



Song of Solomon

TOOL KIT

Why do we need a sermon series on love, sex and marriage? Furthermore, why would a study of a 3000-year-old collection of love poetry help?

Good questions. Here are some more.

Do you know of a marriage that is struggling in significant ways? Do you know anyone who has been divorced? Are you married with problems? Maybe happily married with a desire to be in a great marriage? Are you single with a significant fear or anxiety regarding marriage? Have you noticed a decay of the way our culture represents marriage? Have you heard a new set of questions about marriage, love and sex in our children? Have you seen a television commercial or magazine ad that uses sexuality to sell something like car wax, wall paint or scented candles?

I'm not sure it's feasible to expect a negative answer to almost any of these questions. What this betrays is a deep area of need in one of the most important aspects of any culture, at any time: the family. What is more basic and foundational than the family? Family is built on love, sex and marriage. If you abuse the pillars, the house will fall.

Take a look at some of the latest marriage statistics gathered by the Barna Group (barna.com).

Most Americans get married at some point in their life: just one out of five adults (22%) has never been married. Among those who have said their wedding vows, one out of three have been divorced at least once, according to a new study from The Barna Group.

MARRIAGE IS THE NORM

In addition to finding that four out of every five adults (78%) have been married at least once, the Barna study revealed that an even higher proportion of born again Christians (84%) tie the knot. That eclipses the proportion among people aligned with non-Christian faiths (74%) and among atheists and agnostics (65%).

This means the vast majority of Christians will get married at some point, though not everyone, as God calls some to singleness and abstinence. Also, the vast majority of Christians want to get married. Again, not all but most. Even understanding the statistics on divorce and the havoc it can wreak in a family, an overwhelming number of millennials still desire to get married at some point (some statistics say up to 92%). Back to Barna:

DIVORCE IS WIDESPREAD

Among adults who have been married, the study discovered that one-third (33%) have experienced at least one divorce. That means that among all Americans 18 years of age or older, whether they have been married or not, 25% have gone through a marital split.

The study showed that the percentage of adults who have been married and divorced varies from segment to segment. For instance, the groups with the most prolific experience of marriage ending in divorce are downscale adults (39%), Baby Boomers (38%), those aligned with a non-Christian faith (38%), African-Americans (36%), and people who consider themselves to be liberal on social and political matters (37%).

Among the population segments with the lowest likelihood of having been divorced subsequent to marriage are Catholics (28%), evangelicals (26%), upscale adults (22%), Asians (20%) and those who deem themselves to be conservative on social and political matters (28%).

In fact, when evangelicals and non-evangelical born again Christians are combined into an aggregate class of born again adults, their divorce figure is statistically identical to that of non-born again adults: 32% versus 33%, respectively.

This broadly means that divorce is a powerful influence in the world in which we now live. Shocker! It touches almost every family in some way. The affects of divorce on subsequent generations is a major factor in how our culture's perception of marriage, cohabitation, divorce and sex is changing. Back to Barna:

REFLECTIONS ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

George Barna, who directed the study, noted that Americans have grown comfortable with divorce as a natural part of life. "There no longer seems to be much of a stigma attached to divorce; it is now seen as an unavoidable rite of passage," the researcher indicated. "Interviews with young adults suggest that they want their initial marriage to last, but are not particularly optimistic about that possibility. There is also evidence that many young people are moving toward embracing the idea of serial marriage, in which a person gets married two or three times, seeking a different partner for each phase of their adult life."

Barna, who has written more than three dozen books on the intersection between faith and culture, also stated that information about marriage, healthy relationships and divorce does not seem to have as much influence on people's choices. "Government statistics and a wealth of other research data have shown that co-habitation increases the likelihood of divorce, yet cohabiting is growing in popularity. Studies showing the importance and value of preparing for marriage seem to fall on deaf ears. America has become an experimental, experience-driven culture. Rather than learn from objective information and teaching based on that information, people prefer to follow their instincts and let the chips fall where they may. Given that tendency, we can expect America to retain the highest divorce rate among all developed nations of the world."

Tim Keller is a pastor of a mega-church in Manhattan, New York. He is a best-selling author and one of my favorite writers and thinkers. See these numbers from his excellent 2011 book, "The Meaning of Marriage":

"Over the last forty years, the 'leading marriage indicators' - empirical descriptions of marriage health and satisfaction in the United States - have been in steady decline. The divorce rate is nearly twice the rate it was in 1960. In 1970, 89 percent of all births were to married parents, but today only 60 percent are. Most tellingly, over 70 percent of American adults were married in 1960, but only 50 percent were in 2008."

Keller gets much of his information from W. Bradford Wilcox at *The Marriage Index*, and the *The National Marriage Project* of the University of Virginia. See their annual reports and a wealth of excellent articles and research at thestateofourunions.org and americanvalues.org.

We are in a crisis. No matter how you slice it, the fruit is rotting. The popular view of the nature of love is decaying. The fabric of the institution of marriage is dissolving. Sex has overflowed its created riverbanks into every deviance and facet of culture. Yes, we are in a crisis.

What is the answer? The answer is a revival of truth and grace, believed and practiced, that only the Holy Spirit of God can bring about. But be careful here. We agree with a theological answer like this because we are thinking mostly of a fallen culture. A world of angry atheists, the unchurched and indifferent. But what about the Body of Christ? What is the answer within the Church? Among believers? Is it the same answer?

These, and a thousand other related questions and startling facts, are the reason why a teaching series on love, sex and marriage is so important. We believe that the Word of God is our only source of revealed truth. It is inspired by the Spirit of God, without error and indescribably powerful for transformation, training and correction. Where else would we go in such a time of need?

Tools in the Kit:

- » Introduction to the Song of Solomon
- » Authorship
- » Theme
- » Interpretation
- » Structure and Outline
- » Resources
- » Application Materials

Our prayer is simple. Our approach is simple. The power needed is Divine.

- » Grace and Truth communicated by the Holy Spirit of God through the Song of Solomon
- » The inner transformation of individual hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit
- » The wider transformation of marriages and relationships in our church and our city

The tool kit before you is just that, a collection of individual tools to help you with specific problems or questions. Use it like a tool kit. You may choose to read it in whole or skip to specific sections, depending on the questions you are asking. As a unit, it is intended to provide richer background, resources and avenues of application than a time-limited teaching series can provide.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SONG OF SOLOMON

"Among the books of the Bible, the Song of Solomon is one of the smallest, most difficult, yet one of the most popular with Jews and Christians. Over the centuries hundreds of books and commentaries have been written and unnumbered sermons preached on these 117 verses!" (G. Carr, *Song of Solomon*, 15)

As we will see the section on interpretation, the history of this Book of the Bible is bound together with the way it was understood. There is no doubt, the Hebrew poetry of the Song of Solomon is highly erotic. For example, the book is read in its entirety during the Feast of Unleavened Bread after Passover, but only by a male over the age of thirty. This awkward discomfort led the Jewish nation well before the time of Jesus to interpret it in ways other than literally: a man and woman in marriage. Yes, it describes a holy passion and love inside of marriage, but that is not all. We also get to see a marriage begin, reflect on the past, persevere through conflict and trouble and set a course for health and maturity. In the course of our study, it is an appreciation and emulation of this movement and growth that will be our most treasured goal.

Its placement in the arrangement of the Hebrew Old Testament canon is also instructive. After the Books of Moses, historical books and most of the prophets come in this order: Psalms, Job,

Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes...

It would seem that after an examination of the "excellent wife" in Proverbs 31, the last chapter of the book, the ancients sought to give two of the greatest examples of this kind of woman in the Scriptures: Ruth and the Bride of the Song of Songs. Not without their problems and challenges, both illustrate maturity, faith and purity.

The opening words of the book in Hebrew are "Song of songs of Solomon." Following the Hebrew way of expressing superlatives, this might mean "the greatest song of Solomon." Think of "holy of holies" expressing the holiest place of the Temple. This is the origin of the three most used titles of the book: "Song of Songs," "The Song of Solomon" or "Canticles" from Latin Vulgate Bible for *songs or chants*.

While there is some minor debate regarding dates, let the following markers serve our study. Solomon ascended the throne of his father, David, in 971 B.C. He was the second son of David and Bathsheba, the first having died. They named him Solomon or *Jedidiah*, which means "loved by God." (See 2 Samuel 12:24-25.) The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Solomon was only 14 years old when he took the throne. Even at this age, Solomon possessed the wisdom to ask God for a discerning heart. (See 1 Kings 3:7-13.)

Like many of Israel's rulers and kings of other nations, Solomon started well. He sought God and followed in the righteous footsteps of his father David. But He did not fully heed the warnings of God and the treacheries of his role. In his old age, Solomon multiplied wives and concubines with diverse backgrounds and pagan roots. These, in turn, stole his heart after false gods. (See 1 Kings 11.) After a forty-year reign, sadly, the temple in Jerusalem would be the most enduring aspect of Solomon's legacy, the kingdom collapsing and cleaving in two after his death in 931 B.C.

It there a greater human enigma in the Scriptures? While some characters are rather one-dimensional, frozen in their state, others display movement in their character. But does any character come close to the up and down curve of Solomon? Great wisdom and piety in the beginning, complete with social and religious reforms and the construction of the temple. Then we observe a slow decay in his great wisdom, failure to follow God in the midst of great peace and success. The heights of glory accentuates the crash of failure in the end.

This is the true story of Solomon. All of these factors and scores more make a study of the Song of Solomon the opposite of simple. Not only Solomon the man, but matters of language, symbols, genre and structure. This is why a document like this tool kit is both helpful and necessary. The brevity and scope of this work will only scratch the surface of the issues.

Why then would we be interested in studying a book by like this? Especially since the subject matter centers on one of the biggest points of later weakness and trouble in its author?

AUTHORSHIP

While the "of Solomon" in the Hebrew title can be taken several different ways, most scholarship dating to antiquity has seen King Solomon as the author. "Tradition has uniformly attributed the book to Solomon" (Hanna, *From Moses to Malachi*, 237). Counter to some modern theories of a later composition date, internal and external evidence, such as the setting and vocabulary, supports the simple conclusion that King Solomon authored or compiled the work during his lifetime.

But the question remains, even if Solomon wrote it, why would we deem it valuable considering his mistakes and sins later in life?

Considering Solomon's youth when ascending the throne of Israel, some have seen his three major writings as indicative of the three major seasons of his life: Song of Solomon is his early years/reign, Proverbs in the middle and Ecclesiastes at the end. This question, however, remains perhaps the most important single block to the fullest appreciation of the book and its offering. Hanna says it well, "With seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, one hardly expects Solomon to compose an exquisite love song to a bride. In his case, practice did not make perfect! But the problem is not insurmountable when we consider that the

Song of Solomon was probably written in his early years. The “beloved” may be Solomon’s first wife. This serves to make love and faithfulness in marriage all the more important and Solomon’s later failure all the more tragic” (Hanna, 237).

We thus conclude, and not merely because it is convenient, that Solomon is both the principal character and author/compiler. We also conclude that he experienced this relationship within the true narrative captured early in this reign as King, before the greater difficulties of multiplying wives and concubines was invited. This would place the date of the book near the first half of the tenth century B.C., somewhere between 970 B.C. and around 950 B.C. as an estimate.

THEME

Perhaps the simplest answer is also the most precise. The Song of Solomon is all about love. But at a closer look, it is about love between one man and one woman, expressed through different seasons of a committed marriage. It celebrates the purity of human love as an expression of God’s highest ideal for love.

There are only two main characters: the young Shulammitte bride/wife and Solomon the groom/ husband. Their story is not merely a celebration of sex as God has created it and blessed it. Nor is it simply a collection of erotic poetry or love songs. It is rather all of these and more because it is captured within a story. It is this story and its

movement that actually turns up the volume on the theme of love.

Consider a brilliant and life-giving marriage in a couple that has been married for 50 years. The marvel of their love is one thing. The marvel of their love set in the context of myriad challenges, tragedies and obstacles is even greater. Love written in a story is always greater than a snapshot.

Perhaps Song of Solomon 8:6-7 serves as a fitting and poetic expression of this great theme: *“Put me as a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, jealousy as severe as the grave; its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, nor will rivers overflow it; if a man were to give all the riches of his house for love, it would be utterly despised.”*

INTERPRETATION

Here we will attempt to simplify what is perhaps the most complex question of the Song of Solomon. The type of literature by which to classify the Song is not identical to the question of interpretation but they are deeply connected. “The major problem a commentator must face with this book is deciding what kind of literature it is and what basic approach to take in interpreting it” (G. Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, 21).

First, we can observe that the Song of Solomon is thoroughly poetic in form and content. This helps us narrow its genre or literary type, which in turn

aids accurate interpretation. The Hebrew Scriptures use poetry quite often; Psalms, Proverbs, much of Job and much of many of the Prophets are Hebrew poetry. To be clear, Hebrew poetry is not about rhyming words or “word rhyme.” In the Hebrew language rhyme is cheap as many words end the same. This kind of poetry is “thought rhyme” paralleling images, ideas and teaching statements. Hebrew poetry is also highly symbolic, thoroughly employing similes, metaphors, words pictures and images.

Within the whole of the Song some have seen fourteen or fifteen individual love poems or songs. The number of the songs is less important than their unity. They form a whole that shares a unifying theme and structure. Literary devices are used to help transition between scenes and bring coherence, such as the “chorus” and oath statements we see in the Song. This allows the work to flow outside of strict chronology, like a modern movie with flashback scenes. This type of literature, common in the ancient near east, seems to fit very well.

From genre we move to interpretation. Without getting too much in the weeds, let’s briefly review the main schools of thought. First is the **Allegorical** interpretation approach to the Song. This school was prominent in early Jewish and Christian readings and sees the content of the book as a vehicle for the deeper truth of God’s love for Israel or the church. This is closely related to a **Spiritual** reading of the book, which sees the content as relating to the believers intimacy with God or the spiritual fel-

lowship a believer enjoys with Jesus.

One of the more popular approaches among evangelicals has been the **Typical** or **Typological** approach. This reading sees value in the historical and literal details but then connects them with some type or reality beyond itself. Scripture does use typology, as the temple is a type of heaven, Melchizedek is a type of Christ, etc. Others see the Song as a Dramatic play designed for theatrical performance or celebration. And finally, others read it with a deep regard for the Literal meaning of words and phrases, the symbols and figures of speech they represent and an appreciation for a historical relationship in reality. This **Literal** or **Natural** approach will be our main school of thought because it aligns with our purpose and goal. This method fully embraces all of the figures of speech, word pictures and images available in Hebrew poetry.

So, without disparaging at all the view that the Song of Solomon has brilliant and useful things to say about our spiritual intimacy with Jesus, the questions and needs regarding the state of marriage in our culture and city form our primary lens. We are in a crisis. Thus, in order to speak into this crisis directly, we choose to approach the Song from a natural and literal viewpoint, a perspective that has a long history and has existed alongside the allegorical method for centuries. This in turn will help to simplify and clarify our interpretive tools and conclusions, even within the challenges that lay before us in such an ancient text.



STRUCTURE AND OUTLINE

The Song of Solomon is a collection of songs or love poems, but much more than a simple anthology. There is, as we will see, a real unity and narrative to this collection of songs.

I am indebted to Dr. Kem Oberholtzer, a teacher and disciple-maker at Faith Bible Church, for sharing his great work on the Song of Solomon (ThM Thesis for Western Conservative Baptist Seminary). His insightful and thorough study illuminated many factors for me, not the least of which was a story-line structure and outline. I represent it here in my own words.

1:1: Title :: The Greatest Song of Solomon

1:2 - 2:7: The First Major Section :: The Wedding Day in Jerusalem

The Bride's Wedding Day Thoughts and Jitters

The Wedding Day Banquet in the Hebrew tradition

The Wedding Night

2:8 - 3:5: The Second Major Section :: Flashback to the days of Courtship

Solomon visits the Shulammite woman at her home

Problems prior to marriage

3:6 - 5:1: The Third Major Section :: The Wedding Day Continued

The Royal Wedding Procession into Jerusalem

The Wedding Night continued



5:2 - 8:14: The Fourth and Final Major Section ::

Marriage Conflict and Maturity

Intimacy Issues

Separation in Conflict

Reconciliation

Marriage Maturity

A Hometown Vacation

Notice a few things about the structure. It begins on the wedding day and only flashes back to the dating, courtship and proposal. Then the narrative resumes back on the wedding day and night. The final movement is the longest and most involved. It includes several points of conflict and reconciliation towards maturity in marriage. Thus, the narrative, without the constraint of chronology, speaks to most of the main stages of marriage: attraction, dating and courtship, proposal, wedding, wedding night, sex and love-making, conflict, communication, reconciliation, romance, commitment and maturity.

Our schedule of sermons will follow this narrative and focus on strong Biblical teaching regarding these aspects of marriage. We will maximize thoughts on relevant application and homework for married and engaged couples.

RESOURCES

We felt led to this teaching series because of the desperate state of marriage and family in our city and world. But transformation involves much more than a few sermons. You must work toward a great marriage. You must work on yourself. You must see growth regarding how you pray, respond, speak, react, lead, follow, show affection and give grace. Each of these battles has an attainable, Jesus-centered and Spirit-filled ideal for your role as husband or wife. You've got work to do if you want a great marriage.

Beyond this teaching series there are a tsunami of resources available. Go to any bookstore, Christian or otherwise, and you will quickly drown in the diversity of perspectives available. The tips, tricks and "secrets" to a healthy, happy marriage are many. Go to an online bookstore and search for "marriage" and the wave is even higher.

In an effort to clarify this search, we offer some websites, books and even workbooks for your continued study. Whether you are familiar with them or not, take some time to consider how each of them will help you take a step towards a great marriage.

FAITH BIBLE CHURCH

First of all, please check out the ample resources in our **Faith@Home** ministry center on the campus of Faith Bible. Most of the resources are free. All of the books there are just \$5, much less than the retail price of any of them. You will find sections of material on parenting, marriage, specific kids related material and more.

Investigate our brand new **re|engage Marriage Ministry**. The current session is already going, but we will begin a new one in January 2017. Space is limited and registration opens October 9, 2016. You can register online at: faithbibleonline.org/reengage. This powerful 16-week group marriage course is designed for any marriage, for those that need simple reconnection to those that need full resurrection. Email Gavin Carrier for more information: gcarrier@faithbibleonline.org

We also offer counseling at Faith Bible, and the most common issues brought to our counseling offices relate to marriage. If we can assist you with well-trained, high level, Biblical counseling, please call our church office at 936.321.5505 to schedule an appointment.

BOOKS:

Much of spiritual growth involves reading. Meditation on Scripture should be first and foremost. But reading helpful books written by believers should also play a role.

- » "The Meaning of Marriage" by Tim Keller
A fantastic background study for marriage
- » "Before We Say 'I Do'" by Wright and Roberts
The Workbook is especially good for engaged couples
- » "The Mingling of Souls" by Chandler and Wilson
This is a very readable work on the Song of Solomon
- » "Sheet Music" by Dr. Kevin Leman
This book on sex inside of marriage is exceptional
- » "The Marriage Builder" by Larry Crabb
One of the best by a powerful writer
- » "Love and Respect" by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs
A simple idea with powerful consequences

WEBSITES:

There is great care, discernment and critical thinking necessary with “internet research.” Read with caution. The following websites, however, are trustworthy sources that offer great insight into the issue we are discussing.

- » thestateoffourunions.org
- » americanvalues.org
- » focusonthefamily.com
- » familylife.com
- » marriagerevolution.org/
- » biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/

APPLICATION MATERIAL

As a way of promoting real transformation and life-change from the inside out, we will labor to devise and discuss specific application from each text each week of our study. Above them all will be one large endeavor. We are calling it The Faith Date Challenge (#faithdatechallenge). Simply put, we are challenging every married and engaged couple in our church family to have 20 intentional one-on-one dates within the remainder of the calendar year (about 16 weeks). As you spend time together, we encourage you to snap a quick photo of your date and tag it on social media with #faithdatechallenge and the date number (i.e: 1/20). This will provide a way for us to encourage each other toward intentionality and a resurrection of our marriages. You can find date night ideas and topics of conversation both in the Faith@Home Ministry Center or on our app.

Furthermore, we are challenging singles to make a list of marriages that you are close to and commit to fervent prayer for them. Be bold and ask how you can specifically be praying and then do it, regularly, consistently and boldly.

Finally, as we work through the teaching series, there will be discussion questions and homework in each sermon, most of them also available in the sermon notes. These notes are available at any time through our Faith Bible App. In the App store on any device, search for “Faith Bible The Woodlands.” Please take advantage of these questions and marriage homework as a way of implementing what we discuss. A great marriage takes work.



Heavenly Father,

I pray for the husband, the wife, or the future husband or wife that is reading this right now. Please work powerfully in their heart through this group project. Speak clearly through your Word in the Song of Solomon. Heal them where they are wounded. Fill them where they are empty. Strengthen them for the road ahead. Transform their heart first, and then their marriage, in Jesus' name. Amen.