

Overcoming Obstacles in Intimacy

Please open your Bible to the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon. It's on page _____ in the Bible under the chair in front of you.

By way of review...

The book may have been written by Solomon, but I don't think he's the husband in the song. I think it's about a married woman who is remembering and celebrating the love in her marriage as she and her husband sing together. They sing about their longing and anticipation, about their praise and adoration of each other, and even about some of their difficulties and times of disconnection.

And we said that in this song there are two repeated refrains – one, do not awaken love until it pleases or outside of the covenant of marriage. And two, there is a celebration of mutual belonging, “I am my beloved's and he is mine.” This mutual belonging is celebrated through consent and communication and connection between the man and the woman.

And we said that this whole marriage relationship, this “one-flesh” relationship, between the husband and wife is itself a sign of the relationship that God desires with His people.

One of the points we made rather quickly last week was that this song paints an ‘idealized’ version of passion and romance within marriage. And that's true, but it is also an honest look at the reality of romantic relationships in that it speaks about those times of unmet desire and disconnection within their relationship.

And so today, I want to zero in on one section that deals with that idea and along the way, we'll pull in some other passages that speak to this issue of problems in cultivating intimacy in marriage. We'll be talking more about application today, sort of out in front of the text. So be like the Bureans and see if what I'm teaching aligns with the Scriptures, ok?

I'm hoping to answer some questions like: How do we overcome the obstacles that we face in seeking to grow in intimacy with our spouse? What are some of the issues that might cause disconnection and what does God have to say about that?

So no matter where you are in this conversation about marriage and connection and sexuality, there are truths here that will apply to all of us, though you may have to translate some to your specific situation. This is after the wedding night when the honeymoon is over...

Read Songs of Songs 5:2-6:3

Intro

I want to begin by quoting some lyrics to a song that I imagine that most of us know. It sounds very much like the passage we just read in the Song of Songs, and it speaks of the times of disconnection and longing that we may experience in love and romance. See if you recognize it...

*The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping
I dreamed I held you in my arms
When I awoke, dear, I was mistaken
So I hung my head and I cried*

*In all my dreams, dear, you seem to leave me
When I awake, my poor heart aches
So when you come back and make me happy
I'll forgive and take all the blame*

*I'll always love you and make you happy
If you will only say the same
But if you leave me and love another
You'll regret it all some day*

*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy when skies are gray
You'll never know, dear, how much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away.*

Did you recognize it? These are some of the real verses, and this came to my attention through the music duo "The Civil Wars" who made beautiful music but couldn't stay together as a band. And did you notice that in this song, there is this longing for their beloved? They dream and heartbroken when they are not together?

And you probably know what that's like, if you've had much life experience at all. There is a kind of pain and heartache that we feel in our souls when our longings are unfulfilled.

In this Song of Songs, the author – maybe Solomon – writes about times when this heartache occurs. As we said last week, this is a song in the Bible that is written for you and for me. And it's written as a song, or poetry set to music. Later tradition holds that it would have been sung as part of the weeklong wedding celebration for the Jewish people. It's a celebration and a sort of idealized picture of marital romance. This song has echoes of the Garden of Eden and so it reminds us of the first marriage between Adam and Eve when they were naked and unashamed.

But this song is also real and honest that in this life, it's not all the celebration of the wedding and honeymoon. There are times when life gets hard and the intimacy we long to enjoy seems far away.

The Bible recognizes there are obstacles to marital intimacy. And I want to look at three of them this morning. These aren't all of them, for sure. But I want us to see these particular ones and what God has to say about them in the Scriptures. And maybe you'll find yourself in one or more of these.

Different Desires

Look again at verses 2 and 3 of chapter 5...

Song of Songs 5:2-3

I slept, but my heart was awake.
A sound! My beloved is knocking.
"Open to me, my sister, my love,
my dove, my perfect one,
for my head is wet with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night."
3 I had put off my garment;
how could I put it on?
I had bathed my feet;
how could I soil them?

There are lots of opinions about what exactly is happening here. Is the woman awake or asleep? Is this a dream or not? Either way, it's a poetic description of a time when her beloved has come knocking at the door. He's apparently been out working all night and so his head is wet with dew. And he wants to join her. He's eager to be with her.

But in verse 3, she essentially says, “Honey, I’ve already gotten ready for bed. It’s not a good time for me. I don’t want to have to bathe again.”

So there’s this disconnect. He wants her, but she’s not into it.

But then, verse 4, he persists.

Song of Songs 5:4

My beloved put his hand to the latch,
and my heart was thrilled within me.

So he tries once more to get it in, and then... there’s a change in her. Now she *is* feeling into it; her heart thrills. Now she wants to pursue him...

Song of Songs 5:5-6

I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh,
on the handles of the bolt.
6 I opened to my beloved,
but my beloved had turned and gone.
My soul failed me when he spoke.
I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer

So at this point, she wants him. She has a more responsive desire. She’s into it now, but it’s too late, he’s gone. Again, we don’t know if this is a dream she’s describing or actual events. But it’s part of her song here – they are missing each other like ships in the night.

And I appreciate the Bible’s honesty about how this happens within marriage and romantic relationships. There are times of different desires. There are times when the husband wants to be intimate and the wife isn’t that into it. Or there are times when the wife desires to be close and intimate, but the husband isn’t there.

I think this is helpful because so many of us struggle with wrong expectations about how intimacy and married life are supposed to work. People can assume that once you’re married, you’ll immediately have this all figured out. You’ll both want each other in the

same ways and at the same times. And so sex and intimacy will be easy, and you won't have to work at it. In fact, there are some (wrong) voices in the world that would tell you that you shouldn't have to work at it or else you've got the wrong partner. You're incompatible.

I have to tell you – that is bologna. The Bible nowhere says that if you just find the right person, then sex and intimacy will be easy; it'll just take care of itself.

Now, I don't want to overshare about my own story here, but this may be helpful. By the grace of God, Eve and I dated well, in my opinion. We spent a lot of time together in all kinds of contexts, with family and serving together and in stressful situations. And we were intentionally slow about progressing in romantic touch, basically just holding hands and giving brief hugs and things like that. We dated for four and a half years before we were married, and we only kissed for the first time a few weeks before the wedding. We had walked in purity together before and now during our marriage.

Now I'm grateful for that, and I think that was helpful to us as we stepped into marriage. And so young people – I would commend this path to you. Do not awaken love until it pleases. Don't get overly intimate before marriage. This has been a huge blessing for us.

Now, that said, when we were married after having been so slow physically, it's hard to just flip that switch all at once. And there were times when we felt this kind of missing each other when we wanted to connect. So I say all that to say, if you've found yourself in this spot, or maybe that's where you are now – know that you are not alone.

Most couples have different levels of desire for each other. And sometimes that even changes as the years pass. The high-desire spouse may become the low-desire spouse and vice versa.

So it's non-sense to believe that you just have to find the person you're compatible with and then everything will be easy. And listen, even if you did find that person, it won't last that way forever because they're going to change! You're going to change! You need to grow together in this area. It takes work. It doesn't happen all at once.

It takes time to learn each other and listen well and be vulnerable with one another. But over time, you can build intimacy in ways that far surpass what you may experience on your honeymoon.

I love what Gary Thomas writes in the book, *Married Sex*. He says, "A great sex life is something you make, not something you find."¹

In fact, he goes on to argue that when you're first married, you need to work on your holiness and Christ-likeness before you'll truly know the kind of intimate connection that is possible in marriage and then expressed to each other sexually. In other words, it takes personal character to be a generous and attentive lover. It takes forgiveness and humility and patience and diligence to cultivate an amazing love life, one in which you are known and you know one another.

So how do we address differences in desire between a husband and wife?

In part, I think it depends on the cause of this difference in desire. For some couples, there are events in the past for either the husband or the wife which may affect their desire with their spouse. That could be past trauma or hurt. It could be due to past sin, things like pornography or previous relationships that were unhealthy. Or maybe there has been a breach of trust or a pattern of selfishness that's made desiring sex difficult. For others, it could be from physical pain that happens when they tried to be intimate.

And so, you need to use some wisdom in addressing your situation. If there's sin on your part, then there needs to be repentance and change. We'll talk more about this dynamic in a minute.

But for now, I want to focus on those things which are no one's fault. You and your spouse are just different and have had different experiences. You may each desire intimacy at different times and respond in different ways. What then?

Well, what do we see them doing in this Song? In short, they continue to pursue one another with patience.

¹ Gary Thomas and Debra Fileta, *Married Sex: A Christian Couple's Guide to Reimagining your Love Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021)

If we were to read through the rest of chapter five and six, we would hear the bride describing her beloved to the daughters of Jerusalem. She praises his appearance as she thinks about him. And she concludes in verse 16,

Song of Songs 5:16

His mouth is most sweet,
and he is altogether desirable.
This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

As she is describing him to the daughters of Jerusalem, she says that he is altogether desirable. He is her beloved and her friend. Friendship is an essential part of their connection. They're companions; she misses him. Even after turning him down earlier, she is now pursuing her beloved.

They find each other and express their mutual belonging in chapter 6, verse 3.

Songs of Songs 6:3

I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine;
he grazes among the lilies.

And then he responds with another description of his desire for her. He says that he is overwhelmed by her appearance and praises her.

So when they find themselves in this time of different desires, their response is to patiently continue to pursue each other. They don't turn away from each other. They turn toward each other.

I think there is good application for us in that. If you're the spouse with higher desire at the moment, continue to pursue your spouse. If you're the lower desire spouse, continue to pursue your partner. Do it with patience and joy. Don't turn away from him or her. Don't seek to find intimacy with someone else. Continue to try to woo your spouse.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul teaches that wives and husbands each have authority over their spouse's body, not as a right to be demanded, but as a gift to be given. Again, there must be consent. So pursue with patience and give with generosity.

Speaking to husbands, try to win her heart, every day. Touch her mind and her heart before you try to touch her body. Show initiative and attentiveness. Be as romantic as you can. Don't only show affection when you're interested in sex.

For the wives, try to win his heart, every day. Pursue ways to show him that you desire him and want him and that you appreciate and respect him. Be creative and spontaneous. Help him feel like he's the only one for you.

Many times, it is the husband who has more spontaneous desire for intimacy. But that's not always the case, and when it's not, that can be especially difficult for the couple because now you're fighting against the culture voices that make you feel like you're not normal. And that can add shame where God desires freedom.

If you're married, then that means that you're in a covenant, one-flesh relationship with your spouse. And so you have the joyful responsibility to pursue each other. Don't try to shame your spouse because their level of desire doesn't match yours. Instead, work to patiently pursue one another.

And that means that you both need to communicate. You need to talk to one another about your love life. Are you seeking to satisfy one another? I'm not going to tell you how frequently you should be intimate or what you should do for each other in bed. But I will say that there is tremendous freedom for married couples to enjoy intimacy within the marriage covenant. It's much more important to know the why underneath your frequency and the level of satisfaction you both find in your love life than to strive for a certain number or try to be like some other couple.

Find out what *your* spouse enjoys, know when intimacy is helpful or feels like too much. See if there are ways that you can be generous, both with giving yourself to each other at times and at other times, showing patience and finding other ways to connect so that you're not demanding sex from one another.

This is a conversation that needs to happen more than once. It should be an ongoing part of a healthy, intimate marriage. Remember, a great sex life is built, not discovered.

And let me say this as well because I brought it up a moment ago, if you're dealing with trauma or hurt in your past that is affecting your life today, then I would advise getting help from a skilled Christian counselor or therapist. There is no shame in that. Or if you're experiencing pain in intercourse, then talk with a doctor who can provide some help. Listen to your body.

Or if you're just stuck in this area and want to get past the log jam, then ask for help. A few years ago, my wife and I found ourselves having some of the same conversations over and over again. And we found it helpful to go and talk with a counselor who can provide an outside voice and a different perspective. So not everyone needs to know all of your business, and not every voice you can find out there will be helpful. But there are people who are able to speak into your life with truth who can help you navigate some of these tricky and vulnerable conversations. So ask for help.

There are marriage books, and conferences, and even marriage intensives in which couples can go away and take a hard look at the health of your marriage. Depending on where you are, we'd love to help you. God's Word and the gospel give us hope that God desires we would flourish in our marriages and not just settle for less than His best. This is an obstacle that God can help you overcome.

Disconnection

So one obstacle that we see in cultivating intimacy is a difference in desire. A second one that we see acknowledged here is what I'm going to call 'disconnection.'

Back in chapter two of the song, we read this...

Song of Songs 2:15

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

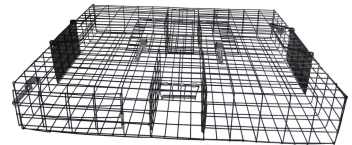
What's this about? What are the foxes? Foxes would be a threat to the health of the vines in the vineyard. They would chew at the roots and cause harm to the plant, maybe even kill it. So in this verse, the bride is telling her beloved to catch the foxes or get rid of those things that would threaten their relationship and cause disconnection.

My wife is a sweet and gentle soul. She is bubbly and optimistic and wonderfully positive. My daughter asked this week what our blood types are, and I think it's so fitting that my wife's is "B Positive." For those that know her, that's just fitting, isn't it?

Well, as sweet and optimistic as she is, there is one thing that will cause anger rather quickly. You know what it is? It's a squirrel digging in her garden. These squirrels cause havoc in her garden, digging up plants and destroying things, many times for no apparent reason at all – just to be annoying. And so even though they're small – they're a threat.

And so what does she tell me, "Nathan...my beloved...catch the squirrels who threaten to spoil our garden!"

So what did I do? I got us a squirrelinator. (show picture) It's a little cage thing that traps the squirrel so that we can remove it far from our property. I don't want these rodents to threaten our garden, and I want my beloved to live in peace.



The point of this verse, if I may update the language, is that you should catch the squirrels which threaten the garden of your marriage. In other words, get rid of those seemingly small things which, if left unaddressed, may cause havoc later on.

So what kinds of things might this be? What are some of the threats to being connected as a married couple?

Here's a list. I've got several here. I'll just run through them and let's see if any of these resonate with you. And let me encourage you to listen with humility, looking for the log in your eye and not listen for the speck in your spouse's eye, yes?

What are some foxes that threaten the health of your marriage?

How about a big one right off the top? **Busyness**. Sometimes you've got so much going on that cultivating intimacy with your spouse seems like the first thing to sacrifice. You can do that for a while, standing sort of side by side, tackling the issues of life – caring for kids or aging parents or work or the household chores. But you rarely spend

time facing each other and working on seeing and knowing and loving each other. That's a fox that needs to be addressed.

And speaking of household chores, what about conflict over the division of labor? Maybe you and your spouse just disagree about how clean or organized your house or your calendar or your finances need to be? There's disagreement there, and it leads to bitterness or resentment over who has to do what. And left unresolved, it is like a fox that will spoil the vineyard of your marriage.

For some of you it may be issues with boundaries. There are in-laws or friends or even your own kids who put pressure on your marriage, and if you and your spouse don't agree on boundaries, they'll take as much time and room as you're willing to give them. I'm not saying you need to cut off other relationships, I'm suggesting that the health of your marriage is more important than other relationships in your life.

Can I say that? Do you agree? God said that a man should leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. That's the priority relationship, over in-laws, over friends, and even over your kids. My kids are welcome guests in our home for a time before they're sent out into the world.

Another fox may be the way that you talk to or about each other. Is your marriage characterized by more criticism or encouragement? The Gottman's are marriage researchers, not believers, but they have studied marriage for years. And they suggest that the ratio for healthy positive interactions versus negative needs to be about five to one. For every criticism or negative thing that you say (and sometimes they need to be said), then you should be giving five compliments or positive statements in order to keep the relationship from feeling too negative.

Are you too critical with your spouse? Do they feel like they're never good enough? Maybe you feel like he or she deserves it. I'll change what I say, when he changes his behavior. I'll engage in conversation when she doesn't reject me physically. I'll change *after* my spouse does. Friends, that's pride. The Bible calls us to be the one who loves first, the one who continues to pursue, the one who apologizes and grants forgiveness. You may need to kill the fox of criticism in your marriage.

How about this one – your phone? Maybe what you’re doing on your phone isn’t necessarily sinful, but it’s distracting you from pursuing your spouse. At night, when you go to bed, your hands are more often on your phones than each other, if I can be so bold as to say it that way. Maybe reconnecting with your spouse just means disconnecting from your phone. It may mean deciding to put down your phone or keep it away from you so that can pursue your partner. And again, start with yourself.

What are the foxes in your marriage that are threatening to spoil your intimacy? If you’re married, that’s a good question to ask each other today or this week. Are there things that are distracting me from being a good husband to you? What is it that may keep our marriage from flourishing if left unchecked?

Catch the foxes, reconnect with your spouse.

Dishonesty

A third obstacle to intimacy in marriage is what I’ve labeled ‘dishonesty.’ This certainly includes lying and deceit between spouses, but I have in mind all kinds of sin and selfishness that would threaten to keep husbands and wives from growing in closeness and Christlikeness.

We’ve been looking at the Song of Songs, but the Bible speaks about intimacy in marriage in other places as well. But honestly, the note that the biblical authors want to sound most often is a warning about being unfaithful in marriage.

So for example, **Hebrews 13:4**

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

God desires that marriage would be held up in honor by all, and the marriage bed would be kept pure. And so God commands that marriage would be protected by ensuring that husbands and wives would keep their marriage vows and avoid from sexual immorality and adultery. One of the ten commandments is “You shall not commit adultery.” Paul writes, “Flee from sexual immorality. Put it to death.”²

² 1 Corinthians 6:18; Colossians 3:5

So let me be plain with you, can I do that? For some of you, the reason that you're struggling with intimacy in your marriage is that there is unconfessed sin in your life.

Maybe it's a secret struggle with pornography or giving in to lust through or movies or TV or online through social media. Maybe you've been flirting with an emotional connection with someone at work or an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend. Maybe you've taken more steps than that, and you've been erasing text messages or lying about where you've been or hiding evidence of a relationship from your spouse.

Those kind of things will drive a wedge of distrust between you. Secret sin is like a fungus, it flourishes in the dark but dies in the light.

So let me encourage you, if there's unconfessed sin in your life that's keeping you from being honest and vulnerable and transparent with your spouse, then the step of faith for you today is to confess that sin and repent. Forsake it. Kill it, and flee from it.

And if you're not married, but you're caught up in secret sin, whether that's with another person or by yourself, then you need to kill that sin before it kills you. And that means getting help. It means bringing it to light with a trusted brother if you're a guy or a sister if you're a woman.

This may feel overwhelming and crazy to consider confessing sin like this. How could that help? That would only make things worse. No, brother or sister, keeping it in the dark has made things worse, you've just not yet acknowledged it. You need to bring it to the light so that you can be truly loved and forgiven. You can't really be loved if you've only let your spouse see what you want them to see. So confess, and repent, and work to rebuilt trust and grow in faithfulness.

I know this is heavy. I know it's hard. How can we have hope? Can we really be forgiven? Oh brother. Oh sister. Yes, where sin abounds, grace does much more abound! Praise be to God for His unfathomable grace!

The good news is that the love of God comes to us, not because we pretend to be holy, but while we were still sinners. So look to Jesus!

Conclusion

So brothers and sisters, how do we overcome these obstacles to marital intimacy? Different desires, or disconnection, or dishonesty? To address these things, there needs to be consent and communication and connection as priorities in your married life.

And through it all, there must be an abundance of grace. If you're going to fight for a strong and healthy and flourishing marriage, then you need to be saturated in the gospel. The gospel is the good news that God loved you when you were unlovely. You were running from Him, and He pursued you. He has freely given to you what you could not afford to buy. God sent His Son Jesus, who paid the penalty for your sin and mine. He died for the sexual sins that we have committed. And He brings forgiveness and grace to our lives.

And more than just forgiveness, the gospel brings healing and transformation. Jesus wants to set you free from slavery to sin and addiction. He desires that you would have a clean and clear conscience before Him.

In the book of Hebrews, the author gives this long list of people in the Old Testament who lived by faith –Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Rahab and Gideon and Samson and many others. And they lived by faith and are commended. But the remarkable thing about those people listed in Hebrews 11 is that they are sinners. If you read their stories, they lied and murdered and had sex outside of marriage and many other things. But they were justified by faith in God. They trusted in the coming Savior.

And so listen to what the writer says next...

Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **2** looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus establishes and perfects our faith. He did this by pursuing the joy that was to be His on the other side of the Cross. It's a joy that He now experiences at the right hand of God. And it's a joy that He wants to invite you into.

So what should we do? We must lay aside the weights – those things that would hold us down, the burdens that we carry, the loneliness and pain, the shame and the guilt and the feeling like we're not worth loving. And we lay aside our sin – the pride and laziness and greed and selfishness that we give in to. And we fix our eyes on Jesus.

And when you lay down your life for Him, that's when you'll find it. And all the things we've been talking about – overcoming obstacles to be more intimate within marriage – those things all deal with the horizontal. But the vertical has to come first. If we're going to be able to kill sin, and catch the little foxes, and pursue each other with patience, then we must first be right with God.

I may be talking to someone this morning who might say, you know, I would love to have a close, intimate relationship with my spouse, but I know I don't have one with God. Friend, I have good news. God has so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son so that whoever believes in Him would have eternal life.

The gospel is the good news that you can be forgiven of your sin and reconciled with God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus on your behalf. He offers eternal life through faith. I'd love the opportunity to talk with you about how you can have a close and intimate relationship with God.

For the believers here today, maybe you need to start with the vertical as well. Maybe you need to spend some time alone with God, confessing your sin, asking for help to walk in obedience and joy.

If you're married, then I hope you've been able to take away some questions to ask, some issues to work on, and the resolve to carry it through. If you're single, you may have to do some translating. Are there foxes in your life that you need to address, even though you're not married? Is there sin that is pulling you away from intimacy with God? What does God want you to do to apply this word today?

Brothers and sisters, let us all look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Let's pray...