. The Shulamite's skin showed the weather and she felt awkward. She was aware of the class difference between her and her man.

Commentator Tom Gledhill says that her vineyard in 1:6, "represents everything that conveys her essential femininity. Her looks, her complexion, her dress, her status, her sexuality-all those considerations which would make her attractive to a man." As she looks at herself in the mirror she sees herself as dark, defective and unattractive. In 1:8, the Lover responds perfectly. He calls her "beautiful" and then he invites her into a romantic game of hide-and-seek. He tells her to follow the tracks of sheep and she would find him by the tents of the young shepherds.

What is going on here? He is seriously affirming her beauty and then playfully inviting her to a romantic rendezvous away from the public eye. In this one single invitation he is turning her attention from her insecurity and redirecting her to *his* desire for her. (Men take note, this will be helpful the next time your wife thinks she looks fat in her jeans!)

In *The Song* 6:4 the man pulls out all the stops in praising her beauty. He says, *"You are as beautiful my darling as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, majestic as troops with banners. Turn your eyes from me, they overwhelm me."* Tirzah and Jerusalem were considered to be two of the most beautiful cities of their day. It might be like our modern equivalent of Paris or Dubai. They were also at opposite ends of the country, Tirzah in the north and Jerusalem in the south. The word "Tirzah" literally means "delight" and "Jerusalem" means the "City of Peace". When put together he was saying that she was beautiful from head to toe, she was his delight and looking at her made him feel at ease. She was his home. Her beauty was so captivating to him that he felt like he was looking at an army in dress uniforms, in perfect formation and displaying their banners. Tremper Longman says, "The beauty of this woman is so overpowering that it arouses fear as well as joy."

This is an important principle in relationships. Husbands, you are the only *legitimate* source of romance for your wives. If you do not tell her she is beautiful, who will? Do you really want other men telling your wife that she is pretty? Of course not! If she is going to hear loving words that affirm her beauty and femininity, she needs to hear them from you. And this should not need to be said but let's not leave it to chance: men need to praise their wives' beauty without attaching it to sex. Tell her she is beautiful, period. And ladies you

are also the only *legitimate* source of praise for your husband. He wants to hear how manly, powerful and handsome he is. Do you really want another woman to meet that need for him? Of course not. Here's the thing, we think that we are being shallow when we praise our mates for their beauty. Perhaps all of the current emphasis on body image and how our culture has twisted it has caused us to shy away from talking about physical beauty? This is leaving a very real hole in our souls that needs to be filled. People need to hear that they are attractive. This does not need to be sexual. Telling someone that they look nice or noticing a new haircut does not need to be weird. As a married man I appreciate someone noticing that I'm wearing a clean shirt or got a haircut. The most important opinion always comes from my wife. She can say it in a way that goes deeper than anyone else, for the better or the worse.

If the Lover and his beloved had any flaws in their bodies we wouldn't know it. They don't talk about it. As far as they are concerned they are the most beautiful people in the world. That's how it should be in marriage. Do you and your mate praise one another's appearance?

To sum this up, our super couple knows how to praise one another's physical appearance without being creepy. They build one another up, they turn one another on and even when insecurity arises it is gently and lovingly quelled. A biblical relationship always has two givers. There is not a giver and a taker. And there are not two takers. There is a mutuality in the way this couple praises one another's looks. He is handsome, she is beautiful and they are not shy about affirming it to each another.

Stop and think about how *THIS* is in *your* Bible. Your Bible affirms physical beauty. Isn't that amazing? Pastor Ben Stuart says, "God made the equipment with which we play the game." God is not against sex and God is not against physical attraction. It is perfectly appropriate for me to think my wife is hot and for her to think I'm a stud-muffin. God actually designed it that way and then gave us an example in the Bible of proper ways for it to be expressed. It's pretty cool that God did that, eh?!

But attraction is more than skin deep and this couple in *The Song* gives us a great example to follow. Tommy Nelson says there are two tiers to attraction. Tier #1 is physical attraction. Tier #2 is godly attraction, a person's character and spirituality. This is what we see next...

One of the first things the Shulamite says about her Lover is: "*your name is like perfume poured out.*" (1:3) This perfume was literally a purified oil that was used in their worship of God in the Temple. It was made from the best olives and contained a unique blend of spices only permitted in the Temple. In the ancient world a person's name was their reputation. Yes, she thought he was handsome but it was the strength of his character that really grabbed her heart. His character and his reputation were like this purified oil, this perfume. He was a man devoted to God and she loved that about him.

Here's an important principle for Christian people seeking a mate. You do not want to just find a church girl or a church guy. There are plenty of fakes hiding out in churches. You want to find a man or woman who passionately loves Jesus more than anything else. This person needs to love Jesus more than they love you which makes you second to Jesus in their heart. This is the only way that you can be assured they will honor Jesus in the way they love you.

In *chapter 2*, she compares her man to an apple tree among the trees of the forest (2:3). She praises him for his stability and his commitment to provide. This man's life bears good fruit that can be enjoyed by others. He serves. In other words, he is a giver not a taker. And notice that he stands out in the forest. All the other trees are just good looking. An apple tree would be a small tree in a forest but it's the only one that gives fruit. She sees a man who is not just another pretty face.

I have a little saying with the grunts at the gym where I work out: “Some of us are show horses, others are work horses.” Some men strut around the gym looking good, bulging in all the right places. Me? I’m bulging but let’s not talk about where! The pretty boys might look good but can they split a cord of wood on Saturday? Can they help their wife flip a mattress? Some of us might not look good but we get it done... “work horses”! The Lover in *The Song* is both a show horse AND a work horse. He’s not lazy. He’s not long on excuses and short on action. He gets it done. She praises him for his character and the way he provides and serves.

He is a man who knows how to serve his darling and put her needs ahead of his own. He knows how to be a rock on which she can depend. These days our culture minimizes the value of a strong man. For some reason strong men are dangerous to feminists. However, I’d argue the opposite. Is there such a thing as toxic masculinity? Yes. But not all masculinity is toxic. Women need men who are real men. The apple tree is a metaphor for genuine masculinity. He is strong, handsome, fruitful, a provider and a protector. It is because of his strong character that she is free to be all that she can be. The reverse is also true. Every good man needs a strong woman. God designed it to work this way. We literally need one another.

While she is physically beautiful he is equally attracted to her heart. Many of our modern love songs praise every part of the body except the face. This man sees her face in exquisite detail. Her eyes are like doves (1:15), her hair is like a flock of goats (4:1), her teeth are like sheep (4:2), her lips are like scarlet ribbon and her mouth is lovely (4:3), even her temples are perfect (4:3)! In 2:14 he pines to see her face, “*Show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely.*”

Why is the face so important? Because it is how you get to know one another. The face is the pathway to intimacy. But the Lover makes it clear that his woman is not just another super model. She is pretty, yes, but she is also an amazing woman. We previously mentioned that her leathery dark skin indicated she came from the peasant class. This does not lessen the king’s love for her. The Shulamite is similar to Ruth whose story is also told in the Bible. Like Ruth, the Shulamite worked diligently in the fields to provide for her family. Her love was demonstrated in calloused hands and sunburn. Ruth married “up” in social class when Boaz took her as his bride. This mirrors The Shulamite’s story. She worked to provide and the king took notice. He praised her for her beauty and character. She is not afraid to get her hands dirty and the king likes it!

He compared her to one of Pharaoh’s mares in 1:9 which is not simply a statement about physical beauty, it is a statement about majestic beauty. He called her a “*lily among thorns*” (2:2) which speaks to the way she stands out above the rest. He called her “my sister” in 4:10 which was a sign of respect. There is something stately and graceful about this woman and that is what makes her so beautiful!

Do you see how attraction is more than skin deep? Yes, it is important to praise your mate’s physical beauty. We all need to hear it from our spouse. But our attraction for one another must go beneath appearances too. What else do you find amazing about your spouse? Tell him/her about it!

Let’s make two important notes about character: First, anybody can lie on a date and anybody can fudge their E-Harmony account. How do you test for someone’s character? You need to give it time. Throughout *The Song* there is a line that is repeated five times: “*I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires*” (2:7). In the Hebrew there is a play on words going on here. In Hebrew the phrase “*by the gazelles and does of the field*” sounds a lot like the words “*By the Lord God Almighty*”. It’s like when someone takes the Lord’s name in vain but instead of saying, “Oh God!”, they say “Oh Gosh!”. We all know what they *really* meant to say! It’s called a “circumlocution”, a way of saying the word without actually saying the word.

That is what is happening here. Without actually saying it *The Song* challenges us to swear by God's name that we will not awaken love until the proper time. Why? To put it bluntly, you need to get to know the person's character and you cannot do that if your hormones get in the way. This also raises the value of having good community around you. If your friends and loved ones do not like the person you are dating it ought to give you much cause for concern!

The **second** thing to note about character is this: be the kind of person you are looking for. Or, if you're married, be the kind of person you desire your spouse to be. A word of caution, you do not want a perfect mate, you want a perfect-able mate. You want one who is humble enough to admit wrongs and who is willing to change and grow. And here is the key...you need to make the first move to be this kind of person. I often pray a prayer that I learned from Stormie Omartian, "Lord give my wife a new husband, and please let it be me." She deserves my best spiritually, emotionally and physically and that is what I strive to give her.

And finally, after all the talk about sunburn, nard and handsome-ness, here's the secret of attraction...It grows with intimacy. Not sex, intimacy. You know, "IN-TO-ME-SEE". We have lost this in the West. We have over emphasized the power of physical attraction. We have pushed the whole fake concept of "love at first sight" and "finding your soul mate". We think it's cute when 3rd graders date and have crushes. We call that "puppy love". All of that has twisted God's design for the way love and attraction are supposed to work. Think about it this way, if physical attraction were the strongest glue for a healthy marriage then Hollywood would have the best marriages. Yet we all know that many of them have turned marriage into a farce.

Do not misunderstand, physical attraction can be the thing that gets you to the race but it is not the thing that gets you to the finish line. There is something mystical that happens when a couple gets a taste for intimacy. When the hearts come together, the bodies follow willingly. Many people in Eastern cultures have understood this for centuries. Many Eastern cultures still practice arranged marriages. In fact, my good friend Pastor Rajan and his wife Indira have an arranged marriage. Several years ago, Karis and I were invited to minister at a retreat for their church in southern California. We met couple after couple with arranged marriages who are happily married. I found it fascinating and asked a lot of questions. Some of these couples have now been married for 20-30 years and have kids and even grandkids.

My curiosity forced me to ask, "What if you thought he/she was unattractive?" (The nice way of saying "ugly"!) Their answer? "That comes later. For us, the first step was making the commitment for the sake of our family and culture." Several of the women I interviewed sheepishly admitted that at first they did not think their husband was handsome. Over time, as they got to know their husbands, the husbands became better looking. It was a stunning revelation: Attraction grows with intimacy.

We sometimes say that "so and so fell out of love" like love is something over which you can trip. It's like a table leg in the dark of night that you stub your toe on accidentally: "Ouch! Hey, I think I'm in love!" (Cue the music.) This makes a good plot for movies that are over in an hour and a half but for a lasting marriage? Not a chance.

At my age, I've got moles showing up like a bad landscaping job on my skin and rebellious wiry hairs sprouting in places they don't belong. "How'd that get *there*?" is almost a daily question when I look in the mirror. The flower of physical beauty is fading fast so what keeps my wife and me chasing after each other? What keeps the spark and the spunk alive? Intimacy. This is something that can only happen over time and the older I get, the better I understand it.

I read a story about Billy Graham and his wife Ruth. They were both in their 90s when they passed and Billy said that as they aged, they continued to “make love” but it looked different. Each morning, Billy would take Ruth’s hand and hold it as they gazed into one another’s eyes. They would share prayer together and then begin their day. In Billy’s words, they “made love with their eyes”.

That’s far more powerful than anything you read about in Cosmo magazine. That’s making love at the soul level and it can only happen after decades of sharing life together. This kind of connection is what God desires for you and your spouse to enjoy. It can be yours if you are willing to do the work of cultivating appreciation for your spouse/loved one. Attraction can be cultivated through intimacy.

Alrighty! Let’s talk about this for a bit. Work through the following questions with your Life Group and with your Discipleship Partner.

#1. The power of smell was mentioned. Tell your own story about a powerful memory of smell. (Good or bad!)

#2. In *4:11*, the Lover says that “the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.” Lebanon was known for her cedar forests. Have you ever had a cedar chest for storing blankets? What emotions and feelings does the scent of cedar stir up in you?

#3. We noted in *1:6* that she was self-conscious about her tanned skin because it implied that she had to work outside. What are some of the causes for insecurity about the way we look? What can you do as a follower of Christ to overcome those insecurities?

#4. READ *The Song 6:4-9*. These are the words of the Lover to his beloved. How might this help her to overcome her insecurities? In *verse 9* he calls her his “dove”. From what you know of doves, what does this say about her? What does it say about the impact she has on his well-being?

#5. There is a right way to praise someone’s physical appearance and there are many wrong ways. Let’s think through this for a minute and talk about it. How can we praise someone’s physical appearance without being creepy? (For both men and women.)

#6. Attraction is more than skin deep. There is physical attraction, yes, but there is also being attracted to a person’s personality, character, love for God, etc. Given the fact that physical attraction can have a strong influence on us, what are some things we can do to foster other types of attraction in a relationship?

#7. In *The Song 2:3* she compares her Lover to an apple tree in the forest. We learned that this was a picture of ideal masculinity. In what ways is an apple tree a picture of masculinity?

#8. In *The Song 2:14* the Lover wants to see her face. Why is the face an important part of getting to know one another?

#9. This chapter closes by making the point that attraction can be cultivated through intimacy. In what ways have you experienced this personally?

Week 3: THE POWER OF CLARITY

*"Jesus is the holiest, meekest, most humble,
and in every way the most excellent man that ever was." ~Jonathan Edwards*

Let's begin this chapter by stating our premise plainly: "Clarity is kindness; brutal clarity is just plain cruel." It has been said, "there is a world of difference between 'speaking the truth in love' and 'loving to speak the truth'." Those who speak the truth in love find themselves in wholesome life-giving relationships. Those who love to speak the truth find themselves lonely self-righteous Rapunzels isolated in their own towers of correctness. They are always right and always alone in their rightness. The people around them always know where they stand but rarely do they feel connected.

On the flip side, there are those who avoid speaking truth for fear that it will not be received well or for fear that they might be misunderstood. If these people muster the courage to say something they tend to speak in such cloudy, fuzzy terms that they leave their hearers guessing what they are trying to say. That is not helpful either. It is unfair to hide our expectations and then be disappointed or angry when others do not meet them. In this chapter we will examine the communication between Solomon and his beloved Shulamite. We will learn how to clearly express our feelings and in the process weave a tight bond between us and the ones we love.

To begin, please allow me to share two lessons from the archives of "Doug's Biggest Blunders" as an illustration as to where this is going. If anything, let this inspire you to pray for Karis...may God help her!

Karis and I met when we were students at Nyack College. She graduated two years ahead of me and she stayed on campus to work. She managed the schedule for the singing group I traveled with and this gave us plenty of opportunity to hang out. In September of my Junior year we began to spend more time together and I definitely gave her the impression that I was interested. However, back then I was trying to be "Mr. Cool" so I never really told her that I liked her. I basically flirted a lot and acted like a hot shot. When Christmas break came that year I ghosted her. This was before cell phones and social media so by "ghosted" I mean I did not write her any letters or call her on the phone. (Back then our phones were attached to a wall, weird eh?!). After six weeks of silence, I returned to campus for a special three-week intensive class. She knew that I was back on campus but I did not talk to her at all. The ghosting continued. Finally, at the end of the three-week class, my buddies and I wanted to go skiing, but I was broke. (Can you see where this is going?) After not talking to her for more than 8 weeks I had the audacity to go to her office and ask to borrow money!

This was not one of my better moments. My communication was more than just "fuzzy". If I didn't give mixed signals, I wouldn't have been giving any signals at all! Miraculously she ended up dating me and, wonder of wonders, she ultimately married me! (Perhaps in a "weak moment"?)

That's exhibit #1. Now here comes exhibit #2 and brace yourself, there were more lows to which I could stoop and I did!

As noted, in what could only be classified as a "momentary lapse in judgment", she married me. For our very first wedding anniversary I pulled out all the stops and took her to Bonanza for dinner. Before you judge me, we were dirt poor so scraping together enough for this was monumental. Plus, Bonanza is where every good hillbilly takes his date for a special evening. The price is right and she can eat all she wants at the buffet. What's not to love?!

There we were, two love birds enjoying the delicacies that Bonanza had to offer and I thought it would be a good time to evaluate our relationship. After all, it's our first anniversary. What better time to stop and take inventory? I decided that I would speak first so I laid out all of the things I felt that she was doing wrong and how she could improve. That ended our dinner, ruined our evening and we spent the rest of the night in awkward painful silence. The end.

So aside from "Doug is a goober and Karis is a very special person" what lessons can we learn from this? Clear communication is an act of kindness. It is not fair to leave your loved one guessing in the dark about how you feel or where you stand on important issues. It's not fair to hold back on sharing your expectations and then get angry when your loved one does not meet them. While fuzzy communication is not loving, brutal communication is just plain cruel. It was 100% wrong for me to blast her on our first anniversary and air all of my grievances. Sitting there in Bonanza I may have been clear but I was not loving. This is why our premise in this chapter is "Clarity is kindness; brutal clarity is just plain cruel."

What lessons about clarity can we learn from our star couple in *The Song*?

In *The Song* 2:15 we read "*Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom!*" The vineyard is a metaphor for their relationship. A life-giving, love-filled relationship is like a vineyard. It is both beautiful to see and bountiful to enjoy. You can probably think of a married couple who had a positive influence on you. There was something life-giving about their relationship. There was something powerful in the way they loved and respected one another that had an impact on you and anyone else who was blessed to be in their orbit. They were no doubt generous, hospitable, kind, easy to talk with and their relationship made you feel comfortable. If you were to interview them you would discover they have done an excellent job of catching the "little foxes" in their relationship and not allowing them to ruin the vineyard.

On the other hand, you can probably think of married couples who are awkward to be around. They make "digs" at one another, they talk over each other, they correct each other and you get the feeling that they are not on the same page. The eye rolls and the huffs let you know there is conflict beneath the surface. After spending an hour with them you can't wait to leave because you're so uncomfortable. If you were to interview this couple you would discover there are many "little foxes" that run rampant through their vineyard, digging holes and chewing at the roots making their marriage the mess that it is.

Let's be honest. Most conversations in marriage are about dumb things:

"Did you get the dog food?"... "Junior is going to Buddy's house after soccer practice."...

"The car is making that funny noise again. Did you hear it?"... "My neck is stiff, I think I need a new pillow."

Stuff like this makes up 90% or more of our daily interactions in the home. In the process, it is easy to say and do things that hurt or annoy one another and just keep moving on to the next mundane thing. The daily grind gets the best of us. The problem is that we never make the time to talk about these things so they remain in the vineyard and like "little foxes" they erode the relationship gradually. In *chapters 2 and 5* we are given a beautiful model for healthy communication. In *chapter 2* we see feelings being clearly expressed and in *chapter 5*, which we will look at next week, we see conflict lovingly resolved.

As we've already noted, these two love birds really like one another! As *chapter 2* opens, the woman begins with another description of herself. If you recall, in *chapter 1* she felt self-conscious about her suntan because it meant she was from the peasant class and was forced to work in the fields. In 2:1 she calls herself a "*lily of*

the valleys.” She feels like she is just a common flower. Is she a pretty flower? Sure. But let’s face it, there are many pretty flowers. Her Shepherd-King picks up on the cue and responds saying “*Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the girls.*”. In other words, she is no common flower. She is a rare beauty!

Men, we need to open our ears and learn how to pick up the cues that our women are sending to us. Do you know when your sweetie needs a compliment? It is safe to say, “Always!” She always needs a compliment. There is never a bad time to offer a kind word to the one we love. When she comes back from the salon with a bad haircut that is not the time to agree with her. That is the time to remind her that she is beautiful in your eyes. When she goes dress shopping and comes back deflated because “nothing fit” that is not the time to suggest joining Weight Watchers. That is the time to remind her of how beautiful she is and no common dress from Marshall’s is good enough for her. In *The Song*, we do not know what prompted her to say what she did but he brilliantly picked up on the cue and responded accordingly.

She responds to his kind words by calling him “*an apple tree among the trees of the forest*”. We’ve already noted this is a metaphor for the kind of masculinity that makes a woman feel cherished, protected and loved. Notice in *verse 3* that she calls him “*my lover*”. This is her favorite way of talking about him. She uses it thirty-one times in *The Song*! There is something powerful in this little nickname. It implies that while there are others who love her there is no one who loves her like him. His love is something special and powerful. It speaks of his declaration of love for her and the security that it brings to her heart. It speaks to his influence in her life which is something that men find extremely valuable.

Ladies, your man loves you. He would literally take a bullet for you. The more you acknowledge his love for you the more he will give to you in return. It’s a fairly simple formula. Men are not complicated. We respond to appreciation. Thirty-one times in the eight chapters of this little song the woman uses a word that acknowledges his contribution and expresses appreciation for him. She calls him “my lover”. He belongs to her and he loves her well. Does your man know this is how you feel?

You may argue, “Not my guy. He’s withdrawn and disengaged.” You can make a huge difference by thanking him for the few things he is currently doing. You will discover that he starts to do more. He may not love you well at this moment but start treating him as your lover and he will begin to express his love for you in better ways.

In 2:3-13 the woman does all the speaking and she describes the way her man comes to her. In *verse 4* she says that his banner over her is love. This is one of the most popular and powerful metaphors from *The Song*. You may even have seen some decoration sold at Hobby Lobby with this verse on it. A flag or banner is a symbol of a nation. For those of us who are patriotic we get moved by the sight of our American Flag blowing in the wind. That flag stands for freedom and it stands for things we believe in as Americans. I choke up every time I see an American flag draped over a casket or hear our national anthem sung as our flag is raised. This woman in *The Song* is saying that her man’s love for her is like that flag. It flies as a symbol over their relationship. She knows he loves her and she relishes the strength of this truth.

There is another aspect of this banner that is important. Flags are displayed out in the open for all to see. Whether they were alone or in a crowd they communicated love for one another. We must guard ourselves from the temptation to complain about our spouses when we get around our friends. The men gripe about “the ball and chain”. The women gossip about “the caveman who doesn’t do anything right”. This kind of talk is unhealthy for a marriage. There is a right time and place to seek counsel from our friends but it is not while hanging out. It is not appropriate to publicly complain and share stories of ways our loved ones have failed. *I Corinthians 13:7* says, love “*always protects*”. Let’s raise the flag of love!

In verse 5 she asks to be strengthened and refreshed with his raisins and apples. These two fruits were closely associated with love in the ancient world. She freely confesses that his love for her is like raisins and apples. She is fed by it and not stifled by it. His love for her is life-giving and she desires more of it.

In 2:8-9 he responds to her call by *“leaping across the mountains like a gazelle”* towards her. He is motivated. He’s “leaping” and he is focused as he comes towards her. In other words, he turned off the TV, shut down his video game, or put down his phone and he squared off his shoulders to face her and give her his undivided attention.

If you have ever seen a deer or a gazelle, they have a graceful strength about them. They can effortlessly bounce over rocks and obstacles, hardly making a sound. I’ve done my fair share of deer hunting and I can tell you that at the break of dawn on a cold November morning the forest comes alive with sounds of scurrying and leaves rustling. An inexperienced hunter jumps with every snapped twig thinking it’s the trophy buck coming through the woods. However, the noisiest critters in the woods are the chipmunks and squirrels! The largest buck in the forest will never be heard. Deer are incredibly soft footed. The metaphor is beautiful. He comes to her with strength and yet he is gentle. He is determined but he is not pushy. He is not a “bull in a china closet”. He is careful and intentional and focused on her needs. In response she is never threatened by his approach. On the contrary, she welcomes it.

Men, the Apostle Peter challenged us to *“treat your wife with understanding as you live together.”* (1 Peter 3:7, NLT) The Berean Standard Bible reads it this way, *“Husbands, treat your wives with consideration as a delicate vessel.”* I like that! My bride is no weakling. I could never have a baby, let alone push three of them out of my body! Karis has fortitude of which I could only dream! However, I also understand that I am twice her size, I am louder, more bullish and I definitely need to tone down my approach when I come to her. This is what Peter is saying and this is how the Lover comes to his beloved in *The Song*. He comes like a gazelle.

The bottom of verse 9 has him *“gazing through windows, peering through a lattice”* which to us, makes him seem like a peeping Tom. However, this is not what is happening. He is approaching her gracefully and carefully, yet directly. He is willing to see what she is willing to let him see. In verses 10-13 he woos her to consider that the harsh winter has passed and springtime has come. Now is a safe time, a good time for them to talk. In communication we need to give one another room to open up at our own pace. It does no good for one person to force the other to talk. And criticism will definitely not help someone open up! I made this mistake early on in marriage. I was critical of how Karis communicated and I was judgmental. This caused her to close up because I was not creating a safe environment for her. To take Solomon’s advice, I needed to slow it down and “peer through the lattice”. Instead, I tried to crash through the gates and we are still working to overcome the damage I caused!

Verse 13 ends with him inviting her to, *“Arise, come my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.”* It is a simple invitation. It is not pushy. It is clear and the response is up to her: “Come when you’re ready.” But for whatever reason, she remains hesitant...

In 2:14-15 he starts to talk and he gently invites her to open up to him. He calls her, *“my dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside.”* Notice that he is not guilt-tripping her into sharing her secrets. He is not manipulating her or telling her she is a crazy woman. She is his “dove”. The dove is a picture of innocence and also of one who struggles to trust. He is not in a hurry. He will take the time for her to trust him. He will not force it. He invites her to *“show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely.”* One commentator says, “the voice is just as infatuating as the face is ravishing.” The words translated as “lovely” and “sweet” at the end of verse 14 do not express the force that is found in the

Hebrew words. In the Hebrew, this man is saying, “Honey, I really, *really* love to just listen to you talk! Baby, the sound of your voice is enough to send me to the moon!”

When I read this, my heart is immediately pierced with the memory of all the times that Karis has tried to say something and I acted like I didn’t hear her. Or the times I was too focused on a TV show and ignored what she was trying to tell me. Or the times I was impatient because I was uninterested in the things about which she was talking. Is it any wonder that she has a hard time trusting me with what matters to her soul? Clear communication begins with sending a clear message that “whatever you say is important to me because YOU are important to me.”

As *chapter 2* draws to a close, the woman responds to her man with an expression of commitment: “*He is mine and I am his!*” This is one of the most beautiful lines in *The Song*. It speaks to mutual devotion. He has won her heart with the tenderness of his words. He has not forced her into anything. He has invited her into intimate sharing. He has touched her soul with his kindness. In response, she invites him to “browse among the lilies” which in Egyptian love poetry was a very clear sexual reference. It is likely that it carries the same meaning here. She is expressing her clear desire for him. “*Love has been awakened*” (2:7) and the time is now! Some have said that the way to a woman’s heart is through her ears which is what we see happening here in *The Song*. His tender words spoken clearly have won her heart and she longs to take their relationship deeper. What is the power of clarity? When done right communicating clearly can weave our souls together.

If you have been married for more than 10 years and you are reading this, when was the last time you sat down and told your spouse how much you appreciated them? It is too easy to let days slip into decades and assume that our loved ones already know how we feel. Let’s never assume it. Let’s communicate it. Let’s praise them often and extravagantly!

Many men feel inadequate to do this. We have been conditioned to believe that we are not romantic. We have become convinced that it is hard for us to express our feelings. But this is not true. At some point, you won the heart of your beloved! You wouldn’t have made it this far if you had not begun somewhere. Think back to what you did to win her heart in the beginning and do it again! Then...keep winning it!

Hey men, think of learning to express your feelings like learning to change the brakes on your car. Is it hard at first? Yes. Will you spend an hour staring at YouTube videos trying to figure it out? Sure. Will you mess it up? Probably. Will you have to make multiple trips back to the Auto Zone to get stuff? Yup. But eventually you’ll figure it out. The same is true with expressing feelings and being romantic. It’ll be a bumpy road but you’ll get there. And let me share a secret with you men: If you mess up an attempt to say something loving, your special lady will still love it. In fact, your failed attempt might be appreciated by her even more! Ladies like that stuff so you really can’t fail men. And ladies, the same principle works for you: He might miss your cue totally. Men can be dense sometimes. But I promise you that the sparkle in your eye and that sly twist in your smile will tell him all he need to know to stop dragging his knuckles and sweep you off your feet.

We all know communication is necessary for healthy relationships. This is nothing new. However, it is finding the courage to actually work on it. That’s what matters. You can do this! To close this out, let me offer what Heather Holleman in her book *The Six Conversations*, calls “The four “L’s to developing good conversational skills”, and I have added a fifth: 1) Let others speak. 2) Listen. 3) Limit distractions. 4) Love through your face and 5) Learn to ask questions. We would all benefit from developing these skills!

Alrighty! Let's talk about this for a bit. Work through the following questions with your Life Group and with your Discipleship Partner.

- #1.** Our premise this week is “clarity is kindness, brutal clarity is just plain cruel”. Do you have any examples of how this principle has played out in your own experience?
- #2.** This chapter focused a lot on loving, romantic language. But this is not the only time when clear communication is valuable. What are some other times when loving clear communication is necessary?
- #3.** *The Song 2:15* speaks about the “little foxes”. Give some examples of the little foxes that can ruin a friendship or a marriage.
- #4.** READ *The Song 2:3-13*. These are the words of the Shulamite about her Lover. Which word picture resonates the most with you? Why? In *verses 10-13*, the woman is speaking but she is quoting her Lover. What is the essence of what she is saying? According to *verse 14*, how does she respond to his invitation?
- #5.** Are you the kind of person who others would say is an “open book”? Or would you be considered more reserved and guarded? If you're reserved, what would it take to help you open up?
- #6.** In *2:16-17* she responds by giving her whole self to him. *Verse 17* says, “until the day breaks and shadows flee” which means she wants to talk all night long! What was it in the man's approach that helped her go from being a “dove in the clefts of the rock” to letting him “browse among the lilies” of her soul?
- #7.** Thinking about some of the best life-giving conversations we have ever had, what would you say made those times so good and rich?
- #8.** If you are married, do you have life-giving conversations with your spouse? If so, what are they like? Describe them. If not, what would it take for you and your spouse to begin talking to one another in a life-giving way? (This may be a question best suited for discipleship-partners.)
- #9.** We talked about raising a flag of love over our relationships. In your own words, talk about what this means practically in your relationships. Have you ever publicly complained about your spouse or a friend to others? How can this be devastating to a relationship?
- #10.** Do you find it difficult or easy to give compliments to others? Why? Why not? Would your friends and loved ones say that you are good at giving compliments?
- #11.** What are three things you can begin doing to communicate more clearly in your relationships? Is there anything you need to stop doing when you communicate?

How can we pray for you?

Week 4: THE POWER OF RESOLVING CONFLICT

"The Bible is little interested in equality...from Genesis to Revelation, it calls us to this deeper, greater, tougher, sweeter thing...oneness. Oneness beats equality every time...it calls us to complete one another." ~Mark Buchanan

Have you ever met someone who seemed to enjoy conflict? These people are a little scary, aren't they? Who wants to hang out with a person who likes to fight? Perhaps you know someone who seems to delight in stirring up trouble? They love dropping word bombs or tossing someone under the verbal bus to see if they can stir things up. These people are a lot like COVID. They give us something to talk about but nobody wants to be near them. Five minutes with this person feels like a year and makes you wish you were somewhere else.

Have you ever noticed how conflict brews? Like a tea bag steeping in hot water feelings can fester beneath the surface in a relationship until one day they erupt. When they finally come to a head we tend to fall into one of two extremes: some of us clam up and others blow up. Which are you? I'll be honest, Karis and I tend to clam up. This might be hard to believe because I can be a loud mouth but I rarely explode in anger. Most of the time I turn sour and retreat. Let's be honest, neither approach is healthy. Whether we explode or clam up, we still do great damage to our relationships. Thankfully, our star couple in *The Song* offer us a better way. Let's take good notes and learn from their example. I pray that we find this helpful.

As *chapter 5* opens we come to the very center of *The Song*. (By the way, it would be helpful if you took a few minutes to read *chapters 5 & 6*.) These ancient people reasoned in circles and not straight lines like we do. We are modern westerners who have been influenced by Hellenism. We think from point A to point Z in a straight logical line. They saw world events as happening in concentric circles. This means that for them the center of a book or a song was actually the most important part of it. What do we find at the very heart of *The Song*? In the second half of 5:1 there is a strange statement that leaves commentators stymied. Scholars argue about who is speaking these words. Is it God? Is it the friends? Is it the daughters of Jerusalem? Here is what it says:

"Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers!"

The New Living Translation brings out the nuance: *"Oh Lover and beloved, eat and drink! Yes, drink deeply of your love!"* In the NIV Bible that I use it says that this is spoken by the friends. However, many commentators believe this is actually God's voice. Think of it this way: God is the narrator of this whole song. He is telling us the story about these two lovers and their community of friends. But then, right in the very middle, God gets excited and throws in His own comment. What would make Him react like this?

These words follow the wedding night scene in *chapter 4*. Many think this is God giving His whole-hearted endorsement to the couples' expression of love and their love-making. This is why the prudery that we often see expressed within the church does not reflect the heart of God. God does not have a problem with sex. He created it. God's problem is the way that we have twisted its use. Let's be blunt: married sex (between a man and woman) is blessed sex! Any other sex is a perversion. God has just witnessed this couple in their bedroom celebrating their wedding night and He is so thrilled by it that He exuberantly tells them to enjoy more of it! He tells them, *"Drink your fill, O lovers!"*

This is the summit of the book. The lover and his beloved have maintained purity even though passions ran high. They celebrated a wedding that was witnessed by family and friends. They went into their bedroom and consummated their love. And this was all topped off with God's blessing. But it quickly unravels from here.

The love train goes off the rails. This is where your WiFi starts buffering right in the middle of your favorite love song and ruins the whole mood.

The scene is presented to us as a dream sequence. In *verse 2* the beloved says, “*I slept but my heart was awake.*” In other words, this is a dream. Now, is it really a dream or is it just presented as a dream? Scholars debate this question so I will leave it to you to decide. Just remember, this is a song so we need to give it a lot of room for creative expression. Whether it is a dream or not, the way they walk through this conflict is awesome and we have much to learn from it.

At the root of this conflict is unmet expectations. Toes got trounced on and feelings got hurt. Many conflicts in marriage are the result of unmet expectations. Sometimes those expectations are not expressed at all or not expressed clearly. Other times they are expressed but not heard. Either way, when we fail to meet one another’s expectations the little foxes wreak havoc. We see this beautifully displayed and resolved in *The Song chapter 5*.

What happened? She is asleep and awakened by the sound of her man knocking on the door and it is fairly clear what he wants: “*My dove, my flawless one, my head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night.*” This is the same language he used on their wedding night in *chapter 4*. He’s saying, “Baby it’s been a long, hard day! I’ve been working, my head is drenched with dew and I’m glad to be back home with you!” He expresses his expectation. If you are a married woman, perhaps you have experienced “the hand in the night”? You’re both in bed, it is late and you’ve begun to drift off to sleep but then you feel a hand sliding under the covers towards your hips. You know that hand and you know what he wants.

In *verse 3* she responds, “*I’ve taken off my robe, must I put it on again? I’ve washed my feet must I soil them again?*” This is her saying, “I have a headache, I haven’t shaved my legs and besides, you ate garlic for lunch today.” (This is where you cue up the sound of a plane crashing out of the sky!). He gets shot down in a blaze of glory! So what does he do? He respects her wishes.

After his failed attempt to make love with his wife, he backs off. He pulls away, but *verse 5* indicates that he left myrrh on the doorknob. Myrrh was an expensive oil used only on the most special of occasions. He is not rolling over in a huff and feeling sorry for himself. He is anointing the very place of offense. At the door where she refused him he left myrrh to say, “You’re not ready right now, that’s ok. When you are ready, you’ll know where to find me. Then, we can talk and we can figure it out.” Was he hurt? Probably because rejection often stings. But did he retaliate? No. He lovingly made a way for them to figure it out later.

In *verse 6*, she appears to regret her cold response to him so she moves towards him only to find that he has left. Now, remember this is a poem. Did he really leave or did he metaphorically leave? You can decide. Either way, she begins to feel regret. She feels an emotional distance caused by her refusal. In *verse 7* we meet “the watchmen” of the city who find her and beat her up which is really odd. She is the queen. Who are these men and why are they roughing her up? They are a metaphor for her conscience. We met them back in *chapter 3* where they served as guides who pointed her to the man she loves. Here in *chapter 5* the watchmen “bruise her” after she spurned her man’s advances. In other words, this is poetic language for: she felt bad about how she responded.

In *verse 8* she enlists the help of her friends in finding her man. This is good. One of the healthiest things you can *do* for your marriage is to have a support network of people you trust who can speak into your lives. In this case, the women in *verse 9* ask her what’s so special about your man? In response, the woman pours out a litany of things that she adores about him. To begin with he is “*radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten*

thousand!” She praises his uniqueness. He is ‘radiant’ meaning he lights up every room into which he walks. He is ‘ruddy’ which means he has rugged good looks: the square jaw, the cleft chin, the playful dimples on his cheeks. His hair is black and wavy meaning he is in the prime of his youth. His eyes are gentle like doves. His arms are chiseled. His legs are like pillars of marble, meaning he didn’t skip leg day at the gym. She finishes her description of him in *verse 16* by saying, *“This is my Lover, this is my Friend.”*

In marriage it is easy to develop a toxic mindset where we remember every infraction our spouse has ever committed. This turns parking tickets into felonies. Before you know it, husband and wife are living at odds and are suspicious of everything that the other says and does. “Love believes all things” needs to become the mantra for your marriage. Believing the best in one another will give a solid basis for resolving conflict. He is not Hitler and she is not the Black Widow. What this woman does is powerful. Notice that she does not list all of the things her man does wrong. Instead of building a case for why she is justified in spurning his request, she builds a case for why he is an amazing man. By the time she is done she can’t wait to see him again!

It is easy to think about how the other person has disappointed us. This helps to justify our anger and hurt. However, it does not help to restore the relationship! We need to remember that in marriage we are fighting for the “we” and not just the “me”. We have a choice to make. Do I want to score a victory or do I want intimacy? What good is it to win the war but lose the heart of the one you love? Three scriptures make it clear:

“Let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouths but only what is helpful for building up the one in need and bringing grace to those who listen.” (Ephesians 4:29)

“Let us pursue what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” (Romans 14:19)

“Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.” (Proverbs 18:2)

Her description of her man is so compelling that as *chapter 6* opens her friends want to help her to find him! They ask, *“Which way did your beloved turn, that we may look for him with you?” (6:1)*. Have you ever noticed the connection between the way that you praise your spouse and the way others view them? Married couples can literally elevate one another in the eyes of those around them. Or, with our words, we can portray our spouse in such a negative way that others see them through tainted eyes.

She responds to her friends by saying that she knows exactly where her man is. He *“has gone down into his garden...I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine...” (6:2-3)*. His garden is her heart! She is his garden. In *chapter 4:12* he said she was a *“garden locked up”* which was a reference to her purity. She had saved herself for him. She was his garden, locked up for everyone else but freely given to him on their wedding night. And now even in their conflict, even before they have fully reconciled he is with his garden. In other words he never left her. He did not “punish” her by removing his love from her. Even in the miscommunication and the conflict he remained with her.

This is such an important principle. Many couples going through a conflict withdraw from one another. The air gets cold inside the house, loving words stop and they leave one another alone. Sometimes in the heat of an argument it is important to take a moment to cool things down but a moment should not become a month. Conflicts do not resolve themselves in silence. The words of scripture are clear: *“Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” (Ephesians 4:26)* This is excellent instruction!

He had not actually gone anywhere. He left the myrrh on the very place of offense as an invitation to work things out. Her conscience told her that she needed to get things right. She sought the advice and help of friends. She refused to build her case by painting him in a negative light. Instead, she listed his many good qualities. And now she comes to him. How does he respond?

It's clear what he does NOT do. He does not respond by listing her faults and telling her how wrong she was for rejecting his advances. He does not try and make her feel guilty. He does not shame her as a bad wife. Lovingly he affirms her and builds her up. Starting with 6:4, he speaks. He begins by affirming her unique beauty. She is beautiful as Tirzah and Jerusalem, which we've already learned means she was beautiful from head to toe and made him feel at peace. In verse 5 he asks her to *"turn your eyes from me, they overwhelm me."* This is strong language. He says that he is overwhelmed by her eyes. She shakes him to his core! She stands out above all the rest. She is better than sixty queens (6:8)! She is his "perfect one" and she is praised by other women (6:9).

Do you see what he is doing? Now that they are finally talking about their conflict he does not retaliate. He does not claim that she did anything wrong. He tells her that he is so captivated by her that he is thrilled to be in her presence again. The Apostle Peter wrote, *"love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins."* (1 Peter 4:8) This is not the same as brushing conflict under the rug. It means that in love, I choose to not be easily offended.

A quick review of their conflict would say that she did nothing wrong in expressing her lack of desire for love making and he did nothing wrong by expressing his desire for it. They simply have two different sets of expectations. "Who wins?" is not the right question. That attitude will create division. The better question is "What do WE do about it?" She has expectations and he has expectations. How do they bring them together? 1 Thessalonians 5:15 says, *"Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else."* This is great advice!

Tommy Nelson says, "Good conflict leads to a resolution in which both parties feel peace and a new platform for communication and cooperation is established between them. Bad conflict leads to a victory for one and a loss for the other, which results in some degree of hidden resentment and bitterness that are stored away for a future fight." Let's work towards GOOD conflict!

In verse 10 the friends ask a question that prompts the man to continue his praise for his beloved. In verse 11 he says that he went looking to see if anything was in bloom. This is a metaphor. He wanted to see if their relationship was growing and had life in it. What he found amazed him. In verse 12 he says, *"before I realized it, my desire set me among the royal chariots of my people."* This was probably a euphemism meaning "I was beside myself with joy." Sometimes in conflict all we can see is the trouble. But Solomon did not want to do that. He wanted to know if they still had love. He checked to see if anything was blooming and there she was, his queen of queens! This is all the motivation he needed to make certain the conflict got resolved.

This is a great place to begin when resolving a conflict. Let's talk about our strengths. Let's look to see if our love is still in bloom. Let's remind one another that we are on the same team and we love each other. I must remind myself that she is worth it. She must remind herself that I am worth it. We must remind ourselves that we are worth the effort to resolve it. This is an important first step because it helps us to focus on OUR solution. We can fight for intimacy together.

Verse 13 ends with a reference to *"the dance of Mahanaim"*. Some commentators believe this was a reference to a war camp. So the dance of Mahanaim was a battle cry and a war dance meant to get an army

hyped-up for battle. Solomon is speaking to the “friends” telling them *not* to look at his wife in this way. In other words, he is saying, “The fight ends here. The matter is settled.” This is gracious and clear. The matter has been laid to rest and now they can move forward with the issue resolved. One of the mistakes that couples make is allowing a conflict to drag on. Talk about it, affirm each other and resolve the issue.

Tommy Nelson offers sixteen “nevers” that are vital to healthy communication in conflict:

Never speak rashly; **Never** confront your mate publicly; **Never** confront your spouse in your children’s presence; **Never** use your children in the conflict; **Never** say “never” or “always”; **Never** resort to name calling; **Never** get historical (In other words, bring up past conflicts); **Never** stomp out of the room or leave; **Never** raise your voice in anger; **Never** bring family members into the discussion unless they are a direct part of the problem being addressed; **Never** ‘win’ through reasoning or logic; **Never** be condescending; **Never** demean; **Never** accuse your spouse with ‘you’ statements; **Never** allow an argument to begin if both of you are overly tired; **Never** touch your spouse in a harmful manner.

This is a long list but if you and your loved one heed it, you will make huge gains in properly communicating through conflicts that arise. Conflicts are unavoidable. Resolving them is intentional. In his classic book, *Love is a Decision*, Gary Smalley offers a simple tool for navigating a conversation in which conflict is being resolved. He calls it “LUV talk”. “LUV” stands for three things we do for one another during one of these conversations:

Listen

Understand

Validate

The first step is to **listen**. Let one person do all the talking while the other simply listens. This is where it is important to not get defensive or argumentative. Simply listen. The second step is to **understand**. To understand is to say back to the person who just talked, “Let me see if I understand you correctly. What you are saying is...”. In this way, the listener is affirming what the talker has just said and is genuinely trying to understand the heart of what they are saying. Sometimes a person’s words do not come out correctly. The listener never wants to assume they have heard correctly. This is why it is super important for the listener to summarize and repeat what they think they heard. At this point, the talker will either affirm what the listener heard them say or the talker may need to clarify what they meant to say. The final step is to **validate**. Validation happens when the listener says to the talker, “I see what you’re saying, and I can see how you came to that conclusion.” This is important! The listener needs to see the situation from the perspective of the talker. Once the listener has been able to see the situation from the talker’s perspective, you flip the roles in the conversation allowing the listener to become the talker.

Remember, in conflict you are not fighting for victory. You are fighting for unity. Unity has been damaged because a hurt has occurred. This means trust must be restored. We must both demonstrate that unity is our goal and that we both care more about “us” than about our own individual selves.

We find our greatest example in Christ. *Romans 5:8* tells us, “*God demonstrates His own love for us in this way: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” In other words, God made the first move to reconcile with us. When we sinned against Him, He lovingly moved towards us and not away. Just as Solomon left myrrh on the doorhandle, God made the offer of peace and then lovingly waited until we dropped our pride and received it.

I hope that all of our relationships smell like myrrh! May we become the kind of people who do everything we can to “*live at peace with everyone.*” (*Romans 12:18*)

God’s Best Blessings on You!

Alrighty! Let's talk about this for a bit. Work through the following questions with your Life Group and with your Discipleship Partner.

- #1.** When it comes to communicating expectations: On a scale of 1 to 10, with '1' being terrible and '10' being awesome, how effective are you at communicating your expectations in a loving way? Why?
- #2.** Let's evaluate the last conflict you had with someone. Was your reaction healthy? Were your words affirming? Were you more concerned with intimacy than with victory? Remember, if there was a 'winner' in your last argument, you created more division and did not resolve anything. You 'win' when you come together.
- #3.** READ *Matthew 5:23-24*. Are there any unresolved conflicts that need to be settled in your marriage or other relationships? What does Jesus tell us to do? Is this hard or easy for you? Why?
- #4.** READ *Psalms 141:3*. When was the last time your mouth got you into trouble? What did you do to restore the relationship? Or, what do you need to do?
- #5.** Thinking through your past interactions, when was the last time you witnessed or experienced a powerful apology? What made it so powerful in your opinion?
- #6.** Talk through the sixteen "nevers" from page 28. Are there any here that resonate with you? Why?
- #7.** One of the things Heather Holleman says in her book *The Six Conversations* is that "How are you?" is a weak question because the brain struggles to find a category to answer it. She suggests the better question is "What have you been thinking about today?" Or, "What surprised you about today?" Another approach is to say, "I'm so curious, tell me about..." This is not a discussion question. It is more like an exercise. Go ahead and try it out on someone and report your results to your group!
- #8.** The power of resolving conflict is that it will deepen intimacy. Yet, when conflict happens most of us are content to never deal with it. Why do you avoid conflict resolution? How can your discipleship partner help you to improve your resolution skills?
- #9.** The way we handle conflict reveals things about our character. What kinds of things?
- #10.** READ *Romans 5:8*. What can we learn from God's example about how to resolve conflict?

This has been a heavy one! How can we pray for each other?

Week 5: THE POWER OF DEVOTION

*"All friendship is birthed out of that moment when someone says, 'What? You too?'
I thought I was the only one!" ~C.S. Lewis*

Many years ago, when I was a young-buck pastor, one of my responsibilities was to do house visits. I was regularly scheduled to stop by the houses of elderly folks or of those who were sick and unable to participate in the regular life of the church. We called these people "shut-ins". I was the friendly encouraging face who served them communion and prayed with them.

One of the homes I visited regularly was that of Mr. and Mrs. Hilliard. She could not walk, was confined to her bed was non-communicative. They lived in a dinky cinder-block house that was located out in the sticks. They converted their tiny living room into a makeshift hospital room and Mr. Hilliard cared for her 24/7. He was not plugged into "society". He cared nothing for hip-ness or cool-ness. His whole world was a little transistor radio that played oldies. When I say "oldies" I mean if you take the oldies and give them grandparents, that's the music he was listening to! He was a bit of a bumpkin with missing teeth, a scruffy face and smudged glasses but he was fully devoted to loving his wife beyond any measure I had ever seen. He lovingly bathed her, changed her briefs, fluffed her pillow, played her favorite radio station and anything else he could to make her comfortable. They lived beyond the reach of meals-on-wheels or any other kind of help so Mr. Hilliard was her only caregiver. He fed her crushed up bran muffins that he softened with milk. When asked why he didn't give her Ensure, he swore that it was no good and these muffins had ALL the nutrition she needed. (I told you he was an old-school country bumpkin!).

My visits with this couple made an indelible impression on my young heart. This was during the first few years of our marriage so Karis and I were newlyweds. Karis was young, blonde and hot. I could not imagine ever finding myself in a place like Mr. Hilliard. His days were hard and his nights were long. He gave himself unreservedly to the care of his bride, refusing to leave her side. He told me how much he loved her. He told me stories of the early days in their marriage when they built a farm together and raised corn and milked cows. He spoke with tears in his wrinkly eyes about how she had been so faithful to him and that "now it is my turn to serve *her*."

I often say that I learned more about marriage from my visits with the Hilliards than I learned from any book. The devotion that he displayed for his ailing bride was truly inspirational. These are not things that young people think of when getting married. We think about romance and sex. We think about beach vacations and candlelit dinners. We do not realize that "in sickness and in health" might mean we end up changing our spouse's diapers or spoon feeding them crushed up bran muffins.

Devotion is not required when the feelings run hot. Anyone can be devoted when the mood is right! Devotion kicks into gear when the road gets tough and life gets long. In *The Song* we do not see our couple enduring difficulty. After all, they are young. She is beautiful and he is chiseled. Their bodies have not tasted the decay that spending years under gravity's thumb will put on flesh. They have not experienced a life-threatening illness or bankruptcy or anything like that. However, even in their youth, we see traces of devotion. We see the foundation stones being laid that will serve them well over time. In this chapter we will examine those bedrock behaviors and attitudes. We will learn that regardless of how far along our relationship may be, we can all make choices that set us up for success when love gets hard.

Bedrock #1: Sexual purity before, during and even after marriage.

Sexual purity is one of the striking themes of *The Song* that quite frankly, we do not find anywhere else in ancient love poetry. Archeologists have uncovered many examples of love poetry from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Ugarit that bear similarities to *The Song* with one exception: sexual purity. I searched for relevant examples to share but could not find anything that didn't make me blush. There is one Sumerian song that even celebrates sex between a man and his mother! This should not surprise us. Humanity has a long history of distorting sex and making it something God never intended. Before we judge the ancients we need to remember the same rule applies in this modern world. We are hard pressed to find any references to purity in today's popular music.

That being said, *The Song* portrays God's ideal for human sexuality. When enjoyed within the confines of a covenant marriage between a man and woman sex is thrilling and fulfilling. Devotion to one's spouse begins long before any rings or vows are exchanged. We see this beautifully expressed in *The Song*.

We see it first in the challenge given to "*the daughters of Jerusalem*" in 2:7. This is repeated three times throughout the book. You can also see it in 3:5 and 8:4. Who are these "*daughters of Jerusalem*"? They are you and me! This is a way of bringing us as the readers into the story. The leading woman of *The Song* challenges us saying, "*I adjure you by the gazelles and does of the field not to arouse or awaken love until it so desires.*" We already learned that the phrase "*gazelles and does of the field*" is a way of saying, "in the name of God." (pgs. 15-16) The word "adjure" is court language. She is telling us to swear an oath by the name of God to leave love alone until the right time.

We look around and it seems everyone else is enjoying the thrills of sex. Whether it is television, movies, music or social media, everywhere we look people appear to be having exciting fun. It is difficult to remain pure! Society pressures us from the outside and our hormones scream at us from the inside. Maintaining purity is literally a daily fight. The woman from *The Song* does not deny that the fight is real. This is why she challenges us to swear an oath to take sexual purity seriously. Given the very real pressures, the first step to maintaining purity is a decision of commitment to make it a priority.

The battle is not just for single people. According to a 2023 article in hackspirit.com, infidelity is still the #1 reason for divorce. They sighted a report from the LA Intelligence Detective Agency who claims that 30-60% of married people will cheat at least once during their marriage. They noted that 74% of men and 68% of women would cheat "if they were guaranteed to not get caught." It is also surprising that 56% of the men and 34% of the women who cheated describe their marriages as "happy".

What does this data tell us? It tells us that cheating is far too common and infidelity is not necessarily motivated out of some conflict or deficiency in the home. In short, infidelity is birthed out of a broken soul which does not value devotion. Why? Devotion is a trait that begins with a rock-solid choice and is practiced long before it is ever tested. This is what *The Song* teaches us. Our devotion towards our spouse builds a wall around the relationship guarding it from any predator seeking to ruin it.

Speaking of a wall, in *The Song* 8:10 she literally says of herself, "*I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers thus, I have become in his eyes like one bringing contentment.*" Within the context the imagery is clear. She has walled herself off from other lovers. She belongs solely to him. In 4:12 he speaks of her as being "*a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.*" The "fountain" of her virginity was sealed, her sexuality is depicted as a garden and it was "locked up" and reserved for one man only...her husband.

In *The Song* 8:8-9 we meet these people simply called “the friends”. Some commentators think these are the Shulamite’s brothers who are asking advice about what to do with their youngest sister. In this ancient culture, a young lady’s brothers were often responsible for her care and protection (cf. *Genesis* 34). These brothers are concerned for their little sister and asking, “*What shall we do for our sister for the day she is spoken for? If she is a wall, we will build towers of silver on her. If she is a door, we will enclose her with panels of cedar.*” The metaphor is fairly clear. If she is a wall, meaning if she is chaste, they will celebrate her good choices and do all they can to encourage her. If she is a “door”, meaning she is promiscuous, they will lock her up with panels of cedar. As an image, cedar wood is more fitting than the image I have given about my own daughter’s purity. I have often spoken of greeting their potential boyfriends with a shotgun! Cedar is hard but it also smells good. The protection by these brothers for their sister will be unwavering but it will also be pleasant. Why? Because her purity is so important.

I do not mean to drag this point out too long but *The Song* contains so much on the subject that it is hard to ignore. Here is one more to close this point: *chapter 4* celebrates the couple’s wedding night. In *verse 1*, he says, “*Your eyes behind your veil are doves*”. Doves speak to her innocence. Peering from behind her veil, which is itself a symbol of purity, her dove-like eyes say, “I have saved myself for you.” In *The Song* 6:7 the Lover says of her, “*Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate.*” The Pomegranate is not called a “passion fruit” for nothing! It has long been associated with love making because of its rich, red color, sweetness and plentiful seeds. Here, he is saying that she is blushing behind her veil. She is innocent.

Why is her innocence celebrated and not his? Good question! His innocence is implied with hers. *The Song* is NOT suggesting that men can do what they want but women must remain pure. His purity is wrapped up in hers. The first step to building a devoted marriage that stands the test of time is to guard your purity before you’re married, while you’re married and even after you’re married should death separate you.

How do we maintain purity? Whether you are still dating or have already gotten married, the “rules of engagement” are similar. We all need accountability so ask other people to help you. Refuse to be alone with a person of the opposite gender. Refuse to engage in flirtatious conversation. If you are married do not “counsel” a person of the opposite gender, especially if they are having marriage problems. Follow the advice of Pastor Timothy who told men to treat “*younger women as sisters with absolute purity.*” (1 Timothy 5:2)

Bedrock #2: Exclusivity.

To say that the king in this song considered himself to be a “one woman man” is an understatement. And she felt the same way. She was a “one man woman”. Their relationship was exclusive and that exclusivity provided a wall of protection around them that made them secure and confident in one another’s love. Exclusivity is an essential element to devotion in a successful home.

This is why many marriages are not ripped apart by some egregious sin. The couple drifts apart by gradual separation. Life gets in the way. They get busy with work and the kids and before they know it, they have grown apart and hardly know one another.

In *The Song* 1:17 they speak of their home being supported by “beams of cedar.” In one sense, this is a picture of the temple which was also built with cedar beams (1 Kings 6:9). He is saying their home is blessed by the fragrant strong Presence of God. This made their relationship both solid and pleasant. Exclusivity is a key ingredient to making their home this way. In *The Song* 2:2 the Lover says that his beloved is like a “*Lily among thorns.*” In 5:10 she declares that her man is “*outstanding among ten thousand.*” They each believed that there was nobody like their mate. To him every other woman was a thorn compared to her. To her, every other man was just a face in the crowd compared to him.

In *The Song* 2:4 she says, “He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love.” The imagery here is so rich! In Hebrew, the word translated “banquet hall” is literally “house of wine”. I like that better! It speaks of sweetness, it’s pleasurable and it’s even intoxicating. These guys were drunk on one another! And the banner was used by armies to identify which side they were on. Battlefields would quickly become dusty and chaotic. The banner was a way to keep an army together. It was a solid point of reference rising high above the fray of battle saying, “This is us!” And rising above the busyness and craziness of life what banner flew over this couple? Love.

They frequently were drawn back to this one principle: we love each other. This is so vital to maintaining devotion in a marriage. There are so many forces pulling and pushing against you and your home. You need a banner flying over you. You need a space to which you return frequently to be reminded of who has your heart. For this couple, their banner was “love.”. In short, they declared “We are on the same team!”

If I may be vulnerable for a moment. One of the ways that I resist the temptation to lust for someone other than my wife is a simple thing I learned from my friend David Stoutenger many years ago. Whenever the temptation arises I say out loud, “I love my wife!” In making this declaration, I raise the banner over our relationship and remind myself that my heart belongs to one woman. I’d encourage you to try it too. It works very well!

There are two more images in *The Song* that speak to exclusivity and they are perhaps two of the most powerful statements in the whole book. In 4:9 he says of her, “You have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes.” Aside from the fact that this is romantically rich, the message is powerful. She has captured him and thrown away the key...and he likes it that way! She is a beautiful thief who has come in and stolen his heart and he never wants it back!

For her part, in 8:6 she says, “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm.” A seal was a piece of melted wax that was impressed with a specific identifying mark. Much like a family crest that we see in British royalty the seal was a direct mark of ownership and belonging. She is literally asking him to let her “own” him. She asks him to put her seal on his heart and arm. The heart refers to his inner being and the arm refers to his actions. Taken together the heart and arm signify his whole person. Why does she want all of him? Because “love is as strong as death.”

In the ancient Near East, death was personified as a god of great power named Mot. In Ugaritic mythology Mot even defeated the god Baal who represented fertility. This woman is saying that love is stronger than Mot. Love overcomes all, it conquers all things and even death itself. Her love for him is unshakable and because of that, their relationship will be fertile and fruitful. In short, to say, “place me like a seal” is her way of saying, “Make me yours forever and you will be mine forever.” In 6:3 she literally declares, “I am my lover’s and my lover is mine!”

Bedrock #3: Continual Pursuit.

This is the fun part of a life-long devoted marriage! Whether they are chasing each other around a vineyard or having a rendezvous in the country or running through the streets, our leading couple is in constant pursuit of one another. “I will search for the one my heart loves” (3:1) is a clear theme in their love story.

It is also a hallmark for successful marriage. Tommy Nelson offers what he calls “the four horsemen of the apocalypse that destroy a marriage”:

- 1) Unrepented and unforgiven sin. Our unresolved offenses pile up.
- 2) Age. When we focus on outer beauty rather than inner beauty, we set ourselves up for trouble.

- 3) Forgetfulness. We forget how valuable our spouse is and take them for granted.
- 4) Laziness.

We forget that romance is a discipline and stop cherishing one another. In short, we stop pursuing one another! One of the keys to maintaining devotion in marriage is to continually pursue the one we love. Pursue unity. Pursue respect. Pursue appreciation. Pursue romance to keep that flame burning, don't let it flicker. There are two things you can do to keep pursuing your beloved: You can keep it fresh and you can seek help.

First, you can keep it fresh. Many commentators believe that *chapter 7* of *The Song* depicts the couple in a later season of life. We will look at the start of *chapter 7* in a moment. For now let's look at the end. After receiving his praises for her she responds with an invitation:

"Come, my lover, let us go to the countryside!" (7:11)

She wants to get away with him. She wants to spend some quality time together away from the hustle of everyday life. In other words, even though they are older they have not stopped carving out time together. Love is often spelled as "t-i-m-e". We waste time on so many things. Is there any better way to spend it than with the one you love? Especially as we age our friendship needs to take precedent. Like every other friendship the one with your spouse needs to be cultivated.

Chapter 7 ends with her words, "*at our door is every delicacy, both new and old, that I have stored up for you, my lover.*" There is no such thing as running out of ideas when it comes to romancing our loved ones. Their door had delicacies both new and old!

Karis has recently become interested in target shooting. We took the pistol permit class together and went through the process to get a license. We are researching a pistol for her to buy and have had fun trying out different models. It sounds weird but it's kind of romantic. Nothing says, "I love you, like a 9mm!" Who knew?! What I'm saying to you men, is be willing to try new things. As a man do I like shooting too? Yes! But earlier this year I also bought her tickets and walked through a Van Gogh exhibit. She marveled at the swirling colors and bold brush strokes. I marveled at her. It worked for both of us!

There is a second thing to consider when keeping our romance fresh. We need to enlist the help of others. Several times in *The Song*, we hear from "the friends". In *1:5* they celebrate love with the woman. In *1:8* they tell the woman where to find her lover. In *5:9* she solicits their help in restoring her to her lover when they had conflict. In *6:1* they help her to go looking for her lover. In *6:10* they reunite the woman to her man. In *6:13* they serve as a type of foil to draw out the praise of the Lover for his beloved.

Musically, think of these friends as being like the background singers. *The Song* would have been sung as a duet between a man and woman. They sing the main parts and these friends are lined up at microphones behind them singing the backup parts. They are the "shoo wap, ditty wap" part of the song. In real life romance our friends play a major role in keeping love alive. Community is essential in finding the right mate. Community is essential to our devotion in romance. At every wedding that I officiate I take a minute to look past the bride and groom and speak directly to the family and friends who are seated. I remind them that their responsibility goes beyond celebrating the day. Their words and actions will have direct impact on the success of the marriage. I challenge them to pray and to encourage the couple as they work to keep their vows over time.

One of the things you can do with your spouse is to surround yourself with friends who have good marriages. Learn from those marriages. Seek their counsel for your own marriage. Receive their loving rebuke if you mess up. Let them hold you accountable as you grow in love with your mate.

Bedrock #4: Mutual Respect and Honor.

In *The Song 7:1-9*, the Lover is praising her features and he begins with her feet. If you recall, he praises her features in a similar way back in *chapter 4*. There he praised her from head to toe. Here in *chapter 7*, he praises her from toe to head! He begins with her sandaled feet and ends with her mouth “*like the best wine*”.

What is going on here and what does it have to do with mutual respect and honor? As they aged, he began to appreciate her in a different way. She is still his dream girl and he lets her know it. Her feet are sandaled which is important. Not everyone wore shoes in the ancient world. Most people were barefoot. In fact, it was not uncommon for masters to keep their servants barefooted so that they would not run off. It was also understood that women who belonged to a king’s harem would be barefoot for the same reason. This woman is sandaled which signifies her pre-eminence in the castle. She was trusted. The king knew that she could come and go as she pleased and their hearts were unified. She was devoted to him whether she was with him or not. In short, he trusted her. One commentator says that he “worshipped the ground she walked on” which is cool to think about too! Her sandaled feet pursued him and he loved it.

As he worked his way up her body he said in *verse 4* that her nose was like the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus. This is one of those images that our modern minds have a hard time appreciating. I’d never say my sweetie’s nose looks like a tower! However, remember that Hebrew love poetry used symbols to express feelings. He is not saying how she looked. He is saying how she made him feel. The Tower of Lebanon was a defensive position on the wall of the city. She was looking to Damascus, which at the time was a seat of power for the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were enemies of the Jews. In saying that her nose was like this tower looking to Damascus, he is saying that she is protective, on the look-out, ready to defend their home from intruders. He is saying that she made him feel safe.

At the end of *verse 4*, he also said that her eyes reminded him of “*the pools of Heshbon*”. Heshbon was a Levitical city meaning that it was a city of priests. These pools were used for ceremonial bathing to maintain ritual purity and cleansing so that the priests could do their work in the Temple. He is saying that her eyes had remained pure. After all these years her eyes were faithful to him. He praises her for her holy character.

I hope that this is not embarrassing for her but one of the things I love about Karis is her love for Jesus. She begins each morning with time in the Word and prayer. I often whisper a prayer of thanksgiving for a wife that loves God’s Word. One of the ways she connects best with God is through worship music. Sometimes she is planning music for Sunday celebrations. But other times she is simply worshipping. I absolutely love those times! I like to sneak into the living room with a cup of tea, sit on the couch and just bask in her praise for God. She has eyes for Jesus and I love it! In the early days of our marriage I did not appreciate the depth of her walk with God. I was too young and lacked the wisdom to see it. But something has happened over the years. This is now the thing I value the most about her. Men, do you praise your bride’s walk with God? Do you see that her eyes are like these pools of Heshbon? I hope so!

What do we learn from this couple? As they aged they became more secure in one another’s love. This was built up over years of mutual respect and honor. As we have already noted they certainly liked one another’s bodies, but their relationship went much deeper than this. They cultivated a soul connection with one another that could stand the test of time. By maintaining sexual purity before marriage their devotion to one another began before they had even met. After they were married, they protected their love by belonging

exclusively to one another. They continued to pursue one another even as they aged. And lastly, they developed mutual respect and honor for one another. He might have been the king but she was his queen! Husbands, is your bride your queen? Does she know it? Wives, is your husband your king? Does he know it?

There is something hard-wired into us that places a huge value on devotion. This is because we have been made in the image of God. He is the most devoted Friend we have ever known. Even when the nation of Israel was at her very worst, this is what God said to her:

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palm of My hands; your walls are ever before Me.” ~Isaiah 49:15-16

Amazing, isn't it? Israel rebelled against God and still God remained true to them. One of the things we love to celebrate about Jesus is His faithfulness. We love the picture of Him as the faithful Shepherd leaving the ninety-nine in search of the one lost sheep. His devotion to us is what inspires our devotion to others and it is the reason why we value it so highly. God is so devoted to you that He has literally gone to the nth degree to ensure a right relationship with you. And all those times when you said, “to heck with it” and did your own thing even though you knew it would break the heart of God? He never left. He stuck with you.

It seems like we elevate devotion in every other relationship but in marriage we make it romantic. We love the stories of best friends. We find it inspiring when we hear about a soldier who jumps on a grenade to save his platoon or a parent who will go to the ends of the earth to rescue their lost child. And then we see a couple who is devoted and start fanning ourselves, swooning about how cute it is. Why do we do that?! Devotion requires dying to myself which makes it extremely hard. That's not romantic. That's painful and it takes grit. Let's champion it! Let's celebrate it when we see it. Let's make heroes out of those married couples who go the distance. A marriage that lasts a lifetime is no easy task!

Romance does not connect a married couple, devotion does. Desire has peaks and valleys that wax and wane with our mood. Devotion is a discipline. It is rooted in our character and it calls us to stop being selfish and give ourselves away for the sake of another. Therefore, devotion is stronger than desire. It also means devotion needs to be developed. It is not automatic. Devotion takes, uh, well...it takes devotion! It begins before we are married as a decision to save our purity for the one whom we will eventually love. It continues throughout our marriage by making one another a top priority, by staying in constant pursuit of one another and by holding one another in high regard with mutual respect and admiration.

A marriage that goes the distance like Mr. and Mrs. Hilliard's runs much deeper than the shallow glitz and glitter that romance can offer. While everyone of us enjoys the heat of passion, we all know that it is not enough to fully satisfy. Marriages need more. Homes need something solid on which to be built. Devotion takes work but it is exciting work and it will help produce the thing for which we are all longing: genuine souls-woven-together intimacy. This can be yours... so get working!

Alrighty! Let's talk about this for a bit. Work through the following questions with your Life Group and with your Discipleship Partner.

- #1.** Of the four bedrocks that build devotion, which resonates most with you? Why?
- #2.** Many people nowadays cannot say that they remained sexually pure before they were married. What comfort does the Bible give to these people, without condoning past behaviors?
- #3.** In your experience, who has had a marriage that you valued highly and learned from? What was it about their marriage that made it so good?
- #4.** READ *The Song* 7. The word translated "delights" in *verse 6* can also be translated "charms". In other words, Solomon was enchanted by his wife! She had him under her "spell". What is it about devotion that strengthens this bond?
- #5.** We are fairly familiar with the principle from bedrock #3 "continual pursuit". There are books and seminars talking about the need to keep "dating" your spouse. However, not much is heard about exclusivity or mutual respect. In your own words, why are these valuable to a healthy marriage?
- #6.** In *The Song* 8:8-9 we meet these 'brothers' who ask about their little sister and how they might protect her purity. What role can our Christian community play in helping us maintain sexual purity before we are married and even after we are married? (Would you agree that maintaining sexual purity is a life-long issue?)
- #7.** In *The Song* 7:4 he praises his wife saying her "*eyes are the Pools of Heshbon*". We learned that this means he valued her godly character. If you are married, what do you admire most about his/her character? If you are unmarried, what character traits are you most looking for in a future spouse?
- #8.** What challenges pose as obstacles to developing a devoted marriage relationship? Or, for those who are not married what obstacles stand in the way of developing devoted friendships?
- #9.** If you are married, would you say that your spouse is your "best friend"? Why or why not? What things can you do to strengthen the bonds of your friendship? If you are not married, who would you say is your "best friend"? What elements make that friendship so strong?
- #10.** If you think about it, God could have made us non-social creatures. He could have made us like Betta Fish who live alone on a rice patty, but He didn't. He made us for intimate community. Why?
- #11.** *The Song* 7:13 ends by speaking of delicacies "*both new and old*". What are some "old delicacies" in your marriage that you cherish and hope you never lose? What are some "new delicacies" that you'd like to try with your spouse to keep things 'fresh'?

How can we pray for you?

A METAPHOR is what happens when a person uses a word picture to illustrate a concept. For example, if I say, “Wow! That church retreat was a mountaintop experience!” I am using the word “mountaintop” as a metaphor that means “really amazing”. An **ALLEGORY** is what happens when a writer makes up a whole song, poem or story that is a word picture meant to illustrate a concept. Almost from its beginning, Jewish scholars have interpreted *The Song* as an allegory that represents God’s love for Israel.

Rabbi Aqiba who lived around 100 AD said, “all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies!” The Jewish teachers believed that God’s relationship with Israel was like a Husband and wife. For example: The prophet Isaiah says, “*As a bridegroom rejoices over His bride, so will your God rejoice over you.*” (Isaiah 62:5) In Jeremiah 2:2 God says, “*I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved Me and followed Me through the desert...*” In Hosea 2:19 God says, “*I will betroth you to Me forever...*”

Since the arrival of Jesus, Christian teachers have interpreted *The Song* as an allegory of Christ and the Church. The Apostle Paul made it clear in *Ephesians 5* that marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and His Church. Truthfully, whether we are talking about God and Israel or Christ and His Church, the journey together follows a similar path. These two paths merge beautifully in *The Song*. Here’s what I mean:

The Song follows four distinct movements. **It begins with a cry for deliverance**, much like Israel cried for deliverance from slavery in Egypt. But **then deliverance gets hard**, as it did for Israel. We begin to waffle wondering if this deliverer can be trusted. Eventually, we conclude that come hell or highwater, **we want the Deliverer**. We “*choose this day Whom you will serve.*” (Joshua 24:19) Finally, we come to the ultimate place of rest where **we reign with our Deliverer**. For Israel, this became a reality under the reign of King Solomon where “*everyone lived in safety*” (1 Kings 4:25) and “*silver was as common as stones.*” (1 Kings 10:27)

These four movements are depicted in *The Song* as we follow the love story between the Shulamite and King Solomon. It is the ultimate Cinderella story of a peasant girl who catches the eye of the king. This is also our story. We are the peasant who caught the eye of King Jesus! *The Song* taps into the deepest longing of human beings. We instinctually know that life is broken and that utopian fantasies fall apart. We cry for deliverance. *The Song* tells us that deliverance is found only in a Deliverer and He is better than we could have ever imagined! Making all things right again begins by being right with Him.

There is a tug and a pull that we experience in this process. We want everything to be right but Jesus wants us to be right with Him. Some days we are good with this. Other days, we just want things to be right. Israel wanted an instant fast-pass to the Promised Land. First century Jews wanted Jesus to overthrow Rome. We could fill in the blank of our own generation, “I wish God would fix...” Jesus insists on fixing our relationship with Him before He fixes our circumstances and this bugs us sometimes! But He is persistent. This ‘romantic’ tension is the general plotline of *The Song*. Utopia is promised to us and it is found as we “*arise out of the desert, clinging to our Beloved.*” (*The Song* 8:5) When we are right with Jesus, everything else will be made right.

For this second half of our journey together, we will be exclusively using a translation of the Bible called “The Passion Translation.” You will find it helpful to buy a copy. We have them available in the church office for \$5. This translation stands out because they have translated the feelings and the nuances of the metaphors which really accentuates these four movements. Plus, they have included many footnotes that provide you with insight into various Hebrew words. I think you will be glad you got a copy!

Week 6: CRY FOR DELIVERANCE AND ASSURANCE

The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of My people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them..." ~Exodus 3:7-8

It would be helpful to read *The Song* 1-2:13.

Before we dig-in we need to establish a few ground rules:

- #1.** We are no longer talking about human marriages. (All single people breathe a sigh of relief!) We are now talking about our relationship with Jesus. We are talking about how He patiently and lovingly leads us into the destiny for which He has created us.
- #2.** Also, please do not skip the verses quoted at the top of each chapter. These are important Biblical references that serve as markers in the plotline of *The Song* and our study. I want you to see how *The Song* parallels Israel's journey to freedom and then make the connection to your own life.
- #3.** The main characters of *The Song* are: the Shulamite (this is us); the Shepherd-King (this is Jesus); and the Friends (this is our community which is made up of family, friends, etc.).
- #4.** From here on out, I will simply be speaking about Jesus, us and our community. It is important for you to know this so that you keep the storyline straight.

With all of that said, let's dig in!

There are two urges that run deep inside us humans: the urge to rebel and the urge to return home. These two urges are in constant tension. We want to go our own way but we know that home is where we belong. Back in the 1960s a group of hippies in Hawaii embarked on what was called "The Taylor Project". They set up a commune style of living where everyone shared everything, including lovers. They didn't work, they did drugs, they frolicked in the blue ocean and they "made love, not war." After just a few years, their utopia ended in tragedy and literally burned to the ground. John Lennon wrote a hit song, "*Imagine*". It appealed to all of us dreamers. He poetically painted a utopian world of sharing and caring where there is no Heaven or hell and no religion to tell us what to do.

Since the beginning, our problem has not been that we want home again. Our problem is that we want home without the Father. We want the Kingdom without the King. We want Eden on our own terms. This has reached a fever pitch in the two years since COVID. In 2021, we experienced what sociologists call "The Great Resignation." Millions of people quit their jobs in search of a better life. Also, in our own attempt to redo the sixth day of creation, we are currently feverishly attempting to redefine what a man or a woman is. And now AI has hit the market and we celebrate this as if we have succeeded in literally creating a new breed of being. These AI beings are amoral and that is what we have always hoped to be. Rest assured, it'll become a disaster. Why? Because it is just another attempt, in a very long line of failed attempts, to scratch the itch in our souls for home. Friends, nothing will be right until we are right with God. Nothing.

It is not surprising then, that *The Song* begins with a cry from the Shulamite. In fact, she does most of the talking throughout *The Song* (no smart comments men!). It is true! She out-talks the Shepherd-King by nearly 2-to-1 which makes sense when you think about it. After all, who does most of the talking when you pray? In her prayer, she cries out for the King to satisfy her need. She wants Him! C.S. Lewis called it a "stabbing desire" that cannot be satisfied by anything other than Christ Himself. In his book *Mere Christianity*, Lewis says, "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world." Every one of us spends our days and nights chasing "it". Some through the arts, others through academia, others through religion and others through more obvious carnal

pursuits. All of us eventually discover that the stabbing desire does not go away. In the words of Bono, “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.” You want Jesus. This is the primal desire of which every other desire is merely an echo.

This is how *The Song* begins. Verse 2, “*Let him smother me with kisses-his Spirit-kiss divine.*” When God created Adam, He breathed into his lungs and brought the man to life. This was the Divine kiss. Dust and deity mingled together and the first man sprung into being. This is how God intended our lives to work. We would live in intimate connection with Him, receiving His breath moment by moment. In a sense, we literally are to live with the kiss of God on us. However, in sin we strayed from communion with God. In our sin, we continue to try and fill the void with any other thing except communion with God. This is that longing. We want more and the more that we want is Him!

Brian Simmons says, “There are places in your heart that will only be healed by divine romance.” You were not made for this world. You were made for Jesus. Until you make Him your home, you will never feel at home and never be able to rest. This is why the woman asks Him to “smother” her with kisses. We do not need a mere peck on the cheek from God. We need to be smothered by His love! Peter, the loud-mouthed disciple expressed a similar idea when he asked Jesus to wash, “*not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well!*” (*John 13:9*) Peter reasoned that if a little bit of Jesus is good, then ALL of Him is better: “smother me!”

The Shulamite’s first two words are “*Let Him...*”. This is where we begin. We have come to the end of our own pointless searching. We have tried one last thing to satisfy our soul and come up dry...again. We are like the people to whom Jeremiah preached:

“For my people have done two evil things: They have abandoned me— the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all!” (Jeremiah 2:13)

Isn’t this the story of our lives? We abandon the Source of living water and wonder why we get so thirsty. Then we try anything but God to slake our thirst only to find ourselves still thirsty! We dig “cracked cisterns” that cannot hold water. We try to satisfy a spiritual thirst with earth dust and wonder why our souls are so parched. Eventually, we come to the end of all of that, turn to Jesus and say, “Let Him...” The moment we say those two words in faith will prove to be the finest moment of our lives!

This desire for God is where we all must begin our journey with Him. We have a need that only He can meet. The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal said, “People almost invariably arrive at their beliefs not on the basis of proof but on the basis of what they find attractive.” Each time we fail at another utopian attempt and each time we thought we’d make the world perfect only to have it blow up in our faces, Jesus becomes more attractive. He is ever the faithful One waiting in the wings for us to finish with our vain pursuits and turn to Him. Some of us arrive at Jesus almost by the process of elimination. We have tried and failed at every other thing until literally He is the only thing we haven’t tried! “Let Him!” is a cry of resignation. It does not take long to discover the joy of what we’ve been missing.

She says, “*I drink them in like the sweetest wine.*” His very presence is like fragrant oil. She realizes “*No wonder the brides-to-be adore you!*” This is what others have told you about. Others tried to tell you how great Jesus is, but you refused to listen. Now that you have come to the end of your searching, you have discovered for yourself how wonderful He really is.

This leads to her second request in verse 4: “*Draw me into your heart*”. She goes from “let him” in verse 2 to “draw me” in verse 4. In *Hosea 2:14* God said that He would “allure” Israel and bring her into the wilderness

and speak to her heart. That was because Israel was rebelling against Him. He was determined to draw her to Himself. But here in *The Song* the Shulamite has already cried out “Let Him.” She has been allured and now having tasted how good God is, she begs for Him to “draw me into your heart.” Like David who discovered in *Psalms* 63:3 that God’s love is “better than life”, this woman has found what she is looking for and asks to be drawn in for more.

The Shulamite is not done yet. She has cried out “let Him” and “draw me.” These are good. But she finishes her words in this section with a declaration, “We will run away together into the king’s cloud filled chamber.” This cloud filled chamber is a reference to the Holy of Holies inside the Temple. She is saying, “I am not content to stay outside with you. I want to go as deep as possible in relationship with You.”

A lot of us say these kinds of things to God, especially in passionate moments like at a camp or a revival meeting. We get overwhelmed by how good He is and then throw all of ourselves at Him. This is good! Several years ago when our oldest daughter Katharine was in college, she called me one evening and as I answered the phone her opening line was, “Guess what Dad! I’m going to be a martyr!” A special speaker had been on their college campus and the challenge was to give everything to God. Our sweet daughter, who has a big heart for God, wanted to go “all in” for Jesus and committed herself to follow Him, even to martyrdom. I’m not sure how you would respond if your child made such an announcement but in that moment, with tears flowing down my face, I celebrated her commitment. A part of me died that night as I released her to the Lord for whatever He intended.

That is what the Shulamite has come to realize as these opening lines of *The Song* unfold. She has reached the end of her searching and discovered that He is all she has ever wanted.

Something happens as we are awakened to the goodness of Jesus. We also become awakened to our flaws. Like Isaiah who caught a vision of God and cried out, “Woe is me” (*Isaiah* 6:5) or like Peter who stood in the boat with Jesus and begged Him to go away because he was in awe of His power (*Luke* 5:8). The Shulamite has caught a glimpse of majesty and in *verse 5*, she sees how unworthy she is. She is as dark and dry as desert tents. In the light of His flawlessness, her flaws stick out and she is instantly self-conscious.

Years ago, I was playing basketball in a park with some young children. I was older, bigger and stronger than anyone else on the court and let me tell you I was crushing that game! My skills were impressive! Then a group of older guys came around and needed me to even out their teams. After just a few minutes I was out of breath, beat down and demoralized. There was no way I could keep up with those guys! Any impressive game skills I had demonstrated in previous games quickly vaporized! Holiness works this way. If I compare myself to someone else I can be tempted to think that I am a pretty holy guy. Even when not comparing myself to someone else I can think I’ve got it all together. Then I catch a look at Jesus and it does not take long before I realize that I am weak and poor. Realizing how awesome Jesus is we see how unworthy, dark and dry we are.

But look at the way Jesus responds: “Yet you are so lovely!” He says it twice! His kind words reassure us that although we see ‘ugly’ in the mirror, He sees ‘lovely’. And what does the Shulamite do? Assured of His love, she starts to worry about how others see her. As if to say, “You think I’m lovely, but what about them?” In *verse 6* she says to her friends, “Please don’t stare in scorn.” She is worried about what they think. And notice that Jesus, the Lover, does not scold her. He continues to assure her.

In *verses 8 & 9* Jesus doubles down on His love for us. *Verse 8* begins with “Listen” and *verse 9* begins with “Let me tell you.” These are emphatic words because Jesus is being gently forceful here. He is saying, “listen

to me!” Picture this: we feel insecure and our emotions start to spiral with all of these worries about how we are not good enough. He gently interrupts our tantrum by saying, “Shh, shh, darling, stop for a second and just listen to what I am trying to tell you...”. He says: *“Come with your burdens and cares.”* Isn’t that great? He loves us in the middle of our tantrums. Never once does He say, “Settle down and then come talk to me.” He enters into our struggles, He cups our chin in His big hands and says, “I love you even with all of your baggage!” He receives us “as is”. What a relief!

And then He says: *“Let me tell you how I see you...”*. My friend, this is when you want to brace yourself. You have never, ever heard this in church before. In church we tell people all the things they must do. We rarely, if ever, stop and simply let Jesus speak to our hearts. And this is what He says... *“to gaze on you is like looking at one of Pharaoh’s finest horses.”* We talked about this a few chapters ago but now do you see it as something Jesus says to you?

Remember that to the Hebrews this imagery was not meant to describe how someone looked. It is meant to describe how Jesus feels. He is not saying we look like horses. He is saying that when He looks at us He gets an overwhelming feeling of awe. In His eyes we are majestic, beautiful and powerful. We have caught His eye and captured His heart!

What is more, our *“tender cheeks are beautiful”*. The cheeks are symbolic of our emotions. We get embarrassed and our cheeks get flushed. We get scared and our cheeks lose their color. So to the Hebrew “cheeks” represented their emotions. Jesus is telling us that even though we are insecure and frantic at times our emotions are beautiful to Him. Jesus is never awkward around our emotions. Isn’t that good news?!

Here is something else that Jesus says. He calls us “My dearest one.” In other places of *The Song*, this is translated as “My darling.” It is used nine times in the book. It is Jesus’ favorite nickname for you. When Jesus speaks to you, what does He most often call you? “My darling.” The Hebrew word is rich in meaning because it means “Lover-friend.” To Jesus we are both! We are His lovers and His friends! Isn’t this what we all want? We want to be loved and we want a good friend. With this one word, Jesus affirms that we are His lover-friends!

Many people who hang around Karis and me know that I call her “Cutie”. I cannot remember when this little nickname began, but it started early on in our relationship. I even spell it differently. I spell it “QT”. The neat thing about a name like this is that it belongs exclusively to Karis. I do not call anyone else “QT”. I only call her by that name. It is something that defines “us”.

Jesus calls you “Darling”. It’s a name that defines His relationship with you. He does not call any angels by that name. He does not even call the Father or the Holy Spirit by that name. There is no one else in all of creation whom Jesus calls “Darling”. Just you. Let this be something that melts you to Him.

Verse 13 contains another rich word picture. The woman is speaking so these are our words to Jesus and she says, *“A sachet of myrrh is my lover...resting over my heart.”* Myrrh was a burial spice. The rabbis used to call it “tears from a tree” because it was always associated with brokenness and sadness. This makes myrrh a strange spice for her to wear on a necklace over her heart. Myrrh is mentioned eight times in *The Song* so it is a common metaphor in this love story. Why use Myrrh? Because it is ultimately a picture of the cross and Jesus’ love for us that led Him to die for us. We hold this truth, this beautiful truth, over our own hearts. We enjoy Jesus’ love because He paid such a high price to love us. Our salvation is truly our most cherished possession and we hold it over our hearts.

To this, Jesus responds in *verse 15* “*My darling...your passionate eyes are like doves.*” Remember that Hebrew imagery represents feelings. Jesus sees us and our eyes are like doves meaning we make Him feel peaceful and at rest. This reminds us of what Jesus said in *John 14:23* “*Anyone who loves Me will obey My teaching. My Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them.*” Could there be anything better than to be at home with God and for Him to feel at home with us? It might be hard for you to believe but it is true. Jesus wants to pick out curtains with you and set up a home!

If you recall, this whole exchange began because she expressed insecurity about how she looked. We see Jesus in His perfection and quickly realize our own imperfections. Yet if we are willing to admit our feelings of insecurity, Jesus rushes in to assure us of His commitment to us. The interaction we see between The Shepherd-King and the Shulamite is a reflection of the same interaction between us and Jesus. In the same way the Shepherd-King reassures his loved one, Jesus speaks to us. Can you hear Him?

As *chapter 2* opens, the Shulamite declares, “*I am truly his rose, the very theme of his song!*” In *chapter 1* she is worried about how she looks. In *chapter 2*, she knows that she is His and she owns it. Whatever song Jesus is singing, He is singing it about us! One of my favorite scriptures is *Zephaniah 3:17* “*The Lord your God is with you, He is mighty to save, He will take great delight in you, He will rejoice over you with singing, He will quiet you with His love.*” He literally sings over you. Can you imagine the song He sings about you? As He runs the whole Universe Jesus whistles a little tune about you and how wonderful you are. Isn’t that crazy good?!

Before you think I am a heretic, look at His response to her in *verse 2*: “*Yes you are my darling companion!*” We are not being presumptuous. Jesus says that you truly are the subject of His songs! But he takes it even further. In the end of *verse 2* He tells us that we stand out from everyone else and “*remain as pure as a lily.*” Jesus truly believes you are flawless. This is how deeply His blood has cleansed your being.

In response, the Shulamite sings for the next three verses about how wonderful her Lover-King is. We literally blossom and come alive because of His love for us. He brings us into His “house of wine” which is mega rich in meaning. Throughout *The Song*, wine is used as a metaphor for love which is cool because it is deep red in color, it is sweet, it is the result of crushing and mingling grapes together and not for nothing, love has a way of making a person feel buzzed! In saying that He took her to the house of wine, the Shulamite is saying that he got intoxicated by her love. Do not miss this. Your love intoxicates Jesus and He continues to pour out love on us until we come to *verse 5* in which she says, “*How could I take more?*”

This prompts Jesus to say to our friends, “*Do not disturb my love until she is ready to arise.*” (2:7) This is repeated a few times throughout *The Song* and it communicates the importance of love. There is a time for love to be awakened and there is a time for it to be held back. Of course, this applies to human romance but it also applies to our relationship with Jesus. In your experience would you say that there has been a waking up in your relationship with Jesus? You have probably known about Him, perhaps even believed in Him for a long time, but then for whatever reason you encountered Him and something awakened within. It’s a mystery as to why it happens when it does. If you’ve experienced this awakening you know what I am talking about. It’s like your love for Jesus was asleep and then suddenly, it was awake! Has this happened to you? Have you experienced what the Shulamite describes in *verse 8*? She heard his voice. She saw Him leaping and coming towards her. She experienced Him gazing into her soul and blossoming within her heart.

Has this happened to you? It certainly can. I am praying that you will encounter Jesus as we go through this *Song* together. This is where we break past the boundaries of religious misconceptions. This is where we give up on our last utopian nightmare. This is where, like the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, we finally cry out from our own shackles of sin and say with the Shulamite, “Let Him smother me with kisses! Smother ME Lord!”

This is also the very place where we hear His calm assurances that He has loved us this whole time. We left Him but He never left us. Will you do as the Shulamite did and “*sit under His grace shadow*” and “*rest with delight where His glory never fades?*” (2:3) He is very clear on how He feels about you. You make Him dizzy with love. Did you ever imagine that you could have that kind of effect on Jesus?

As we close this chapter: are you at rest in your relationship with Jesus? Or are you still worried that you might not make the final cut on judgment day? So many Christians think that if they commit a sin, Jesus is disappointed with them and gives them a cold shoulder. Hopefully you can already see that Jesus is not fickle like we are. His commitment is fierce.

I am guessing that you have never heard this kind of talk before. You’ve heard that you’re a sinner and need a Savior or perhaps that Jesus wants to be your friend. That is all true. But in *The Song*, we hear Jesus saying things to us that rattle us awake. It might be hard for you to believe. That’s ok. Jesus is patient. By the time we’re done, you’ll be His!

Alrighty! Let’s talk about this for a bit. Work through the following questions with your Life Group and with your Discipleship Partner.

- #1. On a ‘10 scale’ with ‘1’ being ice cold and ‘10’ being red hot, how passionate is your own pursuit of Jesus right now? Why?
- #2. *Ecclesiastes 3:11* says God put eternity into our hearts. What does this tell us about our quest for God?
- #3. What makes a person ‘hungry’ for Jesus? Can you think of anything we could do to stir up a greater hunger for Him?
- #4. In *The Song 1:14* Jesus is compared to henna blossoms. The Hebrew word for ‘henna’ is ‘kopher’ which is also translated as ‘atonement’. How does this impact our understanding of this verse?
- #5. Jesus’ favorite nickname for us is “darling” which means “lover-friend”. Talk about why it is cool that these two concepts merge together in this one word. What does this say about Jesus’ feelings towards us?
- #6. On page 42 we noted that Jesus sees us like Pharoah’s horses: majestic, beautiful and powerful. Is it hard for you to believe that Jesus sees you in this way? Why or why not?
- #7. Hebrews and Colossians speak of fixing our eyes and thoughts on Jesus. How can we put into practice doing this every day? What difference would it make in your relationship with Jesus if you fixed your eyes on Him?
- #8. We talked about the “house of wine” in 2:4. What surprises you most about thinking that your love might give Jesus a feeling of intoxication? Is it strange that you affect Jesus in this way? Why? Why not?

How can we pray for you?

Week 7: WHEN DELIVERANCE GETS HARD

"Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?' It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" ~Exodus 14:12 (but see also Exodus 5:21, 17:7, Numbers 11:1 & 14:1-3)

It would be helpful to read *The Song* 3-5.

My family will tell you that I enjoy mocking movie scenes. Sometimes when we are watching a movie as a family my daughter will say, "You can watch this with us dad but you're not allowed to mock!" It typically does not take long before I am in trouble! It's just so hard to not make comments! Whether it is the fakery or the really awful agenda that bleeds through or just something stupid, I have a hard time keeping my comments to myself! And plus, evoking moans and complaints from my kids is kind of fun!

One of my all-time favorite movie scenes to mock is the very end of *Titanic*. Do you know the scene? The ship is sinking in the background and people have scrambled onto chunks of the ship to stay afloat until their rescuers arrive. Rose is floating on a piece of a door in the middle of the freezing North Atlantic waters. Faithful Jack, ever the gentleman, allowed her to have the door while he stayed in the water to help balance her makeshift raft. (Cue the music with Celine Dion.) The two lovers exchange sweet promises and kind words but Jack is clearly freezing to death in the icy waters. And then the big moment arrives. As hypothermia sets in and the final vestiges of life leave Jack's frozen body, Rose promises to never let go. "I'll never let go Jack, I'll never let go!" ...as she lets go of his hand allowing his popsicle-like carcass to sink to the ocean floor!

Now I know the director made a bundle of cash off that movie but they needed to change that scene. She clearly let go of Jack! We have had these discussions/arguments as a family over the years. I think it was bad form for her to let go of Jack immediately after she promised to not let go. She enjoyed that nice chunk of wood while he froze to death in the water. The least she could do was hang on to his body and give it a proper burial! This film is one of our daughter Katharine's all-time favorites and she argues her point differently. She says that "letting go" was a metaphor. Rose never let go of Jack. She never forgot about him as she went on to live her life of adventure. She held him in her heart. I don't buy it!

Here's the point: love looks like a great idea when everything is going well. However, the moment life hits the fan and gets hard it can be tempting to let go and end the movie. Our relationship with Jesus is a love relationship. All of us come to Jesus because we found Him to be attractive. Let's be honest, mostly it is because we heard that He would forgive our sins and give us a fresh start in life. This is what attracted us to Him. And listen, this is what draws us to salvation in Jesus. He loves you and He does forgive you. He makes you a new creation and gives you an excellent fresh start in life. However.....Jesus wants more.

And here is the problem: my heart is a duplicitous disaster. Some days I am hot with love, I'm "all in". Other days I am cold, I'm "checked out". Some days I am on fire for God. Other days I am ashes. The question is not "IF" my heart is a mess. The question is "What can be done about it?" In those moments when my duplicity is exposed, what do I do? Do I follow Adam and Eve's example and cover it with a fig leaf? Hiding is our first instinct. Or do I follow David in the Bible who cried out, *"give me an undivided heart that I may fear Your name?" (Psalm 86:11)*

Caught red-handed in my hypocrisy do I run and hide or fall to my knees and cry for mercy? Falling to our knees and crying for mercy is perhaps the finest moment of a person's life. This is when we stop hiding, admit that we're lousy lovers and get converted, again. One of the lies we are taught in church is that conversion is a

one-time event that happens when a person signs a decision card or gets baptized. Salvation is not an event as many Christians presume. It is a process that leads to an event. It is the preparation for a homecoming. Heaven is much more than a place. It is a magnificent Person. Salvation is starting to spend forever with this Person. He is perfect in holiness so to enjoy Him fully I must also be perfect in holiness.

It is like those people who lost their sense of smell and taste during COVID. It happened to Karis. Because she lost her taste she also lost her ability to enjoy food. She did not want to eat. Jesus is infinitely delicious. Our taste buds are grossly underdeveloped. Salvation is the process by which we develop the capacity to fully enjoy a life with Jesus.

How does Jesus expose those unconverted places in our hearts? I can tell you that He does not shame you. That's the devil's game, not the way Jesus operates. He is gracious. He invites you to go deeper. Your response to His invitation reveals any flaws in your soul that still need to be converted. Every place in your life where Jesus has invited you deeper and you have dug in your heels refusing to budge forward is an unconverted place that needs to be "saved".

As the love story develops in *The Song*, we see love becoming difficult. We see deliverance getting hard and the Shulamite is not so sure that she wants to be delivered. This is an age-old problem. Ancient Israel faced the same dilemma just after they celebrated God's goodness to them. For years they had cried out for deliverance. When the day finally came, Moses showed up and told them about his burning bush encounter. The elders of Israel were super thrilled...until Pharaoh removed the straw from their bricks. Deliverance got hard. It continued to be difficult. From the Red Sea to the burning desert to the giants in the land, Israel faced one challenge after another. God doesn't promise that your deliverance will be easy. He promises that He will never leave you.

There are two scenes in *The Song* which portray this tension we all feel as we follow Jesus. The first scene is found in 2:10-17. The second scene is found in 5:2-16. In the first scene, the Shulamite hesitates to ascend the mountain height with her Lover. In the second scene, the Shulamite faces the suffering of her Man and is not sure she wants to embrace Him.

In *The Song* 2:13, the Lover invites His beloved to "*run with Me to the higher place.*" This sounds like a great idea until we see how much work is involved. In 2:15 He invites her to work with Him to catch those troubling foxes and remove them from the vineyard. Then in 2:17 she turns down His invitation. She told Him to "*go on ahead to the mountain of spices-I'll come another time.*" "Maybe later Lord! Now is not a good time."

Pick a subject. There are any number of things in the Christian life to which God calls us that we hesitate to follow. Over the years I have personally resisted tithing, Sabbath keeping, praying, fasting, being generous, serving, apologizing to someone I wronged, etc. Many Christians think these things are just religious duties and are therefore optional. However, these disciplines are valuable to the formation of our character as Christ followers. They are often portrayed as empty religious behaviors and we have used them to judge one another's progress but that is a twisting of God's intent. What we have dubbed "Christian disciplines" are really opportunities to die to self and go deeper with Christ. Each one has been an invitation to know Jesus more deeply and I have hesitated to follow.

Jesus is gracious. In *The Song* 3:5 He says to the Jerusalem maidens, "*Promise Me, by the gentle gazelles and delicate deer that you'll not disturb my love until she is ready to arise.*" In other words He is giving us time to change our minds, time to become "ready to arise". If you've walked with Jesus long enough you know exactly what I am talking about. Any seasoned saint will tell you they have been through this process many

times. And guess what? Jesus is more patient than we can imagine. You can wrestle with Him for years on a subject and He will stay faithful to you. Eventually, we see things His way and muster up the courage to follow Him into the unknown place.

One of the reasons why we have *The Song* in our Bible is because it paints a picture of your glorious future. It paints a vision for where Jesus wants to take you. This is meant to inspire you. It is meant to give you the impetus you need to push past your fear of the unknown and take the step of faith with Jesus that He has been waiting for you to take. Why must you constantly move forward? Why is it necessary to discipline yourself in the things of God? Because Jesus wants to marry you! And as His spouse, you will be reigning with Him. This is all training for reigning! It's schooling for ruling! (You like the clever rhymes?)

In *The Song 3:6-11* God Himself speaks out loud to us. He announces the coming of Jesus to receive His bride. He speaks of the wedding day. Do you see the flow of the storyline? In the end of *chapter 2* and the beginning of *chapter 3*, Jesus invites us to go higher with Him but we resist. Then we repent. *Chapter 3* opens with us tossing and turning in bed regretting our hesitation. We cry, "*Why did I let Him go from me? How my heart now aches for Him.*" (3:1) And then, almost immediately we are swooped up into a wedding scene. In 3:7 we see the marriage carriage and it is beautiful. In verse 9, the marriage carriage has a seat but it is 'the mercy seat'. In *Exodus 25:21* we are given the description of the Ark of the Covenant which had a cover on the top. They called it "The Mercy Seat". In front of the "Mercy Seat" on the Ark of the Covenant the high priest would offer sacrifices for the people in order that their sins be forgiven. They called it "The Mercy Seat" because it was where they found mercy and forgiveness.

In fact, there are multiple references in this wedding scene to the Holy of Holies. The smoke, the mercy seat, the fragrant spices and the canopy of golden glory. These are all callbacks to the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Clearly, this 'wedding' is unlike any other! This is the wedding of the Lamb talked about in *Revelation 19:7*! In *The Song 3:10*, the place where they sit is "*sprinkled with crimson*" which is a shadow of the blood of Christ which forgives our sins.

Please do not miss the flow of thought: Jesus invited us to go higher with Him and we declined. We refused to budge from our comfort zone. Jesus did not cajole or coerce us. He kept moving and inviting us to follow. He graciously urged the other maidens to not disturb us. A gap was created between us, not because He refused to wait for us but because we refused to follow Him. Eventually, we realized that we missed Him and we relented. He wanted to take us higher with Him and we didn't go. And so, as 3:4 says, "*I caught Him and fastened myself to Him.*" Jesus, I am never letting You out of my sight again!

And then immediately after this we are taken up into our wedding scene. Jesus marries us anyway! Why? Because we are already made perfect by what He did on that mercy seat sprinkled in crimson! Could you become more mature? Yes. But can you be more complete? No. You are made perfect by His blood and this is all the reason Jesus needs to marry you!

This is so refreshing, isn't it? Preachers have beat us up for so long telling us to get our act together. We are given this impression that we're forgiven but since we're imperfect Christians we will barely squeak through the Pearly Gates. Like somehow in Heaven only super saints can have the expensive seats but losers have to sit in the nosebleed seats. There is not a shred of evidence in the Bible to support this notion! When you are forgiven by Jesus' blood you are qualified to share this marriage carriage with Him! This ride is your ride!

And notice something else. Jesus invited us to ascend the mountain with Him and for whatever reason we did not go. Perhaps we were afraid or lazy or carnal or whatever. We thought we would have to climb that

mountain alone. That is not true. He plans on carrying us to the top! When He invited us to climb the mountain we could not see that just over the horizon the marriage carriage was coming for us...to carry us!

This is comparable to what God asked the priests to do in *Joshua 3:15*. Their only way into the Promised Land was through the flooded Jordan River. God asked them to step into the raging waters. They stepped into the water and then God did the miracle. God parted the water *after* the priests stepped into it. Has this been your experience? On this side of faith, whatever God is asking looks terrifying. On the other side of faith, looking back, we see how God provided. Climbing the mountain with Jesus is intimidating but the marriage carriage is just over the horizon! Be encouraged loved one and say “yes” to Jesus, you will not regret it!

This leads us into *The Song chapter 4*. In this chapter Jesus does most of the talking and wow, you have never heard Jesus talk like *this* before! In 4:1 He begins, “*Listen, My dearest darling, you are so beautiful-you are beauty itself to Me!...What devotion I see each time I gaze upon you.*” Wait a second. Devotion? But didn’t we just refuse to ascend the mountain with Him? And didn’t He have to carry us? How can He look at us and see “devotion”?

This is the amazing and mysterious thing about our Jesus. His love for us is complete. We are given His righteousness. He took our sin and traded it for His righteousness (2 *Corinthians 5:21*). When He looks in your eyes He sees His own character shining through. In *The Song 4:2* He says, “*Your life has become clean and pure.*” He has washed you, forgiven you and cleansed you. You are flawless in His eyes (*Ephesians 5:27*).

When Jesus looks at you, this is what He sees: “*When I look at you, I see your inner strength, so stately and strong...your virtues and grace cause a thousand famous soldiers to surrender to your beauty*” (4:4). Does Jesus need new glasses? No. He sees us as we were created to be. This is how thoroughly He forgives. Remember, “*Love keeps no record of wrongs.*” (1 *Corinthians 13:5*) Our sins don’t define us. His mercy does.

This is all the encouragement the Shulamite needs. She responds to her Lover in 4:6 by declaring, “*I will go to the mountaintop with you-the mountain of suffering love...yes I will be your bride!*” In the light of the grace through which Jesus sees us how could we not follow Him? Our ability to fail does not exceed Jesus’ ability to forgive. His grace trumps our sin every time. We have everything to gain and nothing to lose!

The text of *chapter 4* keeps flowing. It is as if Jesus is too focused on expressing His love for us, and our commitment to Him gets lost in His loving words. He continues in *verse 7*, “*Every part of you is so beautiful, my darling, perfect is your beauty, without flaw within. Now you are ready, my bride, to come with me as we climb the highest peaks together.*” I hesitate to make any comments on this. I’d encourage you to read His words to you out loud and let them sink into your soul. You leave Jesus breathless and you have stolen His heart (4:9).

I am a man who at times has prided himself on being uncouth and barely out of the cave but even my neanderthal heart is warmed by Jesus’ tender words. His humility is stunning. How is it that One so great as Jesus could feel this way about one so small as me? Jesus calls me His “*perfect partner*” (4:12). I have never had someone believe in me the way that Jesus does! The loving words of *chapter 4* are more than sweet nothings. Remember, the One who spoke the Universe into existence is speaking these words to you. His words are powerful. Let them work a new creation in your own heart and life.

Verse 16 becomes our response to Jesus’ words: “*Stir up the sweet spice of Your life within me. Spare nothing as you make me your fruitful garden. Hold nothing back until I release your sweet fragrance.*” This is a prayer of consecration: “Jesus, do what You must do to make me the person of Your dreams!”

Saying this to Jesus seems like an insane risk until we experience the blessing of knowing Him intimately. Speaking in purely mercenary terms - it's a good deal for us! As *chapter 5* opens, Jesus continues to speak but He shifts the focus of His message. He is still speaking to us as His bride but at the end of *verse 1* He invites the friends to come and "*feast upon My bride...drink the wine of her love.*" On the surface, this seems weird. After telling us how much He loves us why on earth would He invite others to look at us?

Here's what He is doing. In *Isaiah 49:6* Israel was called to be a "light to the Gentiles" and in *Matthew 5:14* Jesus called us a "city on a hill." The life of Christ being worked out in us is never meant to be for us alone. Our lives are to have a lasting impact on the world around us. God's plan is to thoroughly transform you so that others see the changes in your life and want what you have received. This is our mission.

In *5:2* the Shulamite lets this mission slip. She confesses, "*After this, I let my devotion slumber.*" It's a mystery, isn't it? Just thirty days after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea Israel doubted God and made a golden calf to worship. The Shulamite has this amazing experience with her Lover gushing praises on her and she lets "her devotion slumber." How is it possible to forget and stumble so quickly?! We do the same thing. It seems our mountaintop experiences have cliffs. We plummet from spiritual highs faster than a rock-filled balloon.

At the end of *verse 2*, Jesus calls us to "*arise...open your heart, my darling, deeper still to Me. Will you receive Me this dark night...I need you this night to arise and come be with Me...for My heaviness and tears are more than I can bear...*" There are hints here of the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus asked His friends to "watch with Me." (*Mark 14:34*) They couldn't. They fell asleep. Their devotion slumbered.

We all want to follow Jesus to victory. Sharing the trophy, celebrating the 'win', chanting "we are the champion" sounds great. Sign us up! We forget, or just choose to overlook, the times when Jesus told us, "*You will be hated because of Me.*" (*Matthew 10:22*) "*If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.*" (*John 15:20*) Jesus urged us to "*count the cost.*" (*Luke 14:28*) The Apostle Paul evaluated following Jesus and came to this conclusion, "*I want to suffer with Him, sharing in His death.*" (*Philippians 3:10*) No one arrives at this conclusion lightly and without being tested. Life with Christ is greater than we could imagine. It is also more challenging, more difficult and more gut-wrenching.

In *The Song 5:3-6* the Shulamite essentially says to her Lover that she is satisfied with where they are in their relationship. She has traded her old clothes for new ones which is a picture of putting off her sins and putting on the righteousness of Christ (*Colossians 3:5*). She asks in *verse 3*, "Isn't that enough?" In response, He reaches in to unlock the door of her heart, causing her to tremble at His gentle touch. In *verse 6*, she opens up to Him only to find that He is gone. What's happening here?

In *chapter 3* the separation was because she was unwilling to go with Him to the mountain. Here in *chapter 5*, the separation is designed to help her identify with His suffering. This is called a "test" and often the Teacher remains quiet during a test. Good teachers do not give out the answers to test questions. They allow students to wrestle and work through the problems because this is what is ultimately best for the student. God is a good teacher! It was in this feeling of absence that her heart was "*torn in longing for Him.*" (*5:6*) She sought His presence but could not find Him. She called out and did not get any answers. One of the hardest things to understand about God is that there are some lessons He can only teach us from a distance. In these moments we must decide if He is worth the effort. Am I following Jesus because He does good things for me or am I following Him because HE IS good?

This might surprise you, but Jesus does not want you to simply "believe" in Him. He wants your love for Him to become a conviction. Beliefs are ideas that we hold. We say, "I believe such and such." We argue about

whose beliefs are better. Sometimes, if you argue better than I do, you might even convince me to ditch what I believe and take hold of what you believe. But convictions work differently. Convictions hold us. Convictions have become reality to us. For example, we have a conviction about gravity. None of us is willing to challenge it by stepping off a tall building. We do not debate it and we do not even wrestle with it. This conviction is firmly fixed inside our conscience, gravity is real.

Jesus said, "*These people honor Me with their lips but their hearts are far from Me.*" (Matthew 15:8) Their lips ("beliefs") did not match their hearts ("convictions"). Jesus wanted their hearts because He knew if He had their hearts, their lips would follow. But having their lips does not mean He has their hearts! This is why Jesus said, "*If you love Me, you will obey Me.*" (John 14:15) He does not want your obedience. He wants your love. As you grow in love with Him, your obedience will naturally follow and it won't even feel like obedience!

This is the main point that Jesus makes in His Sermon on the Mountain in *Matthew 5, 6 & 7*. He taught that our righteousness must *surpass* that of the Pharisees (*Matthew 5:20*). He goes on to illustrate, saying that you might not murder someone but if you hate them it is the same thing. You may not commit the physical act of adultery but lusting in your heart is equally as wrong. Why? It is great that you did not kill a person or that you did not physically commit adultery but if anger and lust are still in your heart, you have not yet been converted. God's desire is to remove anger and lust from your heart altogether. This is genuine conversion.

A truly converted person wants to do good. They do not have to muster up the kindness to serve others, they simply do it from the heart. Any boy scout can work up strength to do a few good deeds but if the movement within their soul is to do whatever pleases themselves the rest of the time, they have not been changed. This is what John meant when he said that if you claim to love God but hate your brother, you are a liar. (*1 John 4:20*). My lips can claim love, but if my heart has hatred, I am fooling myself. Many Christians read these verses and think, "I need to be more loving." No! That's the worst thing you can do. That is religion. The right response is not white-knuckling yourself into being nicer. The right response is to repent before God asking Him to transform your heart: "God do not help me to love but make me a lover like You are."

The goal of Jesus is to bring us into the place where our first instinct is to do good and the general flow of our heart is in the same direction as His. Any area of my heart that still struggles to do the right thing is still in need of conversion.

This is why Jesus wants your love for Him to become conviction. He does not want you to "try" to love him. He wants it to flow out of your heart as a "conviction". And it cannot become a conviction unless it is tested. Otherwise, it remains simply a nice idea. What will you do when your love for Christ is tested? In *Psalms 42:10* David was faced with this decision. Feeling like God forgot him, David's friends taunted him about why he didn't give up. His response? He dug deep into his own soul and told his soul to put "*your hope in God and praise Him.*" Nothing would shake David from God. How about you? Is your resolve the same? How will you know unless it gets tested?

When her friends tried to convince her to give up in *5:9*, the Shulamite's answer in *verses 10-16* is breathtaking. She recounts all of the amazing things that He is. And she concludes with, "*If you ask me why I love Him so, it's because there is none like Him to me!*" (*5:16*) This is what happens when our deliverance gets hard. You see, difficulty does not allow us to be quasi-committed. It demands an extreme response. We either respond to it the way that ancient Israel did, with grumbling and rebellion OR we respond as the Shulamite, with a more solid resolution to remain faithful. But we cannot stay in the mushy middle.

The ancient Israelites would have been horrified by these scenes in *The Song* 3 & 5. Nobody turns down a king like this and lives to talk about it! We live in a western democracy. We talk smack about our leadership all the time. But in the ancient world it did not happen. The Shulamite's hesitation to follow the King would have been treasonous to the ancient mind. Therefore, the humility of this king and his love for her would have been utterly shocking to the original hearers of this song.

Can you appreciate the humility and love of Jesus for you? In *Revelation 3:20* Jesus says to the church, "*Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.*" There are challenges in our walk with Christ and we are often hesitant. He stands at the door of your heart gently knocking, just waiting for you to invite Him inside.

We must decide. Is Jesus worth it to you? Do you want Him or simply what He can do for you? Your response to your tests will answer that question.

Alrighty! Let's talk about this for a bit. Work through the following questions with your Life Group and with your Discipleship Partner.

#1 In *The Song* 3 & 5, Shulamite encounters two difficulties. Please explain them in your own words.

#2 In your walk with Christ, have you ever felt like letting go? What happened? What was it that brought you back to renew your commitment?

#3 One of the hardest questions is, "Why do wicked people prosper, but good people suffer?" Given what we learned from *The Song* this week, how might you answer that question?

#4 Jesus is always inviting us to go deeper but we often choose to stay where we are comfortable. Why?

#5 Please give an example from your own life when you decided to take a risky step with Jesus. How did it turn out? What did you discover about Him and about yourself in the process?

#6 READ *The Song* 5:10-16. This is the Shulamite's description of her king. But this is allegory, so we could also use it to describe Jesus. Try to pray through it, offering it as your own prayer to Jesus. Is there any language here that you could begin using regularly in your prayer times? If so, what?

#7 When was the last time that your heart waffled in faith? What happened? How did you respond?

#8 We talked about beliefs and convictions on page 50. Beliefs can be taught. Convictions come out of our experiences. This means that to have a genuine faith in Christ, we must go through stuff. What are three of your strongest convictions, the ones you'd die for? What experiences led you to those convictions?

#9 Have you gone through anything with Christ that has shaped your commitment to Him? If so, what?

#10 READ 2 *Timothy* 1:8-12. Be sure to read verse 12 twice, it is so good! What had Paul become convinced of? What led him to that firm conviction? Here is something tangible you can do this week: memorize 2 Timothy 1:12. Write it on a 3x5 card and carry it with you. Review it multiple times each day until it becomes locked into your memory. When the world gets rash and life gets hard remind yourself, "I KNOW Who I believe in and He is able!"

Week 8: GIVE ME THE DELIVERER!

"If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!" ~Joshua 24:15

"Not one of all the Lord's good promises to Israel failed; every single one was fulfilled." ~Joshua 21:45

Please read *The Song 6 & 7*.

The college I attended did not allow freshmen to have cars on campus, so it was awesome to become a sophomore and be allowed to bring my car to school. I owned a 1978 Dodge Charger 2.2 hatchback. My dad helped me buy it and she was my pride and joy. She had a stick shift with five speeds and tinted windows. When I drove her, she made me feel like David Hasselhoff in *Knight Rider*. Man, I was cool! If you've never seen *Knight Rider*, you need to check it out. It's probably on Hulu but it would be under the "wicked oldies" section.

I learned one lesson very quickly: students with cars have a lot of friends. On multiple occasions I was invited by people who barely knew me to go with them to the city for fun, "and oh, by the way, could you drive?" Fellow dormmates would knock on my door at night asking me to drive them downtown for pizza. They would say, "You fly, I'll buy!" While I appreciated the free pizza as much as the next guy, I found all my new 'friends' to be a burden.

It quickly became obvious that some people just wanted to be my friend because I had a car. It wasn't me they wanted. They were not blessed by my presence or dazzled by my personality. They needed my car and the only way to get it was through me. Many people approach Jesus the same way. We need salvation. The only way to get it is through Jesus. So, Jesus becomes a means to an end. He is one of the hoops through which I must jump to get what I need. Sort of like having to see the doctor before he can give me a prescription.

This is one of the things that difficulties can shake out of us. We talked about it in the previous chapter. Deliverance gets hard and we need to decide if Jesus is worth it. Do I want Him, or just the deliverance that He offers? Unfortunately, there is no easy way to fully answer this question. It must become a conviction, which means it must be birthed out of our experiences. It must be tested. In watching the Shulamite go through her tests in *chapters 3 & 5*, we learned a few things about our own tests.

Ancient Israel experienced the same thing. She went through test after painful test. In *Deuteronomy 8:2-3* Moses was preaching his final sermon to Israel and he said, *"Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart..."* It was not for God's benefit. It was for Israel's benefit. They needed to know what was in their hearts. Through it all, God taught them that *"man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."* The whole experience was one big lesson to teach Israel that God was the One they wanted. He taught them to live on His word, not on all of the amazing things He could do for them.

About 40 years after Moses gave that sermon, Joshua stood before Israel and challenged the people to "choose whom you will serve." In one voice, the whole nation declared, "We want the Lord!" All of their tests brought them to this high-water mark in their relationship with God. He delivered them from Egypt. When the deliverance got hard, they found that He was faithful. Now they wanted Him and Him alone. This is

what we see happening in the Shulamite's experience too. Having endured two tests, she ends *chapter 5* saying, *"Everything about Him fills me with holy desire! And now He is my beloved-my friend forever."* At the very beginning of *chapter 5*, the King invited other people to come and enjoy His bride. Do you remember that from page 49? At first that seemed weird, but then we realized that it spoke to our destiny. Having gone through the two tests, the Shulamite declares her love to the King. As *chapter 6* opens, there are others who ask the Shulamite about her King. They want to know Him too! In other words, her commitment to endure trials with her King inspired others to want to know more about Him. *"We long to see Him too, where may we find Him?" (6:1)* The way that you handle hardship is what will make you stand out from the rest of the world. Do you become frazzled like they do? Or do you endure hardship with a calm assurance of God's goodness? This will make your Jesus attractive to others and it is what we see happening in *The Song 6:1*. The Shulamite has painted such an amazing portrayal of her King that the other maidens also want to know Him.

Chapters 6 & 7 are where their love story flourishes. In *6:3* the Shulamite declares, *"I am fully devoted to my beloved, and my beloved is fully devoted to me!"* In response, Jesus launches into six verses of praise for His bride. Again, He gushes over us with powerful romantic language. You have never heard Jesus speak this way to you before: *"I see you in your beauty, a radiant city."* (6:4) I have driven across the Tappan Zee and the GW Bridges many times in my life. Every single time, I cannot keep myself from craning my neck to look at New York City. There is something awe-inspiring about it. The tall buildings, the masses of people, the activity - all of it. It has a way of drawing your attention. Jesus says that you have that same effect on Him. He is drawn to you.

"Turn your eyes from me; I can't take it anymore." (6:5) You look at Jesus and He becomes undone. This is what your worship does to Him. The Book of Revelation compares our prayer to bowls of fragrant incense. God expands His nostrils and takes in a deep breath of your praise. It is so pleasing to Him! And here, Jesus urges you to stop because your praise is moving Him too much. I can imagine that my praise makes Jesus feel awkward. I sing and sing and pour out my love to Him and with flush cheeks, Jesus awkwardly says, "stop it! You're embarrassing Me!" He says to stop it but really He loves it.

Why do you praise Jesus? Why do you pray? Is it because you *required* to in order to be a "good" Christian? Or is it because you *want* to? Allow your prayer life to be motivated by this: Jesus loves it. Let this be all the reason you need to stop what you're doing and spend time in prayer and worship. Try this, pour out your love and affection on Jesus through praise and worship. Keep doing it until you sense Jesus saying, "turn your eyes from me; I can't take it anymore!" Go ahead. Gush on Jesus, try to make Him feel awkward with your adoring praise. I dare you! This will forever change the way you relate to Him.

"Unique is My beloved one-unrivalled in beauty." (6:9) Jesus could pick anyone, yet He chose you to be His before the creation of the world (*Ephesians 1:4*). Isn't that marvelous? Stop and soak in the sheer honor of having been chosen by Jesus to be His.

Verse 10 contains four descriptions of His beloved: She *"arises like the dayspring of the dawn"*; she is *"fair as the shining moon"*; she is *"bright and brilliant as the sun in all its strength"* and she is *"astonishing to behold as a majestic army."* Think about how these things make you feel. I love to be out in my yard at daybreak. The rays of sun come peeking through the trees, the air is crisp, the world is quiet. There is such hope at the start of a day! And the full moon? Wow! Sitting on our deck at night in the full moon is surreal. The moon has a reflective light, yet our whole yard is illumined by it. And the sun when it rules the sky at full strength? It dominates everything. It brings life to the world. And a majestic army? Have you seen the pictures of military units in their dress uniforms standing in formation? It's awe-inspiring. All of this is what Jesus says about you

loved one! You are that hopeful ray of light to a dark world. You are that one who reflects glory at night. You are that powerful one bringing life to those blessed to know you. You are that majestic army, stunning in beauty. You are the fulfilment of what Deborah sang in *Judges 5:31*. She sings, *“Let those who love Him be like the sun when it comes out in full strength!”* Amen!

Notice how far the Shulamite has come in relationship with Jesus. In chapter one she was insecure about how she looked. Now, she is brilliant, dazzling and like an army ready to conquer. Can you see any similar progression in your own experience with Jesus? When you began walking with Him, you were insecure, easily intimidated. As you’ve walked with Him you have become more confident, your character has become more brilliant, your life has become more vibrant. You are looking more and more like Him!

In *6:11-13* the Shulamite goes in search of “budding vines” which is symbolic of new ministry. Israel was often compared to a vineyard. In *John 13*, Jesus called Himself the vine and we are the branches. Here, the Shulamite goes looking for new branches! And before she knows it, she is snatched up in the royal chariot and everyone is looking to her. At the end of *verse 13*, we find the only reference to the Shulamite in the whole Song. She humbly asks, *“Why would you seek a mere Shulamite like me?”* A Shulamite was someone who came from the town of Shunem. The word “Shulamite” also happens to be the feminine form of the word “Solomon”. It is a word that means “peace”. We have the same name as our King, and it is “peace”. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, *“blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the sons of God.”* (*Matthew 5:9*) Bringing peace into conflict and order into chaos is part of what it means to be made in God’s image.

One of the ways we love Jesus is to love who we are in Jesus. Here in *chapter 6*, Jesus has just spent the last six verses telling us how magnificent we are. In response, the most natural thing for us to do is look for ways to impact those around us. It is interesting to notice that when the disciples were arguing about who was greatest, Jesus did not chide them for pride. Instead, He redefined their concept of power. The truly powerful one”, Jesus would say, “is the servant of all.” (*Mark 9:35*) We operate with this really odd idea. Out of caution and not wanting to puff someone up with pride, we hold back on our praises. As if we are doing others a favor by not complimenting them. We fear that too many compliments would make a person cocky. The exact opposite is true. Those with the biggest bluster and loudest mouths tend to be the most insecure about who they are. Taking the approach of Jesus and opening the floodgates of praise on one another will produce humble, willing servants. This is what He has done with us.

As *chapter 7* opens Jesus continues to speak. As we noted a few weeks ago, He begins by praising our sandaled feet. Wearing sandals was a privilege reserved for those of a higher class. The Shulamite’s sandaled feet indicated that she was trusted by her king and she enjoyed unfettered access to go in and out of the palace as she wished. Let this truth sink in: Jesus trusts you. Believing in Him will change your life. Discovering that He believes in you will put fire in your bones and your life will change the world.

Jesus says, *“You are truly the poetry of God.”* (*7:1*) You are His creation. You are far better than you ever think you are but it is not because you discovered yourself. It is not something you manufactured. It is the result of walking with Jesus and allowing Him to rub off on you. He is being formed within you. *Romans 8:29* is becoming a reality in your life. You are being *“conformed to the likeness of His Son.”* And now your life *“stands tall as a tower, like a shining light on a hill.”* (*7:4*)

As you read these words of Jesus, spoken to you in *chapter 7*, do you get the sense that He is incredibly proud of you? He is glad to know you and He is thrilled by what you are becoming. It is not just for what you can do. But rather it is out of sheer enjoyment of being with you. He enjoys you! You are often distracted by the

world around you. Jesus is not distracted. He has fixed His gaze fully on you, piercing you with His love and adoration. He adores you! Jesus is not disappointed in you. He delights in you. This is the truth!

In verse 10 the Shulamite responds to His gushing praise by saying, *“Now I know that I am for my Beloved and all His desires are fulfilled in me.”* The Hebrew word translated as “beloved” is the word “yadiyah” and is formed from the root word “yad” which means “hand”. The literal idea is “hand-in-hand”. We are His beloved, we are hand-in-hand with Jesus, walking by His side. It is a picture of togetherness.

In Congo and in Kenya, it is not uncommon to see two men holding hands as they walk down the street. I was a bit taken aback the first time it happened to me. I was walking with another man and we were talking, enjoying good conversation. As we walked, he grasped my hand! Not wanting to be offensive I let him but it felt really awkward! In those cultures, holding hands is a sign of friendship. There is nothing romantic about it. Two men holding hands are two men enjoying one another’s company as friends. They often grasp the hand when the conversation goes to deeper levels.

Do you see this as a picture of your relationship with Jesus? You are His “beloved”. You are the one with whom He walks hand-in-hand. All of His desires are fulfilled in you. You are quite literally the one thing He cares most about in the entire created universe. As chapter 7 comes to a close, the Shulamite declares that the *“love apples are in bloom.”* This is a reference to pomegranates which were equated with human passion and love. She is saying that their love story has now reached its fullest bloom.

Isaiah 62:5 “As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.” Can you hear it beloved? Can you hear Him rejoicing over you? Can you see Him blushing as you rejoice over Him in praise? This is it. This is the very center of life. Everything begins right here. It is where we began with God in the Garden of Eden. Adam, Eve and God enjoyed this kind of mutual rejoicing in the first light of creation. It was tragically lost when Adam and Eve committed the first sin. Jesus did all that He did so that we might return to those days of sweet innocence and ecstasy once again.

It seems like this is where we most often feel tension. Some call it the difference between “doing” and “being”. But when seen in context with *The Song*, “being” takes on a whole new meaning. “Being” is not just about us taking a day off from work and learning to breathe again. It is about cutting through the distractions that scream at us every day, such as: We are bombarded with bad news “be afraid!” We are peppered with unfinished business “do something!” We are constantly reminded that things are broken “be worried!” Our failures bully us demanding that we “be ashamed!”

The Song reminds us that there is another Voice. He gently says, “Beloved!” Do you see it? Let’s write it again but with a dash so you can see it more clearly. Jesus says to you, “Be-loved!” What does Jesus want you to do? Be loved. It will take some work to get delivered from the other screaming voices. Rest assured that it is possible to reach a place on this side of Heaven where you live and breathe as simply “the one who is loved, the BE-LOVED”. This is where your soul becomes as immovable as the One to Whom it is attached. This is where Jesus is taking you loved one. Do you see it?

As we close this chapter, would you try something with me? Put down this journal, put on some soft instrumental worship music and get quiet. Start by simply breathing deeply and basking in the music. Then whisper the words, “I love You Jesus.” Quietly, slowly continue to tell Jesus that you love Him. Pretty soon, you will hear Him speaking into your spirit, “I love you too!” And then, stay there for a moment simply loving Jesus and letting Him love you. I call this practice, “making love with Jesus.”

Alrighty! Let's talk about this for a bit. Work through the following questions with your Life Group and with your Discipleship Partner.

#1 READ *The Song* 7:1-9. The things Jesus says to you here are pretty amazing! Which phrase resonates most with you? Why?

#2 If Jesus never gave you anything else, would you be satisfied having only Him? How do you know?

#3 READ *Joshua* 21:45. Looking back over the course of your life and experience with Jesus, are you able to say the same thing? Have all of God's promises held up in your life? Why or why not?

#4 *The Song* 7:8 when interpreted as love poetry, is a picture of the king making love to his beloved. When interpreted allegorically as Jesus and the Church, it is a picture of His power possessing us and laying His claim on us. This verse illustrates the drastically different outcomes that happen when we interpret *The Song* from different perspectives. Which interpretive angle do you appreciate the most? Why?

#5 Did you try the recommended "making love with Jesus" exercise at the end of the chapter? How did it go? Feel free to share your experience with your discipleship partner.

#6 What practices do you regularly engage in to simply "make love" with Jesus? Share them with your discipleship partner.

#7 As we noted earlier in this journal, the Shulamite does most of the talking throughout *The Song*. However, in *chapters 6 & 7* it is the King who does most of the talking. Given what we have experienced so far in *The Song*, why do you think Jesus does most of the talking here?

#8 On page 53 we talked about how much our praise and prayer moves the heart of Jesus. How does it affect your prayer life to know that Jesus is so touched by your prayers?

#9 On page 55 we talked about the tension between "being" and "doing". How do you see this tension at work in your own life? How does the love of Jesus help you?

#10 Do you agree or disagree with the idea that a person cannot receive too many compliments? Why?

#11 How does it affect you to know that Jesus gushes over you with praise like He does in *chapters 6 & 7*? In 6:11-12 and in 7:10-13 the Shulamite responds to her Lover's praise by looking for new ministries. We said that this is often the response to Jesus' praise for us. We want to serve Him more. In what ways can you see this same dynamic at work in your own life? In what ways have you received Jesus' love and then responded with greater service?

"I will make you My wife forever!" ~God (speaking in Hosea 2:19)

Week 9: REIGNING WITH THE DELIVERER!

*"During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree...
The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones." ~ 1 Kings 4:25 & 10:27*

Please read *The Song* 8.

If you want a good time, do a Google search for "Bridezilla stories". You'll have hours of groans and giggles as you read about brides who went off the rails at their own weddings. One article I read was titled "13 of the worst bridezilla moments". There was the bride who fired one of her bridesmaids for being too pretty. Another bride fired the Best Man, someone who had been the Groom's best friend since childhood, because she didn't think he was pulling his weight to help out. Another bride cussed out a 15-year-old girl who worked for the florist that set up the floral arrangements. On and on it goes.

In high school I had a job as a bellhop at a Sheraton hotel. One of my responsibilities was to keep the lobby tidied up for our guests. It was a large hotel that had several ballrooms used for weddings and special events. I remember one time having to call the police because the photographer got drunk and started to hassle the guests and be a nuisance in the hotel. I've always wondered how those wedding photos turned out?

What is it that makes some brides go berserk? Embedded with the funny stories of brides gone wild are psychological commentaries. Most of them suggest that the stress of a "perfect" day becomes too much for some girls and this is why they lose it. They simply cannot take the pressure of holding it all together and they crack under it.

As funny as all of this is, it hits close to home for many Christians. How so? Christians are some of the unhappiest joyless people on the planet. Wouldn't you agree? In church, we even tell jokes about church people who worship like they just sucked on a lemon. We all have bad days but you have to admit that there is often a large cavernous gap between what we practice and how we preach. We preach "victory in Jesus" and live like losers. We mumble "How great is our God" and cheer like maniacs at a baseball game. We talk about being saved and live like we're still trapped. It just seems odd, doesn't it?

Are we loved by Jesus or not? Do we enjoy unfettered access to the very throne of Heaven, or not? Did Jesus give us the Kingdom, or didn't He? And if He did, why do we act like such paupers and victims so often? This is the power of a book like *The Song*. I believe it is the very reason why God included it in Scripture. At the center of your Bible is a message that has the power to transform your life and it is not preached at you, it is sung. Just like music, it has the power to work its way to the depths of your soul and change you from the inside out.

Throughout *The Song* we have witnessed the transformation of a peasant girl into a queen. She was forever changed, not because she attended a seminar but because she was loved. The love that is "*as strong as death*" (8:6) took over her soul, gripped her heart and made her a queen. The same is true of you. If you will allow Jesus to love you like this, you will also be forever changed. You do not need to attend another class. You do not need more white-knuckled discipline. These things are good but what you really need is to simply be-loved. You need to become the "be-loved" of Jesus! Yes. His love is that transformative.

In *The Song* 8 we come to the end of the love story but it is really just getting started. Life is far from over. It is beginning anew. We catch a taste for what life in love with Jesus looks like. It begins with the words of the Shulamite in *verses 1-4*. She has become so filled with love for her King that she aches. She wants to show her

love for him to the whole world. As it turns out, true love does not store up well. True love needs to be expressed. The famed *John 3:16* says, “*God so loved the world that He gave...*” God’s love could not stay contained. He gave. This is what the Shulamite is saying as chapter 8 opens. She says, “*If only I could express it fully, no matter who was watching me!*” She wanted to shout out her love for Him from the rooftops.

And look at *verse 2*. How bold! She says, “*I long to bring you into my innermost chamber...*” She wants to lead the King. This was unheard of in the ancient world. And if you think about it in our relationship to Jesus, it is equally surprising. It is here where our relationship with Jesus becomes mutual. He allows us to lead Him. We saw back in *chapter 7* that we have sandaled feet. He trusts us, even to the point of allowing us to lead. No wonder He asks us to die to ourselves! He desires to enter a mutually submitted relationship with us.

This might sound crazy to you but stop and consider: “*If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*” (*John 20:23*) Jesus also told us, “*I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven...*” (*Matthew 16:19*) The Apostle Paul advised the Corinthian church to take a rebellious man and “*hand him over to Satan.*” (*1 Corinthians 5:4*)

Does this sound wild? Perhaps even heretical? Check out *Mark 10:35-40*, *Matthew 19:28-29* and *Luke 19:11-27*.

In all three passages, Jesus hints at allowing us to reign. Why do you think we are so hesitant to talk about this in church?

What are we to make of this? We have authority to act as agents of the Kingdom here on earth. We have authority to speak in the name of Jesus as His representatives: to offer forgiveness, to bind, to loosen, to hand over. In this way we reign with Him, we usher Him into every space that we occupy. It is the proper execution of this authority that Jesus has been working on in your life. He begins by forgiving your sin and setting you free from your past. He continues by drawing you into close intimate connection with Him so that the difference between your heart and His heart cannot be distinguished. Then, He empowers you to act on His behalf in the world.

Jesus said it this way in *John 15:5* “*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, apart from Me you can do nothing.*” The order is essential. First, remain in Him. Then, bear fruit. Many Christians run around trying to bear fruit and then wonder why they are exhausted and miserable. You were not intended to function this way. It is why so many Christians have the “lemon-sucking syndrome”. Jesus is our Joy. If we lose Him we lose our joy, and as Henri Nouwen said, “few things get in the way of loving Jesus like serving Jesus.”

As *chapter 8* continues, Jesus speaks about us and He says in *verse 5*, “*Who is this one? She arises out of her desert clinging to her beloved.*” That’s us! We are clinging to Jesus. We are abiding in Him. He is our hope and dreams. He is our all in all and we are clinging to Him. This is your destiny. You were created to walk side by side with Jesus, to be escorted on His strong arm.

Brian Simmons notes at least five ways that we cling to Jesus: 1) To be saved from sin, 2) To live above the power of sin, 3) To walk in emotional wholeness, 4) To receive guidance and direction for our lives and 5) To be provided for and loved. We cleave to Him for these things, and so much more! As the branches thrive on the sap that flows from the vine, we also depend on the life of Christ in our veins.

In *verse 6* Jesus invites us to “*Fasten Me upon your heart like a seal of fire forevermore. This living, consuming flame will seal you as my prisoner of love.*” There is a play on words happening here. The Hebrew word for

“seal” is also translated “prison cell”. Jesus is inviting us to get “locked in” by His love. But the seal was also a mark of ownership in the ancient world. Each family had a seal that identified their family. They often branded important things with this seal to signify ownership.

Does the love of Jesus own you? Does it define you? We wear t-shirts that identify us as “Red Sox fans” or “Yankees fans”. We post things on social media that define our positions on social issues. The lover of Jesus will have none of that. The lover of Jesus has settled it: “I am defined by Christ and Christ alone. I am who HE says that I am. I belong to Jesus!” This is what it means to fasten Jesus on our hearts like a seal. Let Him define you and no other.

In *verse 6* Jesus tells us that His love for us is *“all-consuming as the very flashes of fire from the burning heart of God.”* This whole phrase is only two Hebrew words. The Hebrew language works that way. It is extremely dense and picturesque, so it says a lot in few words. The two Hebrew words used here are “shalhebet yah”. The first word means “flash of fire” or “sharply polished point of a weapon.” The second word “yah” is the sacred name for God Himself. Literally it means “the Lord most passionate.” This phrase is similar to what Moses said about God in *Deuteronomy 4:24* *“Our God is a consuming fire.”*

Think for a second about what a fire does. It literally transforms what it burns. An entire pile of wood becomes ashes when consumed by a fire. Gold is purified in a fire. Water is turned to steam. A freezing cold space is made livable with a warming fire. Fire takes raw meat and makes it edible. Fire is used to produce electricity which is then used to do all sorts of things. Beloved, it is breathtakingly unimaginable to consider what God can do with you if you allow yourself to be consumed by Him. Given over to the consuming fire of God you will exceed your wildest dreams of what you could potentially become.

Verse 7 says that endless floods cannot quench His fiery love for you. That is how hot this fire burns. Paul said it this way, *“Nothing can separate us from the love of God.” (Romans 8:38-39)* God loved you before He created you which means you did nothing to earn His love. This also means you cannot do something to lose it. That divorce you had? God still loves you. That rough couple of years when you did a bunch of things you regret? God still loves you. That time you got angry at God and walked away from Him? He never left you. He still loves you. *Verse 6* says, *“place this fierce, unrelenting fire over your entire being.”* Let this fiery love rule you and consume you. Do not let shame derail you.

If you think about it, love does not know what a “sacrifice” is. We do crazy things in the name of love. The funny thing is, we don’t think its crazy. That’s just what love does. To call God’s love a “sacrifice” is an insult. It was not a sacrifice for Him to do what He did on the cross. He loved you. He’d do it again if needed. Thankfully, it was powerful enough to only happen once. But make no mistake, His love for you is that unstoppable.

When you fully own this in your life, you will say what the Shulamite says as *chapter 8* comes near the end. Notice her confidence. Notice that this girl from humble beginnings who was once shy, insecure and worried about her looks now says, *“I am the one who brings Him bliss, finding favor in His eyes.” (8:10)* It reminds us of the way the Apostle John described himself as *“the one whom Jesus loved.” (John 13:23)* This was the scene at the Last Supper and John was *“leaning on Jesus’ bosom”* as the KJV says it. Looks a lot like the bride from *The Song* clinging to the arm of her beloved, doesn’t it? Their story can be your story. I know it is hard to believe but it is true. You can know God in the same way. It could be you leaning on the bosom of the Almighty. It could be you clinging to the arm of Jesus saying, “I’m the one He loves! I bring Him bliss!”

I love how *The Song* ends as a duet sung by both the Bride and King. You can almost hear them singing back and forth as these final lines bring the song to a close. “*Arise my darling.*” “*Come quickly my beloved!*” Their voices melodically flowing together as they sing the final refrain, “*Forever we shall be united as one!*” For those who know Him like this, Heaven has already begun.

We catch a glimpse of this in Israel’s history. It is not coincidence that we are examining a song written by Solomon. It was under Solomon’s reign that Israel reached her zenith. As the verses at the top of this chapter reveal, under Solomon’s rule life was good for God’s people. They had achieved a level of peace and prosperity that was unparalleled in their nation’s history. It would seem they had finally arrived. The cries for deliverance back in Egypt were long behind them. Their struggles through the wilderness were over. They had chosen to be God’s own people and now He was blessing them beyond belief.

This is where *The Song* appears to end also. The Shulamite’s struggles are over. She has found the Love of her life and all is well. However, remember that love does not store up well. Lovers do not keep their love as a secret. They tell everybody. Love grows as it is given. It has been said that love is a verb. It is not something we possess. Rather it possesses us and moves us to action. The Bride of Christ is loved supremely well and she reigns with dignity and grace. She is no “bride-zilla”!

So why is it that many Christians seem to have missed the joy that is theirs in knowing Christ? Why are we often sour lipped and “bride-zilla” like? The answer is: We have used serving Him as a substitute for loving Him. Many parents/leaders/teachers/pastors/coaches want to know how they can improve the places where they lead. The answer is found right here in *The Song*. Dallas Willard says it this way, “Arrange your life so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy and confidence in your everyday life with God. The main thing that you bring to the places where you lead is the person whom you become. That’s what others see and experience, and that is what gets reproduced.” The best thing you could do for the world around you is to fall madly in love with Jesus and cling to Him with all your might. His joy becomes your joy.

We are running out of room, but *Psalms 45* is worth your time. It was written by the sons of Korah who served as the temple choir. They wrote it as a wedding song and it has a few similarities to *The Song* which are interesting. But the primary thing we need to see is *verse 7*, “*God has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.*” This is from the NIV. However, most other versions of the Bible word it like the NLT, “*pouring out the oil of joy on You more than on anyone else.*” This is a song for weddings so it is a happy song and telling the bride and groom that they have joy is a given. However, the writer of *Hebrews 1:9* quoted this verse when he was building a case for why Jesus is better than anything. His point is that no one has more joy, more gladness than Jesus!

Even though He was also called “the man of sorrows,” Jesus was the happiest man who ever lived. He had more joy than anyone else. The wedding depicted in *Psalms 45* is a picture of our union with Christ. His gladness becomes our gladness. And in joy we reign together bringing light, hope, justice and peace to the world around us.

Do you see it loved one? The secret of contentment is found in enjoying intimacy with Jesus. Then His gladness rubs off on you. Jesus makes you His queen. He believes in you. He trusts you. He has made you one with Himself. There is nothing else on earth that compares to the greatness and glory of knowing Jesus intimately and being known intimately by Him. People who embrace this truth, change the world!

Alrighty! Let's talk about this for a bit. Work through the following questions with your Life Group and with your Discipleship Partner.

#1 READ *The Song* 8. In verse 1, the Shulamite longs to show her love for the King to everyone. What is it about being in love that makes a person want to tell everybody? If this is true, why do many Christians find it hard to talk about Jesus in public?

#2 The picture in *verse 5* of the bride clinging to the arm of her beloved is a powerful scene. In your experience, what happens to Christians who stop clinging to the arm of Jesus? What kinds of things can we do to maintain our intimate connection with Christ?

#3 In *verse 12* she says that she will give "double honor to those who serve her beloved." *Galatians 6:10*, says something similar, "*do good to everyone, especially those who are in the family of believers.*" Anyone who serves Jesus is a friend of ours and deserves double honor. What would our church look like if we gave double honor to anyone who served Jesus our King?

#4 This is the end of our study in *The Song*. Reflecting on the whole study, what is most memorable to you? In what ways has this book of the Bible impacted your relationship with God? How has it impacted your service for God? How has it impacted the way you relate to other people?

#5 In our study we took three different interpretive approaches. (To refresh your memory on them, go back to page 2 in the introduction). Which approach did you appreciate the most? Why?

#6 READ *Psalms 45*. What are some of the similarities between this Psalm and *The Song*? Take a second and look at the structure of this Psalm: *Verses 1 & 17* serve as parenthetical book ends. *Verses 2-9* speak to the king. *Verses 10-16* speak to the bride. Do you see it?

#7 In your own words, how would you summarize the words to the king in *verses 2-9*?

#8 In your own words, how would you summarize the words to the bride in *verses 10-16*?

#9 In *verse 10* the bride is told to "*forget your father's house, the king is enthralled by your beauty.*" Compare this to what Jesus said to a crowd in *Matthew 10:37* or to what Jesus said to Peter in *John 21:15*. How do you respond to this? Jesus is enthralled by you, does His love for you eclipse anyone else's love for you? Why or why not?

#10 In *Psalm 45:7* the king is anointed with the oil of gladness. Have you ever thought of Jesus as being "happy"? In what ways does this change your perception of Him? Is it possible that many Christians are sour because they picture Jesus as being sour? What do you think: Yes? No?

#11 Lastly, if you were to describe *The Song* to a curious friend, how would you explain it? How is *The Song* valuable to your life as a Christ-follower?

Epilogue: YOU ARE WANTED

"Then will come the time when Jesus will sweetly invite His spouse to enter in with Him into the palace of His glory, which He had been preparing for her from the foundation of the world...and shall thenceforth rejoice together in consummate, uninterrupted, immutable and everlasting glory." ~ Jonathan Edwards

Please read *John 4:1-42*.

We have talked about a lot of things in the last nine weeks. So that we do not get lost in it all, let's take just a little more time to carefully summarize *The Song* and apply its main message to our lives. It's an ancient song about two lovers and it offers powerful lessons about love and more importantly, about how God loves us. Some of the biggest take-aways are:

- #1. Desire drives our relationship with God. He desires us. We desire Him.
- #2. Jesus really, *REALLY* likes you.
- #3. Jesus wants you to want Him. Nobody is forced into the Kingdom.
- #4. You cannot change yourself but the better you grasp the love that Jesus has for you, the more like Him you will become.
- #5. God likes to be chased. If you seek Him, you will find Him.
- #6. Oh! And one more thing! Jesus really, *REALLY* likes you! (Can it be said enough?)

Solomon chasing his Shulamite beloved around the vineyard is a picture of Jesus pursuing you. He is the young stag on the hills leaping and bounding towards you. You are the one He loves so much that He will move Heaven and earth to find you. You might not feel like you fit in anywhere. Kids at school leave you out. Others do not seem to "get" you, they don't understand. Co-workers are all too busy climbing the ladder and you feel weird because you don't share their thirst for conquest. You go to church, it feels fake, and even there you feel invisible.

Please hear this: Jesus likes you. He wants you. He 'gets' you!

This is the main message of *The Song*. At the very epicenter of life, the single most important relationship that any of us can have, is the one between us and Jesus. Shakespeare said it this way:

*"So they loved as love in twain;
Had the essence but in one.
Two distincts, division none;
Number there in love was slain."*

It's a bit of a tongue twister, but do you see it? One essence. Division none. The two become one.

This reminds me of the way a woman's life was powerfully changed by one simple encounter with Jesus at the town watering hole. She came to the well in the same way that she lived her life, alone. As the story unfolds, we learn that she had five husbands and was living with a sixth man. Preachers often portray this woman as being immoral. We assume that her promiscuity was the reason for five divorces. However, this is wrong. In the first century, women did not have the upper hand in divorce court. Only the husband could file for divorce. The laws of the rabbis had developed over the ages from the original law of Moses and they allowed men to divorce their wives for any reason, no matter how frivolous, so long as they gave them a written certificate of divorce. One rabbi even taught that a man could divorce his wife for burning his toast! This

means that husband after husband found this woman to be defective for some reason or another and sent her packing. In other words, this dear woman had been kicked out of five different homes! The overwhelming message of her life was...

“REJECTED!”

She came to the well alone that day because nobody else would go with her. She was as unwanted as a Christmas tree on December 26. Washed out, used up, passed over and overlooked. She lived an invisible life in a time when every good woman had a husband who loved her. But this woman? Man after man tried to love her but couldn't. She was...

“UNLOVEABLE!”

It is no wonder that she was suspicious of Jesus when He first asked her for a drink. To her, He was just another man using a cheap pick-up line. Her responses to His initial questions were cagey, off-putting: “You’re a Jew and I’m a Samaritan, how can you ask me for a drink?” “You don’t even have a bucket to get water from this well, how can you say you have ‘living water’ to give me?”

There was something in Jesus’ kindness that began to warm her icy, guarded heart. He was not chased away by her skepticism. He was not offended by the verbal elbows that she jabbed at Him. Like the Shulamite, who questioned the king’s love for her but became changed by it, this woman was slowly warmed by Jesus at that well. She tried to get Jesus to reject her, but He wouldn’t. She tried to get Jesus to go away, but He stayed.

It did not take long, but she became convinced of His love. She dropped her bucket and hurried to tell others to come and meet “this man who knows everything about me.” (*John 4:28*) Do you see it? Jesus knew about all of the rejection. He accepted her “as-is”. He knew she felt unloved. He loved her totally. In accepting her and loving her, He restored her dignity. In response she immediately felt the need to tell others. She ran into the village and told everyone to come meet Jesus. How did the village loser become the village rescuer? Jesus! Here’s the principle: Loved people, love other people. Accepted people, accept other people. Until we find it in Jesus, we will never be satisfied. But once we encounter His love, it changes us. He brings dignity to what I thought was just an average life, and people with dignity will always feel the urge to spread the joy!

The overwhelming message of *The Song* is that God is looking for you. He wants you. He is not put off by the mess you’ve created. He wants you as you are from right where you are.

The other overwhelming message of *The Song* is that you are looking for God. That longing in your soul when all else gets quiet is an urge for God. The unsettled feeling that something is not right is a cry for God. It is primal. Your home is with Him and you will not feel at home until you are right with Him.

Jesus is the One you really want. Everything else you’ve tried promised to fill you but left you empty. Carl Jung said, “Every addiction is a misplaced prayer.” True. We pray for freedom and think “this is it” only to find bondage instead. John Eldridge calls it a “false Eden”. It looks like paradise but turns out to be hell in disguise.

I hear you. You have fallen for so many false Edens that it is hard to believe this one. But I dare you to do what the woman at the well did. I dare you to push on Jesus, test Him, try to chase Him away. Go ahead and give Him the stiff arm. You will discover that He is faithful and He cannot be shoved away. His love for you is stronger than death, which means it is stronger than any of your attempts to reject it. This is good news isn’t it? It means you have not fallen out of His reach. Come as you are, He loves you, you can finally be home.

The Song plays a melody that rings in our souls. It strikes a cord in the deep of our being. Here, at the center of our Bibles we find the heart of God beating...AND IT IS BEATING FOR US! Can you hear it? If you will tune your ear to this chorus it will pull you from the wreckage of the daily rubble that often controls our lives.

Jesus wants you.

He told a flustered Martha in Luke 10:42 that only “one thing is needed”.

“*Needed*”. There is what we need. There is what we want. Sometimes the two merge nicely. Most of the time the two collide. They jostle for power over my soul. Their constant bickering leaves my heart black and blue, bruised. Jesus is persistent: “one thing is *needed*”.

“*One*”. Do not skip the simplicity of this. We live in a world that doesn’t value ‘one’. Our world values ‘much’. We think having much will make us full. So, we fill our lives to the brim. Yet somehow, in all of this fullness we feel empty. Our souls have an echo.

The Song teaches that finding the “one” is when you begin to truly live. It is no wonder then, that Jesus told Martha only “one thing is needed”. This means that everything else is a distraction, an obstacle to living. What is the one thing?

It is clinging to the arm of our Savior (*The Song* 8:5). The two of you become ONE!

Try to imagine what your life would look like if you oriented it around this singular truth: *I am His and He is mine*. What would your day look like if you remained vigilant to any possible wedge between you and the One who adores you? How would it impact you if *The Song* was literally the melody of your heart as you went about your daily business? Allow its refrain to repeat over and over and let it wash your soul:

“I am His and He is mine”

This is the one thing that matters. Will you be brave enough to stop running, stop filling, stop trying, and grip Jesus with your last ounce of strength? Are you willing to say, “nothing else matters except knowing Christ and letting Him know me”? This will change everything for you.

***“Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you;
I have called you by name, you are Mine.” ~GOD
(Isaiah 43:1)***

These are the words of Jesus spoken to you.

I have taken liberty to edit this specifically for men and women hoping that it will better resonate in our souls. Read these out loud and imagine Jesus speaking directly to you. Let His words hit your heart.

To the women

You are so lovely-like the fine linen tapestry hanging in the Holy Place.
 Listen, My radiant one-if you ever lose sight of Me,
 just follow in My footsteps where I lead my lovers.
 Come with your burdens and cares.
 My dearest one, let Me tell you how I see you-
 You are so thrilling to Me. My darling, you are so lovely! You are beauty itself to Me!
 Yes, you are My darling companion. You stand out from all the rest.
 Arise, my love, My beautiful companion, and run with Me to the higher place.
 Let Me see your radiant face and hear your sweet voice.
 How beautiful your eyes of worship and lovely your voice in prayer.
 Listen, My dearest darling, you are so beautiful—you are beauty itself to Me!
 Your eyes are like gentle doves behind your veil. What devotion I see each time I gaze upon you.
 You now show grace and balance with truth on display.
 Your lips are as lovely as Rahab's scarlet ribbon, speaking mercy, speaking grace.
 What pleasure you bring to Me!
 Your virtues and grace cause a thousand famous soldiers
 to surrender to your beauty. Every part of you is so beautiful, My darling.
 Perfect is your beauty, without flaw within. For you reach into my heart. With one flash of your eyes I am
 undone by your love, My beloved, My equal, My bride.
 You leave Me breathless— I am overcome by merely a glance from your worshiping eyes,
 for you have stolen My heart. I am held hostage by your love.
 What a perfect partner to Me now that I have you.
 Even hosts of angels stand in awe of you.
 Held captive by your love, I am truly overcome!
 I could have chosen any from among the vast multitude of royal ones who follow me.
 But unique is My beloved dove—unrivaled in beauty, without equal, beyond compare,
 the perfect one, the favorite one.
 You are truly the poetry of God—His very handiwork.
 Out of your innermost being is flowing the fullness of My Spirit—
 How delicious is your fair beauty; it cannot be described as I count the delights you bring to Me.
 Fasten Me upon your heart as a seal of fire forevermore.

Forever we shall be united as one!

To the men

Listen, if you ever lose sight of Me, just follow in My footsteps.
 Come with your burdens and cares.
 Let Me tell you how I see you-You are so thrilling to Me.
 To gaze upon you is like looking at one of Pharaoh's finest horses-
 a strong, regal steed pulling his royal chariot.
 You stand out from all the rest. For though thorns surround you,
 you remain as pure as a lily, more than all the others.
 The season has changed, the bondage of your barren winter has ended,
 the season of hiding is over and gone.
 Can you not discern this new day of destiny breaking forth around you?
 The early signs of My purposes and plans are bursting forth.
 Run with Me to the higher place.
 You must catch the troubling foxes,
 those sly little foxes that hinder our relationship.
 We will do it together.
 What devotion I see each time I gaze upon you.
 Your life has become clean and pure. The words of your mouth are as refreshing as an oasis.
 When I look at you, I see your inner strength, so stately and strong.
 You are as secure as David's fortress.
 Your virtues and grace cause a thousand famous soldiers to surrender.
 You leave Me breathless—I am overcome by merely a glance from your worshiping eyes.
 What a perfect partner to Me now that I have you.
 Even hosts of angels stand in awe of you.
 Your undying devotion to Me is the most yielded sacrifice.
 Look at you now—arising as the dayspring of the dawn,
 astonishing to behold as a majestic army waving banners of victory.
 You are truly royalty!
 You are truly the poetry of God—His very handiwork.
 Out of your innermost being is flowing the fullness of My Spirit—
 never failing to satisfy. Your life stands tall as a tower, like a shining light on a hill.
 Such discernment surrounds you, protecting you from the enemy's advance.
 Your thoughts are full of life, wisdom, and virtue.
 You stand in victory above the rest.
 Place this fierce, unrelenting fire over your entire being.
 Endless floods will be unable to quench this raging fire that burns within you.

Forever we shall be united as one!

Recommended reading list

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to these authors and their books. Like my refrigerator, I returned to these again and again in search of meaningful nuggets to share with you. If you're interested, I'd gladly loan a copy to you for your own study. Sharing books is fun!

Akin, Daniel. *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Song of Songs*.
 Eldridge, John. *Resilient*.
 Garrett, Duane and Paul R. House. *Word Biblical Commentary: Song of Songs/Lamentations*.
 Holleman, Heather. *The Six Conversations*.
 Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*.
 Longman III, Tremper. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Song of Songs*.
 Nelson, Tommy. *The Book of Romance: What Solomon says about Love, Sex and Intimacy*.
 Simmons, Brian and Candice. *The Sacred Journey: God's Relentless Pursuit of our Affection*.
 Simmons, Brian, ed. *The Book of Song of Songs, The Passion Translation*.
 Smalley, Gary. *Love is a Decision*.
 Willard, Dallas. *Living in Christ's Presence*.

Also, I would highly recommend listening to the Passion City Church podcast and finding Ben Stuart's whole sermon series on The Song of Songs. It is very good!

Also, Brian Simmons did a weekend seminar at Healing Waters Church in Long Island. You can find the videos on Youtube by searching "Brian Simmons teaching on Song of Solomon".

Lastly, a very special "thank you" to Pat Williams for faithfully editing my ramblings. I truly appreciate her careful eye for detail. God bless you Pat!