

the
Pleasures
of Marriage

*An exposition of the
Song of Solomon*

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, Michele. Thank you for your unconditional love, soul-mate companionship, and godly encouragement. You have made our marriage the most pleasurable of all earthly experiences.

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The Pleasures of Marriage: An Exposition of the Song of Solomon

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	7
1. Foundations for Understanding the Song of Solomon	9
2. The Bride's Powerful Attraction	21
3. The Groom's Commitment to Love and Support	33
4. The Wedding Banquet	41
5. The Wedding Night	51
6. A Bride Reflects on the Days before the Wedding	59
7. The Anticipation Builds	71
8. The Two Are Made One	79
9. Trouble in Paradise	87
10. Shulamite Changes Her Mind	97
11. Solomon Returns with Praise	105
12. Creative Intimacy	111
13. Rekindling the Flames of Marital Passion	119
14. Love: The Foundation for Great Intimacy—Part 1	127
15. Love: The Foundation for Great Intimacy—Part 2	133
<i>Bibliography</i>	141
<i>Scripture Index</i>	143
<i>Subject Index</i>	145

Preface

This exposition of the Song of Solomon was initially preached as sermons at Lakeside Community Chapel, the church I pastor. The many positive responses I received from the congregation encouraged me to put these messages into book form.

I am extremely grateful to my friend Geoff Lanotte for heading up this project. Without his vision, wise counsel, and diligent work in putting together a team, this book would have never been published. In addition, Pauline Hylton wrote most of the discussion questions and applications found at the end of each chapter. Thank you, Pauline, for using your amazing creativity to come up with the takeaways.

Among the many books and commentaries that helped me in my studies, I am especially grateful to Joseph Dillow for his book *Solomon on Sex* and to Arnold Fruchtenbaum for his book *Biblical Lovemaking*. Both of these authors were extremely helpful in their insights into the story line that runs throughout the Song of Solomon.

Special thanks are due to my wife, Michele, who initially encouraged me to study and teach the Song of Solomon, and then to publish my studies.

May God be glorified by this exposition of His Word.

1 *Foundations for Understanding the Song of Solomon*

Several months prior to our marriage, Michele and I decided to read a book about sexual intimacy. Since both of us were inexperienced in this area, we thought a book on the subject of sex would help prepare us for our honeymoon. But on our first night together, when my ignorance about sexual relations became rather obvious, my wife questioned if I had read the book. Embarrassed by my lack of skill in lovemaking, I replied, “I don’t remember reading *that* chapter!”

It has been over thirty years since that first night with my wife when I felt like a romantic failure. However, I am happy to say that eventually I did manage to improve in the area of romance, and sexual intimacy has been a very enjoyable and satisfying part of our marriage.

I know though that I am not the only one who has ever felt inept in his ability to make love to his spouse. Although a certain amount of naiveté about sex is understandable and fitting for those entering marriage, God wants husbands and wives to have a healthy understanding about physical intimacy. How do we know this? We know because He included the Song of Solomon in the Bible.

Even though the Song of Solomon is a relatively small book, consisting of just eight chapters and only 117 verses, its contents have the potential to profoundly impact anyone who studies it—especially married couples or those hoping to someday be married. While several Bible books mention sexual issues briefly (Genesis, Proverbs, Leviticus, 1 Corinthians), the Song of Solomon is the only inspired book devoted to the subject of physical intimacy between a

husband and wife. Appropriately, the book has been described as “nothing less than an explicit and unblushing celebration of sex within marriage.”¹

While the overall purpose of our study is to gain practical enlightenment from the Song of Solomon concerning the pleasures of marriage, this first chapter must focus on establishing the book’s theological foundations. It is these foundations that lay the groundwork for correctly understanding and appreciating the life-changing truths revealed in the Song of Solomon.

Without a clear understanding of these theological issues, the book remains a mystery that raises more questions than it answers. For example, many have wondered why a book about sex and romance is found among the sacred pages of Scripture. Knowing that the Bible is a holy book and that all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for our growth in godliness (2 Tim. 3:16), sincere Christians have questioned the spiritual value of the Song of Solomon. After all, how can a book that uses such sensual language as “may he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Song 1:2) and “your two breasts are like two fawns” (4:5) possibly enhance our spiritual lives? It most definitely can; otherwise it would not be found in the canon of Scripture.

Many Biblical scholars have wrestled with a number of interpretive questions related to the book, such as, who wrote it, should it be understood allegorically or literally, who are its main characters, and what is the basic story line? In fact, the Song of Solomon has produced so many knotty theological questions like these that one Bible scholar concluded it is “perhaps the most difficult and mysterious book in the entire Bible.”²

In spite of its many interpretative challenges, the Song of Solomon can be understood. Like every other God-breathed book (2 Tim. 3:16), it was written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4). Far from being a mystery that is impossible to solve, the Song of Solomon is God’s revelation to us about marriage and romance. Therefore, God intends for us to study, comprehend, and apply these divine instructions to our lives. Assisting us in these endeavors are four key foundational truths that help to unlock the meaning and significance of the Song of Solomon.

1. C. J. Mahaney, *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 9.
 2. Jack S. Deere, “Song of Songs,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1:1008–09.

Foundational Truth One: Solomon Wrote a Book on Marital Faithfulness

The Song of Solomon begins by identifying its title and writer as “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s.” Although this book is commonly known as the Song of Solomon, the Hebrew text actually states that this is the “Song of Songs,” meaning this is the best of songs, the song that surpasses all other songs. Similar language is used in Scripture when communicating the unsurpassed nature of other objects, such as “the Holy of Holies” (the most holy place) or “the King of Kings” (the king that excels all other kings). While we don’t know its original melody or tune, we do know that this book was composed as a love song without equal and unmatched by any other love song.

But who wrote the song? Although some Bible teachers believe that this song was dedicated to Solomon rather than written by him, the most natural understanding of the book’s opening line is that Solomon, the son of David and king of Israel, wrote it. Not only does it most naturally appear that Solomon is presented as the writer, but his name is mentioned throughout the book (Song 1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11–12). In addition, the male lover in this song is called “the king” (Song 1:4, 12; 7:5). If that’s not enough convincing evidence that Solomon wrote this song, then consider that 1 Kings 4:32 reveals Solomon was a gifted musician and the composer of over one thousand songs! This song, being the Song of Songs, was the finest of all the songs he wrote.

Taken together, the weight of evidence strongly supports the view that Solomon wrote this book. If this is the case, the book presents a moral dilemma: The Bible states in 1 Kings 11:3 that Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. The question many Bible students have struggled with is how Solomon, with such extreme moral failure in his own personal life, could write a divinely inspired and authoritative book about God’s perspective on sex and romance. As a polygamist, Solomon would have had no credibility in praising the merits and beauties of monogamy. How then do we reconcile Solomon’s unfaithfulness in his own marriage with his writing a book that exalts the virtue of marital faithfulness?

The most reasonable solution is that Solomon wrote this song when he was a young man, in the early years of his reign as king, and before he fell into the sin of multiple wives and concubines. If that is the case, this song is about his relationship with his first wife, with whom he was deeply in love, totally committed, and sexually loyal. Far from writing the Song of Songs as a marital hypocrite, Solomon wrote with full integrity as a young man genuinely in love with

his one and only wife. It is very likely that he wrote the Song of Solomon as a young man, Proverbs during his middle years, and Ecclesiastes as an old man.

Although some may question this approach to reconciling Solomon's authorship of the Song of Songs, there does seem to be some evidence from Scripture that Solomon wrote this love song with his first, and at that time, only wife in mind. One indication comes from the identity of the main character of the Song of Songs, Solomon's bride. She is never mentioned in the book by her first name but is simply known as "Shulamite" (Song 6:13). Though it is commonly thought that this designation is derived from her hometown in northern Israel, a more likely explanation is that her name simply indicates she was Solomon's wife. In the Hebrew language the word *Shulamite* is the feminine form of the name Solomon, making it appear that Solomon wanted us to know his wife as "Mrs. Solomon."

So who was this Mrs. Solomon? While we cannot be dogmatic about her identity, there is some Biblical weight supporting the view that she was Solomon's first wife, an Ammonite woman by the name of Naamah, who bore him his only son, Rehoboam. Dr. Henry Morris, in his commentary on the Song of Solomon, wrote the following about Solomon's many wives.

It may also be significant, that, although the account in 1 Kings notes that Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, neither Kings nor Chronicles mentions any sons or daughters, with the exception of Rehoboam and two daughters, Taphath and Bamath. . . . If Solomon ever really had marital relations with seven hundred wives—not to mention the three hundred concubines—there must have been literally hundreds of Solomon's children in Jerusalem! Why is this never mentioned? The account in 1 Chronicles 3:1–9 has no hesitation in listing 19 sons of David . . . or the sons of his concubines. Why was nothing said about any of Solomon's sons other than Rehoboam? Could it possibly be that all of Solomon's wives were merely for show and prestige, rather than connubial relations? [In other words, political marriages.] Did he reserve that [sexual relations] for his first and one true love, who bore him one son and two daughters? A significant clue may be found in the record of Solomon's death, in relation to the birth of his son Rehoboam. "And Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel forty years" (2 Chronicles 9:30). "For Rehoboam was one and forty years old when he began to reign. . . .

And his mother's name was Naamah an Ammonitess" (2 Chronicles 12:13).³

And so it would seem, based upon Solomon's love and single-minded devotion to the Shulamite maiden, that he wrote this greatest of all love songs as a young man, faithful to his wife.

Foundational Truth Two: The Story Deals with Common Marital Challenges

It is obvious from the many statements about sex and romance found in the Song of Solomon that the story line of this book has something to do with the physical relationship between a man and a woman. The Song of Solomon is not, however, an ancient sex manual, nor is it a book solely focused on sexual love. A significant story is being played out that addresses marital challenges faced by all husbands and wives. The Song of Solomon presents several aspects of Solomon's relationship with Shulamite—from their initial meeting to their developing romance, from their wedding day to their first sexual encounter on their wedding night, and from the initial joys of marital delight to the significant adjustments they needed to make as a married couple.

The progressive story line of the Song of Solomon is summed up in the following words by Joseph Dillow:

King Solomon lives in the tenth century B.C. He is Israel's richest king, and owns vineyards all over the nation—one of them close to Baalhamon in the northernmost part of Galilee, near the foothills of the Lebanon Mountains. While visiting the vineyard, Solomon meets a country girl, Shulamite. She captures his heart. For some time he pursues her and makes periodic visits to see her at her country home. Finally he asks her to marry him. Shulamite gives serious consideration to whether she really loves him and can be happy in the palace of a king, and finally accepts. Solomon sends a wedding procession to escort his new bride-to-be to the palace in Jerusalem. The book opens as she is getting ready for the wedding banquet and the wedding night. The details of their first night together are erotically but tastefully described, and the first half of the book closes. The second half of the book deals with the joys and problems of their married life. She refuses his sexual advances one night, and the king departs. She, realizing her

3. Henry M. Morris, *The Remarkable Wisdom of Solomon* (Green Forest, AZ: Master Books, 2001), 31, 32, 35, 36.

foolishness, gets up and tries to find him, eventually does, and they have a joyous time embracing again. While she lives at the palace, the new queen often longs for the mountains of Lebanon where she grew up. She finally asks Solomon to take her there on a vacation. He agrees, and the book closes with their return to her country home and their enjoyment of sexual love there.⁴

Although all of these facets of Solomon and Shulamite's relationship are covered in the Song of Songs, the development of their love story is not easy to follow because Solomon didn't organize his material chronologically. He wrote his song in a poetic form known as a lyric idyll, a type of literature in which the writer selects certain events and dialogues from a historical background and puts them together based upon literary style rather than chronological order. Using the format of a lyric idyll, Solomon took the various events of his relationship with his wife—their courtship, wedding day, first night together, and sexual adjustments as a couple—and presented them without regard for the order in which these activities took place. Going back and forth between events, a lyric idyll has been compared to “a movie with several flashbacks—the story remains temporarily suspended while the audience views a scene from the past.”⁵ Heightening the drama of his song, Solomon also inserted a series of choruses from an imaginary group, known as the daughters of Jerusalem (also referred to as the daughters of Zion in Song 3:11). Using this chorus as a literary device, Solomon interrupted certain events throughout the song in order to give warnings, emphasize certain points, or move from one scene to another.

In addition to the absence of a logical time/order sequence in the Song, another unique literary feature employed by Solomon is that he recorded the story from his wife's perspective. In other words, Solomon composed this song so Shulamite tells the story of her relationship with her husband. The book is presented as a series of reflections by a married woman as she looks back at the events that led to their marriage, their wedding night, and their early years together. These reflections are expressed in the language of poetry with much symbolic imagery. It is the symbolic imagery of these reflections that have led some to believe the Song of Solomon should be interpreted in an allegorical manner rather than with the more normal/literal approach to language.

4. Joseph Dillow, *Solomon on Sex* (New York: T. Clark, 1977), 8.

5. *Ibid.*

Foundational Truth Three: The Song Must Be Interpreted in a Normal/Literal Way for It to Make Sense

Due to the sensual language of the Song of Solomon, most ancient Jewish and Christian scholars were uncomfortable interpreting it in a literal way. They understood the book to be an allegory about God's love for His people, with some rabbis regarding it as a divine love song for Israel, and early Christian leaders looking upon it as Christ's expression of love for the church. While historically there have been many variations within the allegorical approach to the Song of Solomon, those who viewed it this way believed that the book's numerous details were purposely intended by its writer to communicate hidden spiritual realities.

However, once the door to allegory was opened and the commonsense rules of normal language and grammar usage were abandoned, there were no boundaries to guide the interpreter. This meant Bible teachers were free to make the text say anything they wanted it to say. Not only did this method of Bible interpretation obscure the true and intended meaning of the Song of Solomon, but it led to a host of odd views. In an attempt to deny the obvious—that this book is about marital romance and physical intimacy—many ancient Bible teachers who were committed to the Song as an allegory were forced to let their creative imaginations run wild, resulting in silly and absurd interpretations. For example, in Shulamite's statement "I am black but lovely" (Song 1:5), her dark skin was seen as a reference to the sin of the church, while her loveliness spoke of her spiritual beauty after conversion. Likewise, the voice of the turtledove being heard in the land (2:12) was said to speak of the preaching of the apostles. Similarly, the words *eat* and *drink*, used by Solomon to describe the physical act of sex (5:1), were allegorized by many Bible teachers as a reference to the Lord's Supper.

As unnatural and quirky as some of these interpretations may be, the most bizarre allegorical views have been reserved for Solomon's statements about his wife's breasts (Song 4:5; 7:3). They have been interpreted as a reference to Moses and Aaron, the church from which we feed, the Old and New Testaments, the twin concepts of loving God and loving our neighbor, and the outer and inner man.

One doesn't really need to be a Biblical scholar to figure out that when Solomon wrote about his wife's breasts, he had her literal breasts in mind, not Moses and Aaron or any other Biblical truth. In fact, we might indeed be prone

to question Solomon's mental state if he was really thinking about Moses and Aaron while writing about Shulamite's breasts.

Although the allegorical approach still remains a popular way of interpreting the Song of Solomon, there is nothing in the text of this book that indicates it was intended to be an allegory. That Solomon chose to use poetic symbolism to express the pleasures of physical intimacy doesn't mean he purposed to convey veiled spiritual realities under the guise of sexual romance. In explaining why this book should be understood as a literal celebration of marital intimacy, C. J. Mahaney makes this important observation:

Solomon's topic was obviously sex. Just consider all the sensual and erotic language in this book. It certainly looks like it's about physical and emotional passions. It sure seems like this is the story of a real man and a real woman with real human bodies. When Solomon was at his desk writing the Song, do you think he had in mind some symbolic, spiritualized relationship between God and his chosen ones? I don't.⁶

The only way to make sense of the Song of Solomon is to interpret it by using the normal rules of grammar and language, which is to see the literal truths behind the many poetic symbols. When one follows this interpretative approach, the true message of the book becomes obvious—that Solomon composed a divinely inspired song about God's perspective on the way sexual love should be experienced by a husband and wife.

Foundational Truth Four: The Purpose of the Song of Solomon Is to Transform Lives for God's Glory

It isn't difficult to understand how Biblical instruction on important spiritual disciplines such as prayer, worship, and Bible study help us grow in our relationship with the Lord. However, many people fail to see how a book that gives instruction on the joys of physical intimacy can have any positive influence upon our spiritual growth. Yet when it is correctly understood, the Song of Solomon has the potential to profoundly impact lives.

At the heart of the Song of Solomon is the simple yet profound truth that God's will for married couples is to enjoy sexual intimacy. He created sex not only as a means to procreate (Gen. 1), but also as a wonderful way for husbands and wives to delight in the physical pleasures of each other. What Solomon

6. Mahaney, *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*, 11.

briefly stated in Proverbs 5:18 and 19—“Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated always with her love”—he expanded upon in his Song of Songs. It is not by coincidence that Solomon never mentions children as a result of physical intimacy but focuses instead on the sheer enjoyment he and Shulamite experienced in their sexual relationship. Therefore, all the teaching in the Song of Solomon about lovemaking is designed to instruct married couples on how to enjoy sex as God intended it to be enjoyed. Why? So they can glorify Him by doing His will.

God’s Word has some specific statements and commands concerning the sexual responsibilities of marriage partners. The apostle Paul gave clear instructions to the husband and the wife on the necessity of regularly meeting the sexual desires of their spouse (1 Cor. 7:1–5). Likewise, the writer to the Hebrews commanded believers to hold the institution of marriage in honor and to make sure they are sexually faithful to their spouse (Heb. 12:4). Submission to Scripture in the area of sexual responsibilities within marriage is just as important as obedience to any other doctrinal truth. When a husband and wife take these commands about sexual intimacy seriously and are committed to bringing physical pleasure to each other, God’s will is accomplished and He is glorified by the obedience of His children.

The Song of Solomon is God’s authoritative voice of instruction for married couples about enjoying sexual relations with their spouse. Far from being an outdated subject from an ancient culture, the Song is a much-needed voice for our generation, because, sadly, countless couples are not enjoying physical intimacy. Many husbands are caught in the treacherous grip of pornography; they would rather mentally engage in relations with another woman than with their wife. Many wives either refuse to be intimate with their husband or reluctantly engage in relations only as an obligation to be endured. It is to couples struggling with marital challenges like these that the Song of Solomon offers hope and encouragement. By presenting Solomon and Shulamite as models of marital intimacy, all husbands and wives are able to see what their marriage should and could be like.

However, before beginning our study of the Song of Solomon, I want to offer a word of caution, especially to husbands who are hoping that the contents of this book will help their wives become better sex partners. The Song of Songs is not intended to be a divine manual on improving the sexual performance of your spouse or a guidebook on sanctified sex techniques. In fact, the Song goes way beyond giving instruction about the joys of sexual intimacy. It gives

priceless lessons to the husband about treating his wife with sensitivity, being selflessly devoted to her, expressing romantic love in words that will win her heart, and resolving marital conflicts. Husbands who receive these valuable lessons and practice them should find their wives taking a renewed interest in sexual intimacy.

While the Song of Solomon is specifically directed to married couples, it still offers many significant lessons for singles, especially those who hope to someday be married. Many statements in this book address the critical issues of moral purity and abstaining from sexual relations until marriage. The Song also gives practical guidance on the kind of person to whom a believer in Christ should be attracted. It sets before every single person Solomon and Shulamite's marriage as an example to follow, rather than a Hollywood glamour couple who have no understanding of God's perspective on relationships.

Regardless of our marital status, the Song of Solomon is of great value to all who will read and receive its truths. Although this book isn't directly about God's love for His people, it should be noted that the Bible does teach that marriage between a man and a woman is a picture of Christ's relationship with His bride, the church (Eph. 5:22–33). Therefore, a believer in Christ who learns and applies the great lessons about a meaningful marriage from the Song of Solomon will also naturally receive a deeper understanding of his relationship with the Lord.

It is my hope and prayer that as you read *The Pleasures of Marriage*, you will be motivated to obey God's commands concerning sexual intimacy with your spouse and that you will enjoy the blessings obedience brings.

Applying This Lesson

1. Can you relate to the anecdote about lacking skill in the area of love-making? If you are married, have an honest discussion with your spouse about your performance in the bedroom. If there is some deficiency in this area, ask what you can do to improve your ability at sexual intimacy and then begin to implement this suggestion starting tonight.
2. Do you find that sexual intimacy with your spouse is a delight or a burdensome chore? If it is a chore, what can you do to turn it into a pleasure? Is any sinful behavior or attitude preventing you from enjoying sexual intimacy? Ask God to reveal any such sin. Repentance of any sexual issue

at the beginning of this study will only help in making the truths of the Song of Solomon more meaningful for your marriage.

3. If you are single, what do you believe a good marriage looks like? What specifically can you do to help prepare yourself to have a marriage like that?
4. As you begin studying the Song of Solomon, what do you anticipate this study will do for your life? Are your expectations realistic? Sit down with your spouse and have a heartfelt talk about your hopes for this study.
5. How do you think being a Christian should influence the way you treat your spouse? Be specific in your answers. Are you treating your husband or wife in a way that honors God? Ask your spouse, and they will be happy to tell you the answer to this last question.