

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Longing, Desire, and the Goodness of Delayed Gratification

Song 2:8–3:5

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to the Song of Solomon. We are continuing our verse-by-verse study of this book. And today we examine Song of Solomon 2:8–3:5.

We live in a world of instant gratification. I'm going to say that in the grand scheme of things that's not a good thing. We have fast food, instant coffee, immediately downloadable entertainment, and instantaneous communication all around the world.¹

That's not necessarily a bad thing in every case. But it can create a sense of expectation for everything else in life. Why save up for something if you can just "buy it" on credit? Why cook a healthy meal if you can just get something quick, easy, and *mostly* healthy?

And here's where instant gratification becomes especially problematic. How do we wait patiently for a spouse when we don't really have to wait for much in this world? Pornography is cheap and easy. Sex outside of marriage is perfectly acceptable in our culture. Who wants to wait? Who wants to risk a long courtship especially when it might not materialize in marriage? Some people who want to get married, don't get married. That's just a fact in today's world.

And yet, there is a broad, biblical principle of the goodness of delayed gratification.² There is goodness in the waiting. There is goodness in the searching. There is goodness in the longing for companionship.³ **Sometimes that longing leads people to Christ.**

And the truth is, even after marriage, there is a sense in which longing, waiting, and delayed gratification are good. Nobody gets married and gets exactly what they want all the time without waiting. That's a fantasy.

The title for today's message is "Longing, Desire, and the Goodness of Delayed Gratification."⁴ And we're going to see that concept unfold through two scenes in this book. One involves a tranquil traipsing through the countryside in 2:8–17. And the other involves a nightmare scenario for the woman in 3:1–5.

¹ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 42: "Part of the problem with waiting for sex for most of us is that in our culture we have lost the concept of waiting for anything... Now we are used to instantly downloadable entertainment, readily available fast food, and the immediate gratification of all our desires. We don't save up to buy something that we want anymore. We just put it on our credit cards so that we can have it right away, and we get angry if anything prevents our immediate enjoyment of our desires. We don't want to wait for anything. Period. Yet this particular poem is all about waiting, even when the time seems absolutely, positively ripe. Some things are worth waiting for."

² O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 61–2: "But why wait? Why on earth would anyone wait, especially today? ... We have the pill, condoms, and as a last resort, abortion tablets (for the day after) and clinics (for the months after). Why wait? The answer, implied throughout, is to wait because it's worth waiting for. It's the motive of delayed gratification... You wait because there are serious blessings. It's worth the wait. It's the motive of delayed gratification—opening your Christmas presents on Christmas morning, not on Thanksgiving eve."

³ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 41: "When my wife and I counsel engaged couples, they are sometimes embarrassed by how hard they find it to set proper boundaries on their physical intimacy. Yet even while there are very good reasons to wait faithfully for the honeymoon, as this passage emphasizes, it *should* be hard to wait. Don't be ashamed of this struggle. Be grateful as you wrestle with those desires and strive to remain pure."

⁴ Hess, *Song of Songs*, BCOTWP, 101: "This picture of delayed gratification challenges all who would see this book either as a biblical license for free sex or as a manual for a successful marriage. It is neither, although it may have insight for marriage. It is erotic love poetry that makes no apology for appealing to all of the senses that God has created. Yet it also affirms that there is an order to this wonderful gift of sex. Its potency and wildness does not mean that there is no restraint."

Now last time, we ended with a pretty risqué sequence of events. The shepherdess and her shepherd were having a stimulating picnic with raisin cakes and apples (2:5). There was the language of passion and lovemaking in 2:6. And then the woman calls the unmarried women of Jerusalem to account. She oaths them in verse 7!

⁷ *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.*

She's going to do the exact same thing at the end of our passage today—3:5. But before she does that, Solomon paints us a picture of what longing and desire look like.

Many people see these episodes as flashbacks. It's as if, the Shulamite takes these virgin daughters of Jerusalem back to her own time of waiting and longing. And she shows them what it was like for her and for her man to “not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.” I think that's correct.

In other words, she's making a case. She's painting a picture and making an argument. She's showing the young women of Jerusalem a better way. And the young men of Jerusalem need to listen up too. **And the men and women of twenty-first-century American need to listen up too, as we discuss the goodness of delayed gratification.**

She says in verse 8,

⁸ *The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills.*

Feel the parallelism here!

This woman calls her man, “my beloved” or “my love.” The Hebrew word is דֹדֶךָ (*dôḏ*), which is the same word that was used as an abstract noun in 1:2, “your love is better than wine.” This Hebrew word has the same flexibility as the English word “love.” You have love for someone, and they show love to you. And so you call them, “my love.”⁵ She calls him דֹדֶךָ (*dôḏi*)—“my love!”

And notice what this object of her love is doing. He's leaping over the mountains. He's bounding over the hills. This guy is thrilled to come see his girl. He's jumping for joy! **That happens sometimes when a man finds the woman of his dreams.**

Look at verse 9.

⁹ *My beloved is like a gazelle*

Notice the simile here—“like.”

⁹ *My beloved is **like** a gazelle or a young stag.*⁶

Now this has to be a young guy leaping and jumping. **After a few knee surgeries, you can't jump like this anymore.**⁷ That's why I think this is a flashback to “the courtship stage” of her life. Because she likens her man to a young, strong, springy animal.⁸

By the way, male gazelles can run upwards of 60 miles an hour.⁹ Here's a picture of the שֵׁבִי (šēbî) or the Mountain Gazelle that still roams parts of Israel and other countries today.

⁵ English has even more flexibility than Hebrew because “love” is also a verb. So we might say, “I love my love with a love that is better than wine.” The Hebrew verb for love isn't a cognate of דֹדֶךָ (*dôḏ*). It's the verb אָהַב ('ā·hāḇ) which is used in Song 1:3, which is not a cognate of דֹדֶךָ. But the noun אֹהֶבָה, the cognate of the verb אָהַב, is found in the Song (e.g., 2:4–5, 7; 3:5, 10; 8:6–7).

⁶ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 43: “At the end of the previous passage, the woman charged the daughters of Jerusalem by the gazelles and the does of the field not to stir up love before it pleases. Against the background of that vow by the gazelles not to stir up love until love itself is ready, here we see a gazelle bounding up to her to declare that the time for love has finally come.”

⁷ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 158–9: “Leaping connotes energy and vitality... The gazelle or deer implies beauty and grace as well as strength without violence (unlike, for example, the lion).”

⁸ O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 56: “She's a dove, but what is he? Is he a roaring lion, a wild boar, an untamed tiger? No, he's not a powerful, dangerous animal but rather a gazelle—a swift, handsome, cautious, curious, strong but not violent, easily excitable, and sexually eager animal, especially in the spring.”

⁹ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 70.



The Mountain Gazelle (Hebrew: צִבִּי [šēbī])

These animals are really fast; you’ve got to be fast in order to outrun a big cat. And gazelles can jump ten feet vertically in the air.

A stag (a buck) can run about 30 miles an hour and jump 30 feet horizontally.¹⁰ **If there were ever a track meet between humans, deer, and antelope, humans would lose all the racing and jumping events.**¹¹

Look at the middle of **verse 9**.

Behold, there he stands behind our wall,¹² gazing through the windows, looking through the lattice.

Now what is this? Why would the husband be gazing through windows and looking through a lattice? Why doesn’t he just go in the house? The answer is—he’s not her husband yet.¹³ This is a flashback to the time when she was living with mom and dad, and her shepherd admirer came to see her.¹⁴ And he’s anxious to spend time with her.

Look at **verse 10**,

¹⁰My beloved [same word as before דֹּדִי (dōdī)] speaks and says to me: “Arise, my love, my beautiful one,¹⁵ and come away,

The word for “my love” here is different than the word she uses for him. She calls him דֹּד or דֹּדִי (“my love”). He calls her רַעֲיָתִי. And the meaning of that word (רַעֲיָה [rāyāh]) is closer to “friend” or “companion” than “lover.”

But just so you know that this is not a platonic understanding of friendship—i.e., **he put her in the friend zone**—he immediately calls her also “my beautiful one” (יָפֵתִי).¹⁶ And he says, **“come away with me!”**

Now, let’s stop here and let me make a few applicational comments. This is a man who loves this woman and he wants to spend time with her. If they are unmarried at this point, he wants to marry her! He’s planning on it.

And one of the important aspects of love and marriage is the following—do you like spending time together? There needs to be physical attraction, yes. But there also needs to be intellectual and relational attraction. There needs to be relational and even spiritual compatibility.

The truth is that your relationship as friends in marriage will outlast your physical attractiveness. I wish that wasn’t true, but it is. The book of Proverbs says as much when it says that beauty is fleeting,

¹⁰ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 70.

¹¹ Technically gazelles are not a deer species. Gazelles are a kind of antelope that are part of the Bovidae family (with sheep, goats, and cattle), not the Cervidae that includes deer, moose, elk, and caribou.

¹² Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 159: “He is outside בְּתֵלֵנוּ, ‘our wall,’ that is, the wall of her parents and brothers... The point is that the man is wooing the woman; he wants her to leave her childhood home and run with him in the wilderness—here suggesting the wilds of sexual maturity and the danger of abandoning the security of her childhood home.”

¹³ Van Pelt sees this as a reference to Solomon’s harem. She is being prepared for the harem by the “daughters of Jerusalem.” And outside of the harem wall is her beloved who is unable to reach her. He’s peering through the window, but he’s unable to take her away. See his “Interpreting the Song of Songs: Wisdom, Orthodoxy, and Feminism.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Boston, November 18, 2025. Audio recording. <https://www.wordmp3.com/details.aspx?id=53576>. See also Van Pelt, “The Message of the Song of Songs,” lesson 5: <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/learn/foundations/essentials-the-song-of-songs-ot265/arrival-beloved-and-the-arrival-of-solomon-ot265-05>

¹⁴ Hess, *Song of Songs*, BCOTWP, 89–90: “Presumably this is the house of the female’s family, certainly her parents, and therefore the ‘our.’”

¹⁵ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 157: “LXX adds περιστέρα μου and Vg. *columba mea*, both meaning ‘my dove.’”

¹⁶ The Hebrew word יָפֵתִי (yā-pēh) meaning “beautiful” or “lovely” plus the 1cs suffix, therefore “my beautiful one.”

“but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised” (31:30).¹⁷ **These bodies wear out over time. But God-fearing increases. And friendship as a married couple increases too—at least it should.**

So when you are looking for a spouse, don’t just look for the person that you are the most physically attracted to. You need physical attraction, but you also need relational attraction. Can you spend fifty years with that person and grow old with him or her?¹⁸

Let me say it this way, using the language of Song of Solomon—men, you need to be able to say both רֵעִי and יָפִתִּי. You need to be able to say both, “my friend” and “my beautiful one.”

And also, just by way of mutual affirmation in marriage, notice how these two lovebirds talk to one another. That shouldn’t change after five years of marriage or fifty years of marriage.

Let me say that more prohibitively—you never, ever call your spouse names. When Sanja and I do premarital counseling, we share with couples seventeen things that they should never do in marriage. We got that list from Tommy Nelson and a sermon that he preached twenty years ago.¹⁹ And the first of those seventeen rules is you never, ever call your spouse names—dummy, stupid, idiot, moron, birdbrain. Don’t you do that, married couples!

You can call your dog names. You can call your cat names. I do that all the time with my cats. But you don’t talk down or verbally insult your spouse. Or your children for that matter!

If you need help with what to call your spouse, take your cues from the Song of Solomon—“my friend,” “my love,” “my darling,” “my dove,” “my beautiful one,” “the one whom my soul loves.”²⁰ Take those into your heart, and let it come out of your mouth.

Let’s keep going. Look at verse 11.

¹¹*for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone.*

Where’s he going with this? Look at verse 12.

¹²*The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come,*²¹

What’s he doing here? He’s asking this girl to go on a walk with him! He’s asking her to come see the beauty of the countryside. In ancient Israel, you didn’t go to the movies with your love interest. And you didn’t get into an automobile and go out to dinner. In ancient Israel, you went for a walk during the daytime. Because bad things happen at night. Or good things depending on the context!

In fact, courting in ancient Israel was more like courting in America a hundred years ago than it is today. You spent time with the family. You spent time in groups. And if you were alone, you were alone briefly. The big change in human culture came with the automobile. That’s a gamechanger.

And notice what this guy wants the woman to see. He’s a shepherd. He’s familiar with the beauty of the fields.

Look again at verse 12.

¹²*The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.*

¹⁷ Technically this part of Proverbs wasn’t written by Solomon (see Prov 31:1). Unless Lemuel is a *nom de plum* for Solomon.

¹⁸ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 59: “The period of dating or courtship is not simply to be spent in a glorious romantic haze. It is supposed to be the time when you gather the data about how you fit together as a couple, how effectively you serve each other, and how effectively you serve others together.”

¹⁹ Taken from Tommy Nelson, “Rules of Engagement: The Art of Conflict,” sermon, Denton Bible Church, November 9, 2003, <https://dentonbible.org/sermon/rules-of-engagement-the-art-of-conflict/>.

See also Tony Caffey, “Marriage and Conflict Resolution,” March 13, 2024, <https://www.messiahbible.org/marriage-and-our-maker-conflict-resolution>, also available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lt14Jybbx4&t=3s>; See also Tony Caffey and Sanja Caffey, “Marriage,” Theology in Action podcast, March 28, 2023, <https://www.messiahbible.org/a-deep-discussion-on-marriage-theology-in-action>, also available at <https://youtu.be/ANEykGEIVxY?si=SdI9VCCdLDW8fIHN>.

²⁰ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 164: “The Song of Songs is not just about sexuality and the bodies of the man and woman; it is a work of tender, affectionate speech.”

²¹ Hess, *Song of Songs*, BCOTWP, 93: “The picture here assumes the climate of Palestine, in which there are two primary seasons during the year: the summer with its heat and dryness, and the winter with its showers, storms, and cold. The latter lasts from October to March, and then the summer begins. There is no autumn or spring, because the appearance and disappearance of precipitation provide the main markers for the two seasons.”

¹³The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.²² Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away.

There it is again. “My friend!” “My Beauty.” **“Come away with me!”**

Now some commentators see this more as a man calling a woman to marry him, not go on a date. He’s calling her to a life together.²³ And there are allusions throughout to the joys and the mysteries of lovemaking in the garden or the countryside. I think there’s something to that.

And that doesn’t really bother me, because the purpose of dating should always be discernment for marriage.²⁴ **You don’t just date to date. That’s like pouring a foundation without any intention of ever building a house. It’s like going to the airport without any intention of boarding a plane. That’s futility. You date with the expectation and the prospect of marriage.**

Look at verse 14.

¹⁴O my dove,²⁵ in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff,²⁶ let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

Can he say that? Is that okay for a man to say to a woman? Yes, but there better be intentions behind that statement. Let me say it like this—**there better be a ring heading towards that finger! You don’t get to say this on the first date. And you don’t get to say this to someone you have no intention of marrying.**

This is what Tommy Nelson calls, “escalating the relationship!” This man wants to be with her. He loves her. He wants to see her face. He wants to hear her voice.

In fact, this may be even more escalation here than we realize. The word translated “face” here in the ESV could be translated “form” or “appearance.” If that’s what’s meant here then he’s saying, **“I just want to see your beautiful form. I just want to hear your beautiful voice.”**

Sometimes I’ll call my wife in the middle of the day while she’s at work because I just love the sound of her voice. I just love talking with her. Her voice is a comfort and a delight to me.

When we used to live in Chicago, I worked at Soldier Field for a few years, where the Chicago Bears play. And Sanja worked at one of the downtown banks. And I used to call her in the middle of the day during my lunch break.

And there were certain perks associated with working at Soldier Field. Back then, they used to test out all the catering items for upscale dining on all of us lowly employees working in the bowels of the stadium. So at lunchtime, I got to sample filet mignon. And I got to sample Chilean sea bass with truffle butter sauce. And I got to sample pan-seared sea scallops. It was amazing. And I’d call Sanja and say to her, “You won’t believe what I’m eating right now!”

But I didn’t just call her to brag. I loved hearing the sound of her voice in the middle of my day. It was even better than the pan-seared sea scallops.

²² Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 43: “The marks of spring’s arrival are multisensory, pressing in on all sides: there is the sight of the blossoming flowers, the sound of the singing turtledoves, the fragrance of the blooms on the vines, and the taste of the ripening figs. Every sensation cries out the message of nature that the time is right to find a partner and go forth, be fruitful, and multiply.”

²³ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 42–3: “Once we strip away the flowery poetry, what the man wants the woman to do is clear because he says it twice: ‘Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come away’ (Song 2:10, 13). He wants her to leave the home of her father and mother, cross the wall, and join him on the other side, out where the deer and the antelope play.”

²⁴ Nelson, *The Book of Romance*, chapter 3: “Courtship ideally results in an engagement to marry. Plans then should move very quickly toward a wedding, in my opinion. I am a strong believer in long dating, long courtship, and a brief engagement. Once the decision is made to marry, it is very difficult to restrain passion. Plan the wedding and get on with the marriage.”

²⁵ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 160: “Here, however, the woman herself, and not her eyes, is called a dove. He portrays her as nesting high in the crags and rocky cliffs, far away from human contact, the main point being that she is out of his reach... He cannot get to her; for them to come together, she must come out to him, or open the door to him, or descend to him. But he does not attempt to gain her by force or entrapment. His only means of attaining her are his words.”

²⁶ Hess, *Song of Songs*, BCOTWP, 95–6: “Pope notes two places in Palestine that go by the term ‘Valley of the Doves.’ One is northwest of the Dead Sea in the area of Jericho, and the other is northwest of the Sea of Galilee. Each may be described as a valley with steep sides filled with caves in which the doves live. Many thousands of doves have been seen in one or the other of these sites in the premodern era. That such rocky clefts and crags formed the natural home for doves seems apparent from these illustrations.”

Similarly, this man just loves the sound of his “beautiful one’s” voice. He just wants to see her. He just wants to spend time with her. And that’s because he’s in love with her. And she’s in love with the boy. And that’s the way it should be. They’re preparing for life together.

By the way, there’s a contrast to this scene in the book of **Proverbs** where there’s another person peering through a window (**Prov 7:6–12**). In that scene, there’s a seductress who is looking for a young, gullible boy to pounce on. And there’s no desire in that woman for companionship or longevity in marriage. She just wants to eat and have her fill (see **Prov 30:20**). She wants her adulterous, sinful desires satisfied.

And there are people like that in this day—men and women both (honestly, mostly men!). They don’t want longevity. They don’t want friendship. They don’t want marriage. They just want their sexual appetites satisfied. They just want to eat like a wolf. Stay away from those people like the plague.

And speaking of dangers out there, look at **verse 15**.

¹⁵*Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom.*”

Who’s talking here? And who is the “us” in **verse 15**? First, it was the woman talking in **verse 8**. Then it was the man talking in **verse 10**.²⁷ Who’s warning whom about the foxes? Log that away, we’ll come back to that.

Look at **verse 16**.

¹⁶*My beloved is mine, and I am his; he grazes among the lilies.*²⁸

O wow! That’s a change! Before **verse 15**, he was talking and he was trying to get her to spend time with him. Now she’s the aggressive one. What changed?

Look at **verse 17**.

¹⁷*Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains.*

Go ahead and write this down in your notes as #1. There are two scenes in this passage and then two cautions. The first scene is in the countryside. And the idea being conveyed is simply this—The wonder is worth the wait.

1) The **Countryside**: The wonder is worth the wait (2:8–17)

This entire passage is bracketed by the oath that the woman gave to the daughters of Jerusalem—“Don’t stir up or awaken love until it pleases.” There’s an allusion to that same idea in **verse 15**.

¹⁵*Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom.*”

That’s the warning that hovers over this entire text. Although the text itself is lovely and inviting. **It’s almost like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden enjoying their relationship without the hindrance of sin.** The vineyards are in blossom. The flowers are blooming. The turtledoves are singing. It’s springtime, and it’s the time for love. Don’t rush it. Don’t force it.

But something changes in **verse 16**. If I could say it this way, I think there is wooing and waiting in **verses 8–14**. The desire for one another has been lit.

But **verse 16** changes the equation.

²⁷ The ESV has “SHE” for the entirety of 2:8–3:5. That’s because even when the man speaks, it is direct speech quoted by the woman. This is made clear from 2:10, “My beloved speaks and says to me.” The NIV2011 has “HE” for only 2:14–15. But then reverts to “SHE” for 2:16–3:5. The NIV1984 does the same, but uses the terms “Lover” for the male and “Beloved” for the female. The NKJV has “THE SHULAMITE” speaking for 2:8–14 and 2:16–3:5. For 2:15 it identifies the speaker as “HER BROTHERS.” The NLT has “Young Woman” speaking for 2:8–13. Then the “Young Man” speaks in 2:14. Then the “Young Women of Jerusalem” speak in 2:15. And then the “Young Woman” speaks again for 2:16–3:5.

The KJV doesn’t provide headings with assumed speakers. The NASB95 only has section headings (e.g., “The Bride’s Admiration” for 2:1–17 and “The Bride’s Troubled Dream” for 3:1–5).

²⁸ O’Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 57: “In verse 9 he is *gazing*, and in verse 16 he is *grazing*. In verse 8 he is leaping *over* mountains, but in verse 17 he is invited to ‘be’ *on* the mountains. He went from over to on, from gazing to grazing (looking to touching). What the ‘lilies’ and ‘mountains’ symbolize, I will leave to your sanctified imagination, or until we get to 4:6 and 7:8 where it is clear what the mountains symbolize.”

¹⁶My beloved is mine, and I am his;²⁹ he grazes among the lilies.³⁰

In other words, the vows have been taken.³¹ The commitments have been made. Now it's time to enjoy the goodness of sexual intimacy as God intended it.³²

And that's intimated in the statement in **verse 16**.

he grazes among the lilies.

He's not a gazelle or a stag bounding over the mountains looking for his doe. He's found her, and he's safe in her embrace. There's nothing crass or crude here. But it's not prudish either.³³

And that sentiment is echoed in **verse 17**.

¹⁷Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains.

In Hebrew thought, the day breathes at dawn. And shadows flee as the sun rises. So this woman has asked her man, her young stag³⁴—now that she belongs to him alone and he belongs to her—to stay the night with her.³⁵

The end of **verse 17** is especially suggestive. Some translate the text as follows, “Be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of Bether.”³⁶ The problem with that translation is that there are no mountains of

²⁹ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 162: “This simple sentiment ‘My lover is mine and I am his’ is perhaps the most beautiful line of the Song. This looks back to the decree of Gen 2:24, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife; and they will become one flesh’ (NIV), and it looks ahead to 1 Cor 7:4, that the husband has authority over his wife’s body and the wife has authority over her husband’s body. True love is monogamous. It implies devotion to the other but also implies that one has the right to expect fidelity from the other.”

³⁰ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 78: “This phrase describes the male lover, but its precise meaning is obscure. It is presumably erotic, an idiom, or perhaps a euphemism, meaning that the man is enjoying sex with the woman.” Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 162: “The lotus was associated in Egyptian art with sexuality. Among other items, he cites a painted ivory tile from the tomb of Tutankhamen in which the queen, Ankhesenamen, stands before Tutankhamen. She holds a bouquet of lotus flowers and is wearing a diaphanous gown that is open at the middle, exposing her from the waist down. It is probably an invitation to love and indicates how the Egyptians associated the lotus with lovemaking.”

³¹ O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 55: “‘My beloved is mine, and I am his’ (v. 16a). That’s language of mutual possession. That’s Bible talk for ‘leave and cleave [ESV, hold fast] ... [and] become one flesh’ (Genesis 2:24; cf. Hosea 3:3; 1 Corinthians 7:3, 4). That’s covenant formula language—I will be their God, and they will be my people’ (Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4; cf. 1 Peter 2:9, 10). That’s the material of marriage vows—‘Do you take this man to be *your* husband? And do you take this woman to be *your* wife?’”

³² Some see sexual intimacy as only anticipated in the Song of Solomon till the explicit marriage scene of chapter 4. But I see sexual intimacy intimated throughout the book. O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 55: “Evangelical scholars do not debate whether the sexual intimacy described in the Song of Songs takes place within or outside of marriage. They all agree that a book in the Bible would only affirm such relations taking place within marriage. But evangelical scholars do debate at what point the first erotic encounter takes place within the Song... The majority opinion is that 4:1–5:1 describes the first encounter. It’s a poem about the wedding night. Thus, 2:8–17 is about the proposal, 3:1–5 the prewedding jitters, and 3:6–11 the wedding ceremony. Others think the Song starts in the bedroom with a love scene, and from there on it is one earthquake of eros after another. In plainer language, the whole Song is set in the context of marriage. I stand in this camp.”

³³ O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 58–9: “You might be prudish, but the Song is not. The Bible is not. God’s Word is fully aware of desire, seduction, rape, polygamy, homosexuality, adultery, and sex after age ninety. And that’s just Genesis. So if you are shocked by what I’m saying (what this poem is saying), you shouldn’t be. Let your sensibilities be shaped by Scriptural sensibilities. This poem is an invitation to sexual intimacy within marriage.”

³⁴ Hess, *Song of Songs*, BCOTWP, 87–88: “On a larger level, 2:8–17 begin with mountains, gazelle, and stag, and they end with gazelle, stag, and mountains.”

³⁵ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 78–9: “Should he go or come at dawn or at dusk? I think that the woman is telling her lover, in highly metaphorical language, that at nightfall he should quickly come to her to engage in passionate lovemaking.”

³⁶ This is how the NASB95 and KJV translate the verse—“the mountains of Bether.” The NIV and NLT have “the rugged hills.” The RSV has “rugged mountains.” The ESV does have a footnote that concedes, “or mountains of Bether.”

Bether anywhere in Israel (or elsewhere for that matter).³⁷ So the ESV is probably correct in interpreting this metaphorically as “cleft mountains” or “cleavage mountains.”³⁸ Don’t make me spell that out for you!

In other words, she’s asking him to join her on her body in the goodness of sexual intimacy.³⁹

And once again, the Bible affirms the goodness and the delight of sexual intimacy in the context of vows, commitment, and monogamy.⁴⁰

Now, as part of that. Let’s go back to verse 15. Here’s the first of two cautions in the passage. Smack dab in the middle of this passage on the goodness of anticipated sexual pleasure is this verse on foxes.

¹⁵Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our⁴¹ vineyards are in blossom.

Foxes! What are the foxes?⁴²

Foxes, just so you know, are almost universally presented as negative in ancient literature. They are negative in the OT (Judg 15:4–5; Neh 4:3; Ps 63:10; Song 2:15; Ezek 13:4; Lam 5:18).⁴³ They are negative in the NT (Luke 13:32). They are negative in Aristotle and Plato. Whenever a fox shows up in Aesop’s Fables, usually he’s doing something bad or mischievous.

And so when we find foxes in the vineyards in Song of Solomon—that’s not good! You don’t want that! That’s clearly communicated here by the verb “spoil.” The foxes are spoiling the grapes in the vineyard by eating them prematurely.

And the foxes here are a metaphor for the *spoiling* of sexual delight. And the principle conveyed is something like this—protect the garden of sexual delight. Don’t spoil it.

1) The **Foxes**: Protect the garden of sexual delight (2:15)

How might someone spoil it? Well, the danger is to take the courtship relationship too far. The danger is indulging in the goodness of sexual pleasure at the wrong time. The danger is indulging in the delight of sexual pleasure with the wrong person.⁴⁴ And the dangers are legion. There are as many dangers out there as there are people in the universe.⁴⁵

And notice also the statement in verse 15. This is an imperative in Hebrew indicating a command.

³⁷ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 163: “Efforts to identify a possible geographical location for the הרי בֶּתֶר as the ‘mountains of Bether’ are useless and obtuse, notwithstanding the fact that Aquila and Symmachus related it to Battir, a place conjecturally identified with Khirbet el-Yehud, about eleven kilometers southwest of Jerusalem... The phrase הרי בֶּתֶר fairly conspicuously refers to the split between a woman’s two breasts.”

³⁸ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 45: “You don’t have to be Sigmund Freud to see a potential connection here to her breasts, a connection that will be made explicit later on in the Song.”

³⁹ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 80: “As soon as it is dark, he should spring into action as quickly as a gazelle. Just as gazelles move swiftly and nimbly over the mountains (1 Chr 12:9), so should the lover move like a gazelle over ‘the mountains of *bether*,’ the woman’s body.”

⁴⁰ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 58: “We disconnect sex from commitment, and commitment from relationships, which turns us into consumers of relationships. We are constantly searching for people we can use to serve our interests and meet our needs, rather than looking for a single, lifelong intimate relationship in which we become the committed servant of another with whom our life is utterly and eternally intertwined. Do not treat sex as a light thing, something that can easily be toyed with. Don’t play around with casual relationships. Until you are ready to commit to this kind of all-consuming search for the one whom you are going to incorporate into your family and with whom you will build the next generation, you are not ready for love, and you are certainly not ready for sex.”

⁴¹ Hess, *Song of Songs*, BCOTWP, 98: “Their mutual desire to share their love with one another is expressed by the use of ‘our.’ This is a powerful statement about the need to protect the love that the lovers possess. Those in romantic relationships know all too well how quickly a relationship can be upset, especially by interlopers. There is no certain solution, but it makes a great deal of difference if the couple together pledge to come against any attempt to interfere with that relationship, and then make this a public declaration.”

⁴² Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 160: “In the Papyrus Harris 500 Egyptian texts, a woman refers to her lover as her fox (on the translation, see Keel [1994] 110 n. 2; he also cites a hymn to Hathor in which wreathed young women and drunkards raise their heads to the goddess of passion and to the foxes).”

⁴³ In some of these passages, the Hebrew term שָׁנִי (šū ‘āl) is translated “jackals” in the ESV.

⁴⁴ Nelson, *The Book of Romance*, chapter 3: “Passion will grow naturally in courtship. But so must restraint. The Bible treats desire as normal, expected, and good. But there is a divine time and place for it.”

¹⁵Catch the foxes for us,

Who's being asked to do the catching? Who are the fox-catchers? And who are the "us" in this verse?⁴⁶

Let me make a couple suggestions for this verse. The "us" is the couple. I don't know if the woman and the man are speaking together, or if the woman is talking by herself. Either way, the "ask" here is for other people to help them keep foxes out of their vineyard.⁴⁷

And we know from the grammar of what she's saying that she's addressing a group of people. These are fox-catchers. Because the grammar of the verb "catch" is plural.⁴⁸

So from the woman's perspective, she is saying "You people out there... y'all help us (the couple)... y'all help us by catching the little foxes."⁴⁹

Who's she talking to? She's talking probably to her family. They are the fox-catchers.⁵⁰ **This might also include the community of faith. This might also include her lousy brothers that made her work too hard in the vineyard. They can help with this too! This might also include some accountability partners, if you catch my drift.**⁵¹

⁴⁵ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 48: "Tending your sexual vineyard is not just about refraining from actual physical sexual intercourse; it is about protecting your mind from habitual lust, romantic fantasy, and pornography, all of which can have short- and long-term damaging effects. You can have a vineyard whose walls are still intact—technically, you are still a virgin and can wear the ring—but whose blossoms have been trampled into the muddy dirt in many other ways."

⁴⁶ Hess, *Song of Songs*, BCOTWP, 97: "The preferred option is to understand here metaphors for those who would threaten the couple and their love. Therefore, it seems best to attach this to the words of the couple, an intermezzo that both sing."

⁴⁷ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 44: "It is intriguing, too, that the appeal to 'catch the foxes' has a plural... This could simply be a rhetorical plural, a wish that is addressed to no one in particular. Given the community that hovers in the background throughout the Song, however, it may be an implicit appeal to others to help the couple maintain the safety of their vineyards until the time is fully ripe for them to cross the wall and come together. It is a recognition that purity is not merely an individual decision but a community project... It seems clear that the *our* here is not the woman and the man: he is eager for the wall to disappear. Rather, the *our* is the woman and her family. The wall that protects her (and him) is a family matter, not just a personal commitment."

⁴⁸ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 164: "For the young Israelite woman, the loss of her virginity was one of the most significant milestones of her life. Her own honor and her family's sense of honor were represented in her virginity. She and they protected it with a view toward someday entering marriage in purity, not having 'played the harlot.'"

⁴⁹ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 47: "What this poem in the Song of Songs gives us, however, is not a rule but a reason. In the face of springtime hormones that are crying out with every fiber of our being that now is the time to be fruitful and multiply, the Song reminds us that those pesky little foxes cause very real damage and get in the way of the ultimate goal of the vineyard, which is bearing rich fruit. The farmer who invests energy in protecting the integrity of the vineyard will not regret it later, even though he or she won't reap the benefits of this painful perseverance until the time is fully ripe."

⁵⁰ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 166: "After a woman's wedding night, it appears that she deposited with her parents a piece of cloth stained with the blood from the rupture of the hymen. This was to serve as proof of her virginity, and its presentation to the family may have been done in ritual fashion in the presence of witnesses... Of course, the presence of a blood-stained cloth was not an infallible proof that a woman was a virgin on her wedding night (and for that matter, not every woman bleeds when she loses her virginity). The real purpose of the law was not to provide absolute proof but to reinforce the necessity of maintaining the virginity of one's daughters... In short, *it is the responsibility of the paternal household to maintain the virginity of its daughters.*"

⁵¹ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 49: "The wise farmer does not rely on catching all the little foxes himself. He calls in his friendly neighborhood pest exterminator. So, too, we were not made to live as individuals, or as couples, but in community, where we share wisdom together. We need others to shed light into our blindness, to help us make good decisions. If you are entering a relationship, get advice from wise older people about what good boundaries are. Have people praying for you specifically. For some, that godly wisdom can come from parents. Others will have to search out other godly older people to guide and help them."

The point is this—purity and the avoidance of sin is a community project.⁵² If you try to accomplish this on your own, you will probably fail. But if you involve others, you have a better chance of success.⁵³

Just in terms of a NT expectation, it's the church family that is called to hold its members accountable for sexual purity and sexual ethics. And that doesn't stop when you get married. Paul was livid with a man who was sexually immoral in the Corinthian church. And he went after that church for not putting a stop to that deviant behavior (1 Cor 5:1–13; see also Eph 5:3–8; 1 Thes 4:3–8; Heb 13:4). So this is a community project!

Let's continue in the text. Look at **chapter 3** with me.

In **3:1**, there's a hard reset of the scene. And it's a bit jarring after the tranquility of the previous scene in the countryside.⁵⁴ And it all leads up to that refrain to the daughters of Jerusalem in **3:5**.

What we have starting in **verse 1** is something of a nightmare.

¹*On my bed⁵⁵ by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not.*

Once again, we have a scenario where there is longing and desire. But in this case, there is not the intrinsic goodness of the search for love. There is instead desperation and sadness.

And to add to that sense of despair, the word for “night” here in Hebrew is plural.⁵⁶ So this is not a random dream that she's having. This is a recurring nightmare for this woman.⁵⁷

I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not.

Where is he? Is he working late? Is he on a business trip? Is he not even in the picture yet? Is she a single woman seeking companionship? We don't know. The text is ambiguous.

But I'm inclined to see this passage as a kind of dream sequence that portrays the longing and search for a soul mate. This woman wants someone to fulfill the creation mandate with. But there's no one.

In the previous scene, her man was seeking her. He was calling to her, **“Come! Arise. Go with me!”** Now she says, **“I will rise”** to go find him.

Look at **verse 2**.

²*I will rise now and go about the city,⁵⁸ in the streets and in the squares;⁵⁹ I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not.*

⁵² Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 165: “Deut 22:13–21 has great significance for this discussion. The text concerns a man who marries a woman but who after the consummation of their marriage comes to despise her and begins to tell people that she did not come to the marriage as a virgin: ‘I came to her but did not find evidence of virginity’ (בְּתוּלִים, v 14). In response, the family of the woman was to produce the evidence of virginity (v 17). The elders of the town were to fine the man a hundred shekels for slandering the girl (v 19). If, however, the woman had in fact ‘acted like a prostitute’ and had lost her virginity prior to her marriage, she was to be stoned to death (v 21).”

⁵³ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 49: “I have had couples tell me that after graduation they plan to live in an apartment together but not have sex. That is like inviting the foxes over to camp out in your vineyard but hoping that they won't touch the blossoms. We are weak people who are easily led astray, and our sexual drives are very powerful. So be wise about the plans that you make about when and how you are alone together.”

⁵⁴ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 81: “The setting is dark and urban, in contrast to the bright springtime countryside that figures so often in the Song as the place where the lovers meet.”

⁵⁵ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 83: “מִשְׁכָּב is where one sleeps (2 Sam 4:7; 11:13 and passim), or has sex (Gen 49:4; Lev 18:22; Num 31:17; Judg 21:12; Ezek 23:17), or thinks private thoughts (Pss 4:5; 36:5; Eccl 10:20). All of these pertain here.”

⁵⁶ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 170: “בְּלֵילוֹת means not ‘all night long’ but literally ‘in the nights’ or ‘night after night’ or simply ‘by night.’”

⁵⁷ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 55: “This poem presents us with a recurrent dream of searching, with which the woman wrestles night after night. In the previous poem, she was confident and assured in sending the man away until morning came. She knew that it was not yet time for them to be together permanently. Now, though, as the long nights alone stretch on, she seems less sure of that decision, and in her dreams she ventures outside the wall of her house, searching for her beloved.”

⁵⁸ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 84: “The city where she searches may be Jerusalem (ancient Israel's ‘city’ par excellence), if the woman is a Jerusalemite (like the ‘Jerusalem women’ whom she addresses), but it could be any town. Jerusalem is most likely if, as in 5:7, there are ‘watchmen of the walls,’ indicating a walled city.”

Again this has all the earmarks of a dream sequence. This is a fever dream. These are her anxieties being played out in her subconscious. The woman is longing for love. She's longing for companionship. But her search has come up empty. And her desperation is rising.

Look at **verse 3**.

³The watchmen⁶⁰ found me as they went about in the city. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"

Just so you know, women wouldn't wander around the city in the middle of the night in ancient Israel. If she was married, she wouldn't do this. If she was young and single living with her parents, she wouldn't do this. So this is fantastical. Again, the woman is longing for love, but her search has come up empty.

When you juxtapose the two scenes together—the countryside and the city—you have the basis of a dating relationship. There's excitement and there's terror. There's joy and there's fear. There's delight and then there's trepidation. And there's no way to really alleviate that. These are the emotions that lead up to the wedding vows. **I should know. I officiate weddings. I've seen this.**

Look at **verse 4**.

⁴Scarcely had I passed them [the watchmen] when I found him whom my soul loves.

That's the fourth time that she's used that language in the Song—"him whom my soul loves." This is the language of commitment. This is the language of monogamy. This is the language of exclusivity. The word "him" is singular. The word "whom" is singular. And "my" is singular. And "I" is singular too.

So there's one woman here finding one man to be together with for the rest of their lives. This is the hope that she's longed for. And it brings her relief.⁶¹

I held him, and would not let him go

Literally "I seized him, and I did not relax!"⁶² **"Now that I've found him, he's mine, and he's not getting away from me!"**⁶³

This echoes the language of **Genesis 2:24**, "Man shall *leave* his father and his mother and [*cleave*] to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." That one-flesh statement in **Genesis 2** is both physical and metaphysical. They literally become one flesh in the act of marriage—their sexual union. But they also metaphysically become one entity. **They become Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so.** Their children see them as a unity. **The post office sends their mail to the same address.**

You know some people call Sanja and I, "Tony and Sanja." Some people call us "Sony and Tanja." That's okay. Our names become merged into one person. We are the Caffey's. Because Genesis 2:24, "Man shall *leave* his father and mother and [*cleave*] to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

⁵⁹ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC, 171: "Her act of looking for a man in the streets and plazas of the city is comparable to the behavior of both Lady Wisdom and the prostitute in Prov 1:20–21; 7:10–13; 8:1–4. In each case, the 'woman' in question is hunting for a man in order to entice him. This is of itself neither good nor evil; the character and purposes of the woman in question give the action its moral quality."

⁶⁰ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 84–5: "City watchmen are mentioned in Ps 127:1 and Isa 21:11–12, and Ps 130:6 refers to night watchmen who wait eagerly for morning, but they were not like today's police on a beat. Watchmen, שומרים, are generally stationary sentries posted at the city walls or gates, or at entrances to encampments or palaces (Judg 1:25; 7:19; 1 Kgs 14:27; Isa 62:6; Jer 51:12; Neh 11:19; 12:25; 13:22), to prevent access by unauthorized persons. There is some evidence that ancient cities had night watchmen who patrolled the streets to provide public safety."

⁶¹ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 57: "This young woman doesn't simply long for sex: she longs for sex in the appropriate context—the context of home and family... She wants to bring him to the house of her mother, to the very chamber where she was conceived. What she means by that is that she wants to bring the man into the epicenter of her life and her own family history, so that he can understand on a deep level what profound influences have shaped her into the person that she is."

⁶² Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 56–7: "Seize is the same word that she used in the previous section about catching the foxes (Song 2:15). There is a tenacity and a focus to her pursuit of the man here; this is not merely casual dating in which two members of the opposite sex are hanging out in a long-term undefined relationship. Love involves an exclusive pursuit—he is "the one whom my soul loves," not "one of many possible romantic candidates." What is more, it is a pursuit with a clear goal, which is to "bring him to the house of my mother, to the chamber where she conceived me" (3:4)."

⁶³ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 86: "The Song is invoking a stock marriage trope for this erotic union. The Bible lacks imagery for extramarital erotic intimacy that is not prostitution or adultery. The woman is saying in v. 4 that she will not let go of her lover until they have made love."

And speaking of one flesh (not metaphysical but physical), look at the end of **verse 4**.

*I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her who conceived me.*⁶⁴

That might seem kind of odd to link sexuality to the house of one's mother. Isn't this the opposite of **Genesis 2:24**? Aren't we supposed to leave mom and dad's house?

Well, don't think of that literally. This is a statement of facts concerning the passing on of the generations.⁶⁵ As mom and dad did, so do their children. Mom and dad became one flesh and brought children into this world. Now their child will do likewise. And someday the children they brought into the world will bring their own children into the world. And so on, and so forth.

Life goes on just like it has for centuries. And that's good. That's what this woman has been longing for—to fulfill the creation mandate.

Write this down as a second point in your message. The second scene is the city. And the message conveyed here is that Delayed gratification is a means of sanctification.

2) The **City**: Delayed gratification is a means of sanctification (3:1–5)

I wish that I could tell you that waiting is easy. It's not.

I had a couple friends in seminary when I lived in Chicago who were single. One of them was from Nigeria, and the other was from Turks and Caicos. And these were good men—chaste and God-fearing. And they were a bit older than me too.

And I had this conversation with them about waiting for marriage. And I told them during the course of our conversation, “Yeah, it was really hard for me to wait on the Lord as a single man.” And they looked at me incredulous. And they said to me, “How old were you when you got married?” And I said, “22!” And they laughed and laughed and laughed. They said something like, “Yeah, that must have been really difficult for you. You were really suffering there for a few years out of high school.” Eventually those two men did get married. And they expressed to me the difficulty of waiting.

And again, I wish that I could tell you that waiting is easy. It's not. It wasn't for them. And I wish that I could tell you that sanctification is fun. It's not. It's satisfying ultimately, yes. But it's not fun.

Also, I wish I could tell you that every person who longs to be married will eventually be married. I cannot. God has not promised that to every Christian. And some people... like John the Baptist, like Paul, like Jesus, like Daniel in the OT... will live out their lives as a single person. And singleness is no barrier to a faithful, fruitful life.

And even for those of us who are married, we weren't born married. And there's no guarantee that we'll die married. In other words, we might be single again at some time in the future, like Anna in the NT who was a widow for decades (Luke 2:36–37). Married couples rarely die at the same time.

But I will say this, and this is the thesis of this passage of Song of Solomon. Delayed gratification is good. It's a means of sanctification. And even if we wait till eternity for the perfect marriage to come, between Christ and his church, the delay in gratification will be well worth the wait.

Which leads us to the second warning in the passage. You've got the countryside and the city as the scenes. And for cautions you've got the foxes and the oath.

The oath is found in 3:5.

*⁵I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.*⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, Hermeneia, 85: “We are left with the image of the woman holding on tightly to her lover in the anticipation of their making love, and the story stops there.”

⁶⁵ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 57: “She wants to bring him to the place where together they can form the next generation of the family, just as when, after Sarah's death, Isaac took his wife Rebekah into Sarah's tent and was comforted (Gen. 24:67).”

⁶⁶ O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 60: “Notice a few facts. First, notice that she is addressing the ‘daughters of Jerusalem,’ who are the target audience of the Song. These are young, single Israelite teenagers, ripe and ready for love. Second, notice that her counsel is to keep in check sexual arousal and activity ‘until they can be fulfilled with the right person and at the right time,’ and ‘the right person for sexual intimacy is one's spouse, and the right time is after the commitment of marriage.’ Third, notice that she is very

Write that down as a second caution from this passage.

2) The **Oath**: Don't get ahead of the marital covenant (3:5)

The old man Solomon in the book of **Ecclesiastes** says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (3:1). There's a time to be born, and a time to die. There's a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted. There's a time to kill, and a time to heal. There's a time to weep and a time to dance (Ecc 3:2-4).

And there's a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing (Ecc 3:5).⁶⁷ **"God 'has made everything beautiful in its time' (Ecclesiastes 3:11), including the timing for intimacy within marriage. So when the time is right ... embrace. Yes, embrace to the glory of God!"**⁶⁸

Similarly, Solomon says in the **Song of Solomon** through the voice of the Shulamite wife, **"There's a time to enjoy the pleasure of love, sex, and romance. We're all for that as Hebrews. But don't awaken that prematurely. Don't rouse it outside of the marriage covenant. And don't start something you can't finish in holiness and obedience to the Lord."**

And let's go ahead and deal with this oath statement that involves gazelles and deer. Who makes an oath and calls wildlife as witnesses? What is this? And what does it mean to stir up and awaken love before it pleases?

It's really important that we nail this down, because this statement is oft repeated in the book of **Song of Solomon**. In fact, it's the backbone of the whole book. It's the chorus of the song that keeps getting repeated. What does it mean?

Here's what it means. The author of the **Song of Solomon** **is telling us that we can walk and chew gum at the same time. We can celebrate sex and romance as God's good gifts. We can do that. We should do that.**

But at the same time, and without confusing the goodness of God's good gifts, we need to make absolutely sure that we are enjoying those good gifts the way God intended them. To have sex outside the context of marriage is a mistake.

And this Shulamite woman calls nature itself to back her oath. She calls the gazelles and the does of the field. The man is called a male gazelle in this passage. He's called a stag. She's calling the female gazelles and does of the field to back her oath statement. That's either a reference to all the married women of the world—the does who have stags and the female gazelles who have male gazelles at home. Or it's a reference to nature at large that says to young women in the world, **"Do the right thing. Do love, sex, and marriage like God intended it."**

Maybe even ironically, we have animals telling us as humans, **"Don't act like an animal. Behave like God intended it." Keep sex in the context of marriage.**

And to that, someone in the room might say, "Okay, thanks for this ideal from the Bible, Pastor Tony. But I've haven't abided that in my life. Not even close. I've made so many mistakes in the area of sexual sin, I don't even know where to begin."

If that's you today, I do not condemn you. I'm the last person who is going to throw stones at other sinners. If modern statistics are correct, then upwards of 70% of evangelical Christians have failed

serious about her warning to wait: 'I *adjure* you.'

⁶⁷ The Hebrew word used here, נָקַח, is used elsewhere (but not exclusively!) for sexual embrace (e.g. Prov 5:20; Song 2:6; 8:3). Some also see a euphemism for sex in the previous statement about casting and gathering stones (Ecc 3:5). This dates back to ancient, Midrash readings of the text. Augustine follows the same line of reasoning (see Wright, ed., *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, ACCS, 224). But this is far-fetched and results from a slavish need to link the statements in this colon with the ones that follow about "embracing" and not "embracing." Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, 116: "Based on a reading of the *Midrash Rabbah*, some commentators see a sexual reference in the idiom. The Midrash, as quoted by Robert Gordis, who follows it, reads: 'A time to cast stones—when your wife is clean (menstrually), and a time to gather stones in—when your wife is unclean.' However, there is little evidence besides the *Midrash Rabbah* that supports the interpretation that 'to cast stones' means to make love."

⁶⁸ O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 59.

in the area of sexual purity before marriage.⁶⁹ And so there's no doubt that some of us have failed to abide the oath that the Shulamite gave us to “not awaken love until it pleases.”

And if that you, this morning. Here's how I would address your situation. Let me address it the way Jesus does in the NT.

In the book of **Luke**, there's this amazing moment where Jesus was having dinner in the house of Simon the Pharisee. And while they were eating, they were rudely interrupted by someone. This woman comes into the house and she's weeping. And she's referred to as a sinful woman. And she takes this flask of oil and pours it out on Jesus's feet. And she begins to wipe his feet with her tears and with the hair of her head, and she kisses Jesus's feet.

And Simon the Pharisee, who is watching this, is shocked by it. “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who's touching him.” She's a sinner.

And Jesus answering said to him, “Simon, I've got something for you, buddy.” And to Simon's credit, he listens. And Jesus tells a story about a money lender who had two debtors: one who owed a huge amount and one who owed a little amount. And when they couldn't pay it, the money lender canceled both of the debts. And Jesus asked Simon, “Which of them will love him more?”

Simon got the right answer—the one who had the larger debt. And then Jesus, turning to the woman, motioning towards her. And he says, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.’ And he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven’” (7:44–48).

At the end of that episode, Jesus turns to the woman and says, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50).⁷⁰ Jesus told the chief priests at another point in his ministry, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you” (Matt 21:31).

The truth of the matter is this—sexual purity is good. It's honorable. We should fight for it in our church community. We should hold each other accountable in this pursuit of purity.

But we are not saved by our sexual purity. And we are not saved by being the best versions of ourselves or making up for our mistakes. The truth is that God only saves sinners and only sinners qualify for salvation.⁷¹

So no matter who you are or what you've done, you can be saved. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. At the feet of Jesus! Go to him. Trust him. Let him strengthen and restore you. And let him save your sin-stained soul. Pray with me!⁷²

⁶⁹ See Janet E. Rosenbaum and Byron Weathersbee, “True Love Waits: Do Southern Baptists? Premarital Sexual Behavior among Newly Married Southern Baptist Sunday School Students,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 52, no. 1 (2013): 263–75, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-010-9445-5>. Published online January 28, 2011.

⁷⁰ I'm indebted to O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 63–4 for this final illustration and connection to Song of Solomon.

⁷¹ Duguid, *Song of Songs*, 53: “Broken people, with devastated vineyards, are welcomed by his grace into a new family of forgiveness, hope, and life. Broken people, who know that they have no righteousness of their own to offer, find hope in the righteousness that Jesus Christ himself provides.”

⁷² Numerous Christian and Jewish commentators suggest that “the gazelles or the does of the field” (2:7; cf. 3:5) function as verbal stand-ins for divine names, allowing the woman to invoke God indirectly in her oath (Van Pelt; O'Donnell; Berlin; Longman; Duguid; Fox; Fishbane). The proposal depends on phonetic similarities between the animal terms and names or titles for God. There is at least some superficial resemblance between צְבָאוֹת (*šēbā'ôt*, “gazelles”) and צְבָאוֹת (*šēbā'ôt*, “hosts”), as in יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת (“YHWH of hosts”). The proposed connection between אֵילָנוֹת (*'ayyēlôt*, “does”) and אֵל שַׁדַּי (*'ēl šadday*, “God Almighty”), however, is considerably more remote. Neither the consonantal structure nor the sound of *'ayyēlôt* provides an obvious linguistic correspondence to *'ēl šadday*. The interpretation therefore seems to depend on an uneven and rather strained wordplay. I find the proposal untenable and prefer to understand the gazelles and does straightforwardly as part of the Song's recurring imagery from the natural world.

