1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Song of Songs
Theme: Speaking of Love

Overview: Long before Gary Chapman's book *The Five Love Languages* (words, time, gifts, service, and touch) from 1992, there was the Song of Solomon (also known as the Song of Songs, or literally, "The Finest Song"). This is sexual wisdom literature at its most holy eroticism. The book of romantic love poetry was placed in the Writings section of the Old Testament. It was written by Solomon or dedicated to him. It certainly is a strange book to be in the Bible unless God's love for our souls is likened to the strong love between husband and wife. Students will learn of a woman's love for her husband, the husband's love for his wife, the watchful celebration of their love by the couple's attendants, and the Lord of love whose love is the basis for all other loves.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery.**



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

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INTRODUCTION

Author

The book is titled "Solomon's Song of Songs" (Song of Songs 1:1). It was written by Solomon or dedicated to him. Solomon, the son of King David, is credited with composing 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32), and the title "Song of Songs" marks this one as "The Finest Song."

Audience

The Song was preserved for God's covenant people as part of the Writings section of the Old Testament, alongside other wisdom literature. Its poetry speaks to husbands and wives, to the friends and community who support them, and to all who long to know the Lord's love.

Date

If written by Solomon, the Song comes from his reign over Israel in the tenth century BC (about 970–930 BC), a time of peace and prosperity for the united kingdom.

Setting

The Song unfolds as a series of love poems exchanged among a husband (the king), his wife (the Shulammite, 6:13), and their friends (the daughters of Jerusalem). Its images are drawn from the gardens, vineyards, flocks, and spices of the Ancient Near East, from Lebanon in the north to En Gedi near the Dead Sea.

Theme

The Song celebrates God's gift of romantic and sexual love within the exclusive commitment of marriage. "Love is as strong as death. . . . Many waters cannot quench love" (Song of Songs 8:6-7). Many Bible students also see in it a picture of God's love for his people and Christ's love for his bride, the church.

Why Study Song of Songs?

In a culture confused about love, marriage, and sexuality, the Song of Songs speaks plainly and beautifully. This study encourages wives and husbands to delight in and treasure one another, calls friends and churches to honor marriage and encourage couples, and invites all believers to contemplate and worship the Lord whose love is the basis for all other loves.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1:	Song of Songs 1:1-4, 12-14; 2:1, 3-7, 16-17
WEEK 2:	Song of Songs 1:15; 4:1-15
WEEK 3:	Song of Songs 1:4b-8; 3:1-11
WEEK 4:	Song of Songs 1:1-8; 2:4, 16-17; 8:6-7

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Wives pursue, admire, and delight in your husband and view yourself as his own.**

STUDY: Song of Songs

THEME: Speaking of Love

LESSON TEXT: Song of Songs 1:1-4, 12-14; 2:1, 3-7, 16-17

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 5:22-33; Matthew 19:4-6

THE SHULAMMITE WOMAN SPEAKS

BY MARK SCOTT

It is a bit dangerous today to generalize concerning the desires of men and women as it relates to marital love. Are these stereotypes taught, innate, or unique to certain cultures? From the textual selections in today's lesson, it would seem that women desire to be desired. They evidently develop security and a sense of self-worth when they are valued and treasured. In these verses, Solomon's wife (referred to as the Shulammite in 6:13) expressed several desires.

A key challenge to interpreting the Song of all Songs is determining who is speaking. Translations and commentaries that try to mark out who is speaking vary in their understanding. Since the chosen translation is the New International Version, we will follow its identifications.

She Desired Affection

Song of Songs 1:2-3

Kissing is not lovemaking, though it can lead to that. But kissing is affectionate, and she says it is better than *wine*. This display of affection certainly is made more pleasant when the two people smell good, and thus the *fragrance* (nard) is mentioned. Touch may be one of her love languages.

She Desired Intimacy

Song of Songs 1:4; 2:6-7

She also desired to be intimate with her husband, which has the propriety of being alone with him. She wanted her husband to whisk her away into his *chambers* (which may well be their place of intimacy). She longed for his left arm to be under her head, and his right arm to embrace her. In their book *The Act of Marriage*, Tim and Beverly LaHaye suggest that this is a "positional commentary" on intimacy. The woman called to the *Daughters of Jerusalem* (maybe the women attendants) and underlined it with some kind of animal oath (*by the gazelles and by the does of the field*)—indicating beauty and swiftness—to let intimacy have its full pleasure. In other words, "Don't interrupt lovemaking until it has left her fully satisfied."

She Desired to Be Known by Her Husband

Song of Songs 1:12-14; 2:1, 4

Women are not hood ornaments. But they may well take some of their self-esteem from their husbands being known in the village, culture, or nation. In the king's public setting (while he was at his table) she allowed her fragrance to waft over him. They no doubt exchanged looks, and even though they were in public, they were thinking of private moments. His fragrance was likened to a *sachet* (bundle) *of myrrh*, which she could smell when he put his head between her breasts as they lay down together. Maybe scent is a love language all its own. She also likened his scent to a cluster of *henna blossoms* from that crevice near the Dead Sea known as En Gedi (where Solomon's father hid from King Saul). Sometimes secret nuances between a couple can occur during public moments.

When the king was entertaining guests in his banquet hall, the woman wanted to be known to everyone as his love (thus the phrase, "let his banner over me be love"). She was not content to be just a common flower (one of the other girls in the king's harem). She was the *rose of Sharon*, a beautiful flower like that of a crocus that grows along the west coast of Israel near the Mediterranean Sea. The *lily of the valleys* were common flowers, but she wanted to be known by her husband as that special flower, or blossom.

She Desired Protection and Provision

Song of Songs 2:3, 5

An *apple tree* could be a messianic reference. Songs have been written in that regard. But an apple tree in a forest—to which she likened her beloved—would be odd. In other words, he would stand out among others. And saying she delighted to be in his *shade* probably is a reference to his protection of her.

Additionally, he would provide for her. She would need physical strength for lovemaking, so she desired *raisins* (probably raisin cakes of some kind, which remain a delicacy in the Ancient Near East). His protection of her and provision for her take her breath away (*faint with love*).

She Desired Attachment

Song of Songs 2:16-17

Perhaps more than anything, she just wanted to be "with" her husband. She belonged to him, and he belonged to her. When affection wanes, when intimacy is no longer possible, when being known "in the gates" is no longer necessary, and when all one's needs are met, there still is the desire to be together. Even the prospect of such makes her heart beat faster. From morning (*day break*) until evening (*shadows flee*) the prospect of her husband coming to see her like a gazelle or a young stag gives her unspeakable joy.

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CANDY'S FIVE THINGS

BY DAVID FAUST

What makes someone a good marriage partner? It's natural to consider physical attractiveness, similar interests, and compatible personalities as desirable qualities in a mate. An article in *Psychology Today* called "What to Look for in a Potential Spouse" suggests looking for characteristics like confidence, generosity, humility, and loyalty.

I remember having an awkward conversation with my future father-in-law nearly half a century ago. Candy and I had set our wedding date, and her dad asked me a direct question: "Why do you want to marry my daughter?"

I stammered nervously, "Because I love her." (I know, that's profound!) Not satisfied, he pressed deeper and asked, "What does love mean to you?" I struggled to answer his question that day, but he graciously accepted me as his son-in-law anyway, and we enjoyed a good relationship to the day he died.

Candy and I are not expert counselors, but during our 48 years of marriage, many couples have sought our advice prior to their wedding or during rough patches in their relationship. During these conversations I usually gesture toward my wife and tell the couple, "You need to hear 'Candy's Five Things.'" Her marriage advice boils down to five key factors.

1. Shared Faith. "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1). A shared commitment to Christ shapes the way couples prioritize their goals, handle conflicts, make financial decisions and career choices, endure hardships, build friendships, and pass along important values to their children. That's why Scripture counsels us, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

2. Open Communication. Healthy marriages require transparency, vulnerability, and self-disclosure. No dodging the tough topics. No lying or secret-keeping. No stuffing significant feelings inside. Couples need to practice good listening skills and talk openly about their thoughts and emotions. Like a fresh breeze, honest communication keeps the air clear.

3. Complete Trust. In a relationship where two partners share their bucks, bodies, and beds, there is no room for dishonesty and emotional game-playing. Before deciding to marry, prospective spouses should honestly ask themselves, "Do I completely trust this person? Do I see any red flags—any signs he or she is untrustworthy? Am I confident my partner is being completely honest with me?"

4. Mutual Respect. "Marriage should be honored by all" (Hebrews 13:4). Couples need to hold one another in high esteem. You're asking for trouble if you marry someone whose behavior in any way makes you cringe. No one is perfect, but you should only marry someone you deeply respect. Disparaging comments and resentful attitudes poison a marriage, but mutual esteem and encouraging words nourish it. "The wife must respect her husband" (Ephesians 5:33). "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect" (1 Peter 3:7).

5. Shared Vision. Candy encourages couples considering marriage to imagine the long-term impact of their life together by asking two important questions:

- Will partnering with this person enhance my service to the Lord or detract from it?
- If I try to imagine my life without him or her, how does it make me feel?

I am thankful the Lord gave me a wise and godly wife. And just for the record, after all these years, I still have a lot to learn about what love means.

Personal Challenge:

Think of a couple whose marriage you admire. Ask them to tell you what they have learned about marriage. What hardships have they endured? What makes their relationship strong?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Since the last time we met, with whom did you talk about the God who saved you, loves you, and takes great delight in you?

2. Choose one of these to answer:
   - What is your favorite love song?
   - What most makes you blush?

Ask two people to read aloud **Song of Songs 1:1-4, 12-14; 2:1, 3-7, 16-17** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

3. How are the five senses (sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch) used in these passages?

4. What do their pet names for each other (she calls him *beloved*, and he calls her *my darling*) tell you about how they feel for one another?

5. What kinds of things attracted her to him?
   - And him to her?

6. The Bible often addresses the importance of inward, not just outward, beauty (e.g., 1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Peter 3:3-4). What makes a person beautiful on the inside?

7. What can you learn about God's intentions for marriage from these passages?

8. Why is it important—and not just in romantic relationships—to be seen, heard, noticed, and really known by others?
   - How can you improve at seeing, listening to, noticing, and knowing others around you? (Note that you can answer only for yourself, not for others!)

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

10. If you were to talk with God like the woman speaks to and about her beloved, what might that sound like? What would you say?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Song of Songs 1:15; 4:1-15**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Husbands, treasure your wife's beauty and celebrate the joy and goodness of such a love.**

STUDY: Song of Songs

THEME: Speaking of Love

LESSON TEXT: Song of Songs 1:15; 4:1-15

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Proverbs 5:18-19; Ephesians 5:25

THE HUSBAND SPEAKS

BY MARK SCOTT

The woman in the Song of Songs took her sense of romance from the closeness and affection of her husband and being desired by him. The man took his romance from the sight, smell, and touch of his wife. While this theme will occur again in chapter 7, this lesson text is one of the most sexually descriptive.

Descriptive speech is used when normal language falls short. The text is filled with similes and metaphors. Similes are figures of speech saying something "is like" something else, while metaphors say something "is" something else. There are at least eight similes and nine metaphors in this text.

He Speaks of the Description of Her Beauty

Song of Songs 1:15; 4:1-5

The second time the husband spoke in the Song of Songs, he outright declared his wife's beauty. He told her she was *beautiful* (i.e., fair—a quality to be desired in the Ancient Near East). He told her this four times in the text. Probably no woman tires of hearing that word.

He also used the tender expression *darling* (lover).

It is as if he literally scanned her body from top to bottom. Eight of her body parts are commented upon either by using a simile or a metaphor. He spoke of her eyes, hair, teeth, lips, mouth, temple, neck, and breasts. Since sight and touch seem to be the man's means of arousal, these are highlighted. Her *eyes* are like *doves* (which indicated tranquility in his world). Later he will say that one look from her eyes all but robs him of willpower and causes him to not think clearly (4:9). Her *hair* is likened to the beautiful black *goats* that graze in the hills of Gilead east of the Jordan River. Her *teeth* are likened to newly *shorn sheep* (i.e., clean). Her teeth have symmetry (*each has its twin*).

Her *lips* are likened to *scarlet ribbon* (thread). To this he added a straightforward phrase, "your mouth is lovely." Her *temples* are likened to the halves of a *pomegranate* (red and sweet). Her *neck* is likened to the *tower of David*, which was not a description of length but of majesty. The tower of David was decorated with his spoils of war. They announced victory. Finally, her *breasts* are likened to *twin fawns* that browse among the lilies during the day. These descriptions all underlined a pastoral setting (fruit and husbandry).

He Speaks of the Delight of Her Beauty

Song of Songs 4:6-15

A man probably can describe things only so long. At some point he must act to consummate his love. He wanted to celebrate their intimacy. He goes to her and bids her come to him. In fact, he envisions loving her until the day breaks and the shadows flee. The *mountain of myrrh* and the *hill of incense* might still refer to her breasts. But the images might be broader than that by referring to her whole body. Myrrh and frankincense were expensive and not native to the land of Israel. They had to be imported, which underlined their value.

Lebanon plays a significant role in the last section of the lesson text. Lebanon is at the northern tip of Israel. It had the greatest trees (they later were used for building the temple) and the best scents. Verses 8-15 function like a chiasmus. Lebanon is mentioned in verses 8, 11, and 15. Going south from Lebanon (which involves moving up in elevation) is a beautiful trip—similar to the husband delighting in his *bride* (mentioned five times in the text). He thought of descending from the crest of *Amana* (the eastern part of the mountain range near Damascus). *Senir* is a twin peak near Mount Hermon. Even though dangers such as lions and leopards may be lurking, he will protect his *sister* (a Middle Eastern term of affection for wife).

His delight in his wife is likened to the many scents from the north. Fragrance, perfume, spice, honeycombs, pomegranates, choice fruits, henna (white-blossomed flowers), nard, saffron, calamus (sweet cane), cinnamon, myrrh, and aloes are all mentioned. The scents would be part of the husband's delight in their intimacy. One other thing should be noticed. This delight of lovemaking should never be shared except between the two of them. The man said she was a *locked garden*, a *spring enclosed*, and a *sealed fountain*. These images all mean that the most fulfilling delight was for one man and one woman in holy matrimony.

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TELL HER

BY DAVID FAUST

A marriage counselor questioned a man about his wife. "Why don't you buy her flowers?" The man's response: "I didn't know she sold flowers."

OK, most of us husbands aren't that bad. But when it comes to emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication, we still have room for improvement.

It happened over 40 years ago, but I cringe when I remember the first Mother's Day after the arrival of our firstborn child. That evening my wife, Candy, became very quiet. When I asked what was wrong, she said, "It's my first Mother's Day as a mother, and you didn't acknowledge it." My reasoning? She was not *my* mother! I had sent a card to my own mom, and I looked forward to the day when our son himself would be old enough to wish Candy a happy Mother's Day. That all made sense to me, so it never occurred to me that I should have made her day special.

Without intentional effort, married couples often slip into bad habits and our conversations become drab and superficial. Someone quipped, "70 percent of marriage is yelling 'What?' from a different room."

James A. Garfield was a lawyer, a preacher in Restoration Movement churches, a Union Army officer during the Civil War, and he was elected to Congress. On June 8, 1880, after the Republican National Convention nominated him for president of the United States, he sent a rather blunt, unemotional telegram to his wife:

> *TO: MRS. J.A. GARFIELD MENTOR, OHIO*
> *DEAR WIFE: IF THE RESULT MEETS YOUR APPROVAL, I SHALL BE CONTENT. LOVE TO ALL THE HOUSEHOLD.*
> *J.A. GARFIELD*

Evidently Mr. Garfield liked to keep his messages short and to the point.

Verbalize Your Affection

Solomon's Song of Songs, written by King David's son, celebrates God's gift of sexuality within the context of marriage, illustrates the Father's love for his covenant people and Christ's love for the church, and demonstrates how to express love with words of affirmation. Over and over again throughout the book, the husband tells his wife how beautiful she is.

Admittedly, some of the Song's colorful poetry sounds strange to us. It's a compliment if I compare my wife's eyes to doves (Song of Songs 1:15; 4:1) and her lips to a scarlet ribbon (4:3), but she won't consider it romantic if I compare her hair to a flock of goats and her teeth to a flock of sheep (4:1-2). And I'm certain she won't appreciate it if I compare her neck to a tower of stones big enough to hold a thousand shields (4:4).

But whatever our personality types, and even if we sometimes struggle to express our emotions, husbands should "be considerate" toward our wives (1 Peter 3:7) and love them "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). Christ honors his bride by loving her sacrificially, listening intently to her questions and concerns, and referring to her with affectionate terms like "beloved" and "radiant" and "chosen." According to Proverbs 31, a wife of noble character is hard to find and worth more than rubies. "Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: 'Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all'" (Proverbs 31:28-29).

If God has blessed you with a noble wife, thank him—and tell her.

Personal Challenge:

Has the Lord put a godly woman in your life? Perhaps a wife, a daughter, a faithful friend, a helpful neighbor, a wise sister in Christ, or someone who has been a spiritual mother to you? Let these godly women know how much you appreciate them. Send them a card or tell them face-to-face.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you do over the past week at seeing, listening to, noticing, and knowing others around you?

2. What expression of love do you prefer to receive from others?

Ask two people to read aloud **Song of Songs 1:15; 4:1-15** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

3. What do the metaphors and similes in these passages tell you about how the man thought and felt about his wife?

4. Note the senses (sight, touch, smell, taste) involved in the man's descriptions and which ones are used more often. What do you learn about the man (and perhaps men in general) from these descriptions (especially as compared to the woman's descriptions from the previous lesson)?

5. What do his names for her tell you about his relationship with her?

6. Some Bible commentators suggest the man's words in this Song illustrate the love of Jesus, the Bridegroom (see Luke 5:34-35; John 3:27-30; Ephesians 5:25-33), for us. What can you learn about the Lord's love from these passages?

7. Look again at Song of Songs 4:12. What do the three phrases—"a garden locked up," "a spring enclosed," and "a sealed fountain"—tell you about the man and woman's exclusive commitment to each other—and to the sanctity of marriage between a man and woman?

8. How will you seek to love others more like the husband in these passages (and like the Bridegroom Jesus)?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

10. If God were to talk with you like the man speaks to and about his wife, what might he say to you?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Song of Songs 1:4b-8; 3:1-11**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Honor marriage in your community by spurring your friends on to desire and love their spouses.**

STUDY: Song of Songs

THEME: Speaking of Love

LESSON TEXT: Song of Songs 1:4b-8; 3:1-11

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Hebrews 10:23-25; 13:4

THE FRIENDS SPEAK

BY MARK SCOTT

They call them the best man, the maid of honor (or matron of honor), and the witnesses for a reason. The people who stand by a bride and groom in a wedding witness firsthand that the couple loves each other and are making a commitment to one another. When people notice an elderly married couple holding hands in the mall, they usually assume the right things (i.e., that one needs the other to avoid a fall—just kidding—they really witness the couple's love for one another).

The husband and wife in the Song of Songs have friends (it would seem mostly female friends) who watched them and helped them. They were known by various titles. Maybe they were the wife's female wedding guests, or ladies of the king's court, or perhaps even concubines. More likely, they were simply any of the females of Jerusalem (since they are called *daughters of Jerusalem* or *daughters of Zion*). Not only did the wife admire her husband, and not only did the husband describe his wife, but the friends of the couple also spoke about the couple's love for one another.

They Witness Her

Song of Songs 1:4b-8

The friends of the woman affirmed her love for her husband. They *rejoice* (exult or be glad) and *delight* in her (and maybe for her). They realize the love she has for her husband is better than wine.

This affirmation brings out a self-disclosing paragraph from the woman. She confessed that she was thoroughly suntanned from having to work outside. Today, that complexion is greatly desired. People who work outside in the Middle East do not need tanning booths. But long ago, untanned skin was cherished. The woman told her friends that because her brothers made her work in the vineyard (to the exclusion of being able to work in her own vineyard), her skin was as dark as the *tents of Kedar*. These tents were made from black goat's hair and were as dark as the curtains of Solomon inside the temple.

She suffered some insecurity because of this. As she searched for where her man fed his sheep, she did not want to have to veil herself (and thus her dark skin). Veiling might have implied prostitution. The woman's friends were real friends, however. They told her where she could find her husband, which was by the tents of the shepherds.

They Witness Desire

Song of Songs 3:1-5

Dreams can be vehicles of God's revelations. Dreams can be silly and meaningless. Or dreams can coincide with our longings and desires. It may not have been the case, but it makes sense to suggest the woman told her friends about a dream she had. After all, the chapter starts, "All night long on my bed." Perhaps she dreamt she could not find her husband. The phrase, *the one my heart loves*, occurs four times. In her dream she looked and looked—even going up and down the streets and squares. In desperation, she asked the city watchmen if they had seen him.

Moments later, she found her husband. She held him tight and would not let him go. She brought him to a safe place (her *mother's house*). Even if it was just a dream, she instructed her friends (the daughters of Jerusalem) not to bother the couple until they finished their lovemaking. Via the dream, the friends witnessed the desire she had for her husband.

They Witness Him

Song of Songs 3:6-11

In light of how verse 6 begins, it would seem the woman's dream has ended. The narrator turned his attention to Solomon himself. He was described in incredible ways. And he was coming to get his bride. He came from the wilderness like a *column of smoke*. But he looked strong and smelled good (*perfumed with myrrh and incense*) from spices that he had purchased from other lands.

Solomon's entrance and chariot got good press and a thorough description. Warriors accompanied the great king. There were sixty of them, and they were battle ready so as to protect the king. The carriage chariot itself was impressive. It was made from wood, silver, and gold. It was upholstered with purple, and then came this interesting phrase, "its interior inlaid with love."

The friends were invited to gaze on the great king. His crown was garnered by his mother (cf., 1 Kings 1:1–2:19). He showed up to take his bride. The friends of the bridegroom realized the king and his bride must increase while they must decrease (cf., John 3:30).

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WHAT WILL YOU BRING TO THE WEDDING?

BY DAVID FAUST

Have you noticed it's become less fashionable for wedding ceremonies to happen in church buildings? In recent years I have attended or performed weddings in parks, barns, hotels, banquet halls, houses, backyards, and even a public library, but fewer couples are exchanging their vows in church facilities. In America today, only about one wedding out of five takes place at a house of worship—a sharp decline from past practices.

Is this trend a big deal? Maybe not. After all, the Bible doesn't prescribe where wedding ceremonies should be held. But I wonder if the move away from church weddings says something about how both the church and marriage itself are viewed in our culture. Not to be a party pooper, but to be clear: the marriage covenant itself should always take precedence over the party.

Celebrations don't have to be complicated and expensive to be meaningful and memorable. In simpler times, paid wedding coordinators and destination weddings were rare. Friends and relatives dressed up, showed up, and spruced up the environment with flowers and music. The minister began by saying, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God" and a photographer took pictures. After the ceremony everyone ate cake, nibbled on mixed nuts, sipped punch, and cheered as the happy couple drove off to enjoy their honeymoon without incurring a huge debt to pay for all the festivities.

The Financial Cost

According to a recent survey, the average cost of an American wedding in 2022 was $30,000, not including the engagement ring (average cost: $6,000). Wedding prices ranged from an average of $16,000 in Kansas to $51,000 in New Jersey. Couples hired an average of 14 wedding vendors (caterers, florists, videographers, musicians, hair stylists, and others). The average wedding cake cost $510, and a typical catered reception dinner cost $75 per person.

Lavish weddings took place in New Testament times, often including a whole week of feasting. Guests received advance invitations and wore special clothes to the banquet. Jesus attended a festive wedding where he changed water into wine. As believers, we look forward to a glorious wedding supper the Lamb of God will celebrate with his Bride (Revelation 19:6-9).

The Covenant Commitment

The bride and groom don't come to the wedding ceremony empty-handed. They bring their unique personalities, strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, habits, and hang-ups. They often bring along some baggage from past dating relationships and from the example they observed in their parents' marriages. Ideally, the bride and groom bring their true selves to the ceremony as they humbly, wholeheartedly commit to lifelong faithfulness. Whether the future means better or worse, riches or poverty, sickness or health, they solemnly pledge to stay together until they are parted by death.

If you are an invited guest, what can you bring to the wedding? One important wedding gift doesn't cost any money at all. Will you pray—really pray—for the bride and groom? Will you ask the Lord to help them fulfill their vows when tough times test their commitment? Will you ask God to fill them with wisdom and the fruit of the Spirit? Will you be part of a community of supportive believers who encourage them for years to come?

Yes, newlyweds appreciate gifts like cash, silverware, and air fryers. But prayers for faithfulness, fruitfulness, and joy will bless them for a lifetime.

Personal Challenge:

Do you know a couple facing tough times in their marriage or family? Write them an encouraging card or note to let them know you love them and are praying for them. Enclose a gift card they can spend at their favorite store or restaurant.

Source of wedding cost statistics: theknot.com/content/average-wedding-cost.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How have you loved others more like Jesus, our Bridegroom, this past week?

2. What predominant trait do you look for in friends?

Ask two people to read aloud **Song of Songs 1:4b-8; 3:1-11** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

3. As best as you can, discuss the conversations between the friends and the woman. (Note that 3:1-5 is probably the woman telling her friends about her dream, and 3:6-11 may be the narrator describing the scene.)
   - How would you describe the friends' involvement in the couple's relationship?
   - How can we encourage engaged and married couples, as well as singles, in our church and other relationships?

4. In the ancient world, sun-darkened skin was typical for commoners who worked outside, while fair skin was a sign of aristocracy. What insecurities was the woman dealing with in her relationships?
   - How do our insecurities affect our relationships with one another today?
   - How can our insecurities affect our relationships with God?

5. How would you describe the woman's search for and yearning to be with her husband?

6. Song of Songs illustrates the overarching biblical story of people seeking God and God seeking us. God said through the prophet Jeremiah, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13; cf., Deuteronomy 4:29; Matthew 7:7-8; Acts 17:27). How would you liken the woman's search for her husband, King Solomon, with people's search for the King of kings today?

7. The friends helped the woman in her search. How will you help someone in your circle of friends or family search for and find God?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

9. In Song of Songs 1:4, the friends say to King Solomon, "We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine." End your time together by worshipping the King of kings with the same or similar words.

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Song of Songs 1:1-8; 2:4, 16-17; 8:6-7**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Contemplate Jesus' epic and exuberant love for his people, and worship him.**

STUDY: Song of Songs

THEME: Speaking of Love

LESSON TEXT: Song of Songs 1:1-8; 2:4, 16-17; 8:6-7

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: John 10:11, 28-29; John 15:9-17; Revelation 19:6-9

THE LORD SPEAKS

BY MARK SCOTT

It was not uncommon for God to elevate the conversation. Jesus would often do this to take the conversation where he wanted it to go. For instance, when speaking with the woman at the well, Jesus offered her living water. She didn't understand, so she replied, "You have nothing to draw [water] with" (John 4:11). But Jesus essentially told her there were two different kinds of water. He offered her spiritual water (i.e., salvation). Consider Caiaphas. He wanted to kill Jesus so that the whole nation would not die (John 11:50). But God took his words and made them prophetic of Jesus' death for all the children of God.

The conversation can be elevated in the Song of Songs, as well. For centuries scholars have wrestled with the "natural" meaning of the book. Is its meaning to be understood literally or figuratively? It clearly contains both. The question is, "Can the meaning of the book be extended?" An earlier voice from church history must have thought so. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) preached from this book for 16 years and got only to chapter 3. That can be done only by extending the meaning to a higher level (e.g., the love God has for his people is likened to the passionate love a husband and wife have for each other). With this book of the Bible, we can reason from effect to cause (though the utmost care must be taken—lest the author's intended meaning be compromised). If human love is joy unspeakable, then it must have come from somewhere beyond itself (i.e., God himself). So, the Lord can speak through the voices of the man, the woman, and the friends. While Song of Songs 1:1-8 and 2:16-17 have been studied in previous lessons, they are used again here in their extended meaning.

How Sweet It Is

Song of Songs 1:1-4

There probably is nothing sweeter than love. That sweetness can be likened to a kiss. A doctor once remarked, "Do you know how many germs are transferred when people kiss?" The patient responded, "What a way to die." Twice in these verses love is likened to the sweetness of *wine*; a third instance likens the sweetness of *perfume* to love. The woman desires to share that love with her husband in his *chambers*.

God's love is also sweet. The psalmist said, "Thy lovingkindness is better than life" (Psalm 63:3, *King James Version*). Paul taught that God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that he has given us (Romans 5:5). Ah, the sweetness of the Holy Ghost becoming our holy guest.

Not Worthy! Not Worthy!

Song of Songs 1:5-8

When an athlete makes a great play, teammates will sometimes bow down and cry, "Not worthy! Not worthy!" They are feigning humility to say they are not worthy to play beside such a fine athlete. The woman in the Song of Songs suffered from a similar poor self-image. She was especially conscious of her suntanned skin. Her *dark* skin color was the result, of course, of working outside all day long. This being her lot in life, she felt unworthy of the king's love.

All believers in the Lord Jesus surely have felt the same way. Paul reminded the Roman Christians that Christ had died for them when they had felt most unworthy. In fact, it was while they were still sinners that Christ died for them (Romans 5:8). The worthiness was in the lover—not in the loved.

PDA

Song of Songs 2:4, 16-17

More than one high school or college student has been charged with PDA (or public display of affection). There is a time and place for everything, of course, and while proper decorum needs to be observed, sometimes love just needs to be declared publicly. The woman wanted everyone at the king's banquet table to know that the king's *banner* over her was *love*. It is not wrong (and it actually is proper) to cry out in public, "Hands off. This woman belongs to me." She wanted him to come to her in the presence of others.

God's salvific act on our behalf did not occur in a corner (Acts 26:26). He publicly displayed his love for all people (Galatians 3:1). A cross at the crossroads outside of Jerusalem was hard to miss.

Stronger than Spinach

Song of Songs 8:6-7

For decades, parents have tried to get their children to eat spinach by telling them it will make them strong like Popeye. No kid bought it. But love is powerful (certainly more powerful than the effects of spinach). Love is as strong as a government *seal*, as strong as *death* itself, and as strong as a *blazing fire*. No amount of water can wash love away. No wealth comes close to the value of real love.

The hymnwriter said it strongly, "Could we with ink the ocean fill; And were the skies of parchment made; Were every stalk on earth a quill; And every man a scribe by trade; To write the love of God above, Would drain the ocean dry; Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Though stretched from sky to sky" ("The Love of God" by Frederick M. Lehman).

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IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

BY DAVID FAUST

Beauty is hard to define. Tastes and opinions vary greatly when it comes to music, art, and ice cream. As garage sales prove, one person's trash is someone else's treasure. A widely known adage reminds us "beauty rests in the eye of the beholder."

Why does one person visit a crowded city and exclaim, "What a fascinating place!" while someone else mutters, "I wouldn't live here if you paid me a million dollars"? Why does one person blissfully stroll on an ocean beach while another hates getting even a single grain of sand in their shoe?

What Do You See in Each Other?

Have you ever looked at a married couple who seemed a bit mismatched and privately wondered, *What does she see in him?* or *Why does he consider her attractive?* Some say love is blind—but I disagree. Real love can see quite well, but it chooses to accept (or graciously overlook) the loved one's imperfections.

Love isn't blind; it's honest and realistic. But it's also merciful. Benjamin Franklin advised, "Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards." As time passes, marriage partners are wise to look past their spouse's faults and remember what attracted them to each other in the first place.

Fierce, Unrelenting Devotion

In the Song of Songs, the bride and groom display fierce devotion to one another. Whether anyone else agrees with his assessment or not, the groom considers his bride beautiful beyond words. Likewise, the bride declares, "Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away" (Song of Songs 8:6-7).

On its surface, the Song of Songs is a vivid portrayal of married love, but many Bible students also view it as a poetic illustration of Christ's fierce, unrelenting devotion to his bride, the church. Matthew Henry wrote, "No waters can quench Christ's love to us, nor any floods drown it. . . . Nor will life, and all its comforts, entice a believer from loving Christ. Love of Christ will enable us to repel and triumph over temptations from the smiles of the world, as well as from its frowns."

What does the Lord see in his bride, anyway? Doesn't he see our glaring imperfections? If you want to find fault with the church, it's not difficult to do. For many today, "church hurt" is all too real. Some believers who formerly held the church in high esteem now openly despise it, while others have decided to quietly walk away.

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the Lord Jesus must have very tender eyes. Doesn't he see all the ugliness and harm done in the name of his church? How could he look at the church and see beauty there? How could he look at our foolish ways and see a bride without blemish, spot, or wrinkle? How could he see anything worth dying for?

We're all flawed and eccentric, marred by inner ugliness no makeup or stylish clothes can hide. The Song of Songs declares, "Love is as strong as death" (8:6), and the cross proves it is true. Only fierce, unrelenting devotion would motivate the Lord to lay down his life for us—and motivate us to lay down our own lives, too.

Personal Challenge:

Read the "Love Chapter" of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13. In verses 4-7, insert your own name each time the word *love* appears. "_____ is patient, _____ is kind. _____ does not envy, _____ does not boast," and so on. Then read these verses again and insert the name of the church where you are involved. How well are you and your congregation displaying the unrelenting, sacrificial love of God to others?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Reply to one or both questions:
   - How have you encouraged an engaged or married couple, or a single person, in our church or in other relationships?
   - How did you help someone search for and find God last week?

2. What does total devotion to something or someone look like to you?

Ask two people to read aloud **Song of Songs 1:1-8; 2:4, 16-17; 8:6-7** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

3. In his Study on this section of Scripture, Mark Scott writes about "extending the meaning to a higher level (e.g., the love God has for his people is likened to the passionate love a husband and wife have for each other). . . . If human love is joy unspeakable, then it must have come from somewhere beyond itself (i.e., God himself)." Previously, we studied two sections from these passages at a more literal, natural level. In this study we will examine these passages at a figurative, spiritual level. How do you see the love spoken of in these passages as God's love for us and our love for him?

4. Like the woman (in 1:5-7), how do people sometimes feel unworthy of God's love and grace?

5. Though we all "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), we "are justified freely by his grace" (v. 24). How does God's grace and love give you worth as a follower of Jesus?

6. As you look at this passage figuratively/spiritually, what do you learn about God?
   - What do you learn about yourself?

7. What do you learn from this couple's devotion for and commitment to each other that you can apply to your human relationships?
   - To your relationship with God?

8. The woman likens the strength of love to several conditions and elements (8:6-7). How is God's love for you like those things? (Also see Romans 8:31-39.)

9. The woman wanted to declare her love for her man and his love for her publicly, for all to hear (e.g., 2:4). How will you go public with your love for God and his love for you this week?

10. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

11. The woman said, "Your love is more delightful than wine. . . . Your name is like perfume poured out" (1:2-3). Use this as a template for worship: "Lord, your love is more delightful than ___. Your name is like ___."

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.